CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC CELEBRATIONS OF
THE DAY OF THE DEAD
IN AUSTIN, HOUSTON, AND SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

A Thesis
by
HILARY ANNE STANDISH

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

December 1999

Major Subject: Anthropology
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Public Celebrations of the Day of the Dead in
Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas. (December 1999)

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The Day of the Dead, a Mexican folk-Catholic holiday annually observed on
November second, is devoted to remembering and honoring deceased family
members. Since the 1970s the holiday has become increasingly popular within the
United States, and across the country many organizations currently sponsor
commemorations in public venues. This thesis describes and analyzes public
celebrations of the Day of the Dead observed between 1995 and 1998 in Austin,
Houston, and San Antonio, Texas.

Sponsors of public Day of the Dead celebrations in these three Texas cities
have rediscovered and reinterpreted the holiday. While they are inspired by Mexican
cultural traditions, promoters of the holiday in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio
bring new meanings and symbols to bear on the holiday. They invite the public to
observe or participate in their commemorations, putting this custom, and in essence
their culture, on display. Organizations and businesses such as art galleries, folk art
stores, museums, and cultural centers promote activities including musical
performances, dances, parades, and poetry readings, and they frequently exhibit
artworks and altars dedicated to the dead. Some of the individuals participating in the
public Day of the Dead exhibits are using the holiday as a springboard to explore larger issues by creating altars or retablos which address contemporary social problems such as the AIDS epidemic, domestic and other violence, discrimination, and environmental degradation.

Public enactments of the Day of the Dead in the central Texas cities considered in this study go beyond the traditional purpose of remembering the dead by additionally serving as a means of recognizing the living. Celebrants connect with their cultural heritage by participating in a tradition with roots reaching far back into Mexican history. Simultaneously, by observing the Day of the Dead in public locations open to a general audience, celebrants proclaim pride in their ethnicity by calling attention to their presence in their communities.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, two people who have instilled in me the value of education. Without their financial, moral, and emotional support this project would not have been possible, nor would I be the individual I am today. I dedicate this work to them as a small gesture of my appreciation for the sacrifices they have made on my behalf and for their undying belief that I could achieve any goal which I set out to accomplish.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was supported in part by funding from the Department of Anthropology, Texas A&M University. The department allowed me to serve as a Graduate Assistant for two years, and also awarded me a grant for travel funds which allowed me to interview informants in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas. In addition to financial support, staff and faculty members were generous with their time in answering questions relating to the process of undertaking a research project.

My brother, Chris Standish, spent countless hours helping me slowly navigate my way into the world of modern technology. I relied on his expertise with computers when I was plagued by seemingly every problem imaginable. It is no exaggeration to say that his assistance was instrumental in seeing this project through to completion. A word of thanks is also due to the rest of my family, my friends, and my loved ones for the encouragement and great patience they showed when I was absorbed in the research and writing processes.

I am grateful to Dr. Marco Portales, professor of English and outside committee member, for his time and for his helpful suggestions for improving the manuscript. At a point when I was feeling bogged down by technicalities, Dr. Portales’ enthusiasm reminded me that I had originally undertaken this particular project because the Day of the Dead is a beautiful and moving tradition which offers a positive means of addressing human mortality.

Dr. Sylvia Grider was an inspiration to me throughout my tenure at Texas A&M University. She is an outstanding teacher who encourages students to think
critically both inside and outside the classroom. Dr. Grider read my submissions with an incredible eye for detail, pointing out errors or omissions I had overlooked. Her mantra that when it comes to writing, less is more, helped me produce a more concise document and kept me on track when I digressed from my major topic.

Special thanks go to Dr. Jeffrey Cohen, my committee chair, who originally encouraged me turn a course project into a more detailed study. His fieldwork background in Oaxaca, Mexico, benefited my research by providing me with information which differed from that found in the literature. Dr. Cohen pointed out valuable sources to be consulted, even loaning me books from his personal collection. Throughout the research process Dr. Cohen showed unflagging enthusiasm for my project and for my ability to undertake it. His encouragement went a long way in boosting my self-confidence. In addition, his obvious devotion to his family reminded me that all scholars need to find a balance between their professional and personal lives.

Finally, my sincere thanks go to the many individuals who allowed me to question or interview them about their Day of the Dead events and their personal philosophies. I am grateful to them for their time and insights, and in some cases, for the friendships which we have developed. Their efforts to inform the public about the Day of the Dead are in some measure opening a cross-cultural dialogue by bringing people together in communal celebration. I am particularly grateful to Macario Ramirez and Ramon Sanchez y Vasquez.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Definition of the Subject

This thesis is based on research and field observations conducted over a three-year period from 1995 to 1998. In this work I describe and analyze the varied ways in which a single Mexican holiday, *Día de los Muertos*, or the Day of the Dead, is publicly commemorated in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas. Because Texas was historically Mexican territory and because the state continues to have a large Hispanic population, the Day of the Dead has long been observed by Texans of Mexican descent. However, within the last two decades and especially within the last five years, two changes have occurred. First, a growing number of organizations across the state sponsor Day of the Dead exhibits or events which are open to the public. And secondly, partially as a result of these public commemorations, larger numbers of people, Latino and non-Latino, now participate in some of the activities centered around the holiday.

In this thesis I consider the following questions: What factors motivate sponsors to "go public" with what has traditionally been a family-based custom centered around the home and the cemetery? In what ways do commemorations

This thesis follows the style and format used in American Anthropologist.
differ as a result of this shift? How is the holiday interpreted for the participants and for the audience at public venues? My hypothesis is that the Day of the Dead has become increasingly popular and oriented to the public because the holiday represents a celebration of Latino ethnic identity as much as it represents a tribute to family and deceased ancestors.

Each fall numerous organizations in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio host celebrations, exhibits, or workshops to which the public is invited or sell Day of the Dead related paraphernalia. During the course of my research, I visited 94 businesses and organizations, including museums, children’s museums, cultural centers, libraries, art galleries, folk art and gift stores, restaurants, bakeries, churches, colleges, and cemeteries. I visited most establishments more than once, in some cases returning annually every October or November from 1995 to 1998.

In contrast to home-based observations of the holiday, the commemorations which take place in the public arena in these three Texas cities are deliberately designed to draw an audience. More than a shift in locale, public celebrations of the Day of the Dead represent a shift in ideology. Sponsors are not merely celebrants, they are presenters of the tradition. Their presentations can be read as cultural performances, following the criteria proposed by Singer (1972:47) and elaborated upon by other scholars (e.g. Stern and Henderson 1993:26), in that they are scheduled, programmed events which are temporally and spatially bounded and which are open to view by an audience.
Toelken (1979:108) makes a useful distinction between central audiences and bystander audiences. The central audience refers to those people in attendance who are familiar enough with a tradition to exert a direct influence on the performance. A bystander audience consists of individuals, such as tourists and customers, who are less familiar with the tradition but nonetheless have certain expectations about the performance. In regards to public presentations of the Day of the Dead in Texas, a central audience includes individuals who create objects on display or program the events and perhaps their family or friends who knew the deceased individuals being commemorated. Members of the central audience know what the Day of the Dead is about, observe the holiday themselves, and attend public events as part of their annual act of remembrance. A bystander audience consists of the people who are less familiar with the holiday but who are intrigued by the custom.

The central and bystander audiences exert powerful influences on decisions made by event organizers. When asked what guided them in creating their displays or planning activities, sponsors typically invoked “tradition,” saying that their commemorations of the Day of the Dead followed historic precedent. While this may be true, there is more going on here since these sponsors court the public, literally inviting friends and strangers alike to observe the activities or participate.

Efforts are made to inform those unfamiliar with the tradition about its history and enduring significance. Some promoters clearly see their events as an opportunity to dispel misconceptions perpetuated in the press or which patrons may have formed due to limited exposure to the holiday or Mexican culture. Most sponsors strive to
enhance the audiences' understanding and appreciation of the tradition. Public enactments of the Day of the Dead therefore simultaneously accomplish two goals. In observing a Mexican tradition, the celebrants connect with their cultural heritage. At the same time, the commemorations provide a framework through which non-Latinos can view the holiday.

Folklore is something which is produced and reproduced as a communicative device (Bauman 1989:177). Just as messages are conveyed to listeners during verbal performances of folklore, sponsors of public commemorations of the Day of the Dead in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio likewise communicate messages to their patrons. For example, a promoter might explain the historical background of elements included in an altar. Moreover, underlying these explicit messages is the idea that the Day of the Dead is a tradition worth maintaining, one which continues to be important to Latinos living in Texas. A gallery owner who chooses to build a commemorative altar for the Day of the Dead in her gallery, rather than in the privacy of her home, is making the statement that she observes this tradition and that she is proud of her Mexican heritage.

In bringing what was formerly a home-based celebration into the public domain of the gallery or the cultural center, Latinos of Mexican descent are in essence putting their customs and hence their culture on display. Similar to folk festivals which feature the unique qualities of specific groups, the desired result of Day of the Dead performances is not to further isolate members of a community but to provide them with an opportunity to achieve recognition within the larger social
arena of the state or nation. According to Roger Abrahams, "An important part of the celebration of ethnic differences has often, in fact, been precisely this move: going public with materials and practices long confined to the privacy of the family or a close group of friends" (1981:305). The Day of the Dead is packaged for community involvement and consumption in an effort to inform a bystander audience about the holiday and its link to individuals in the community. Public displays represent celebrations of both the holiday and the celebrants themselves.

In many cases a party atmosphere is central to the public commemorations of the deceased, turning the Day of the Dead into a celebration of and for those in attendance. Events include parties, poetry readings, dances, musical performances, plays, and parades. Most sponsors provide food and drink during their opening receptions. In other instances the commemorations are more solemn, with fewer, if any, activities programmed. Organizations differ in their interpretations of the holiday and attract a diversity of patrons. They therefore tailor their presentations according to their own views and based on the nature of the audience. This thesis describes the ways in which the Day of the Dead is currently being packaged in three central Texas cities and analyzes the messages conveyed within these performances.

Factors Motivating the Research

The Day of the Dead has been privately observed by Latino families in the United States for generations. After all, until about 150 years ago much of the
southwestern United States belonged to Mexico. Despite this and in spite of the fact that public celebrations of the Day of the Dead have been on the rise since the 1960s, I had been unaware of the holiday until the late 1980s. Having lived the majority of my life in upper-middle class, predominantly Anglo suburbs of the northeastern United States, I had little direct exposure to Latino cultural traditions. Even in my travels to Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala, (which took place in either January, March or June) I was never exposed to this holiday which now fascinates me enough to undertake this extensive study of this yearly observance.

My initial encounter with the Day of the Dead, in a folk art gallery in Dallas, Texas, occurred shortly after I relocated there in 1987. In an experience which I speculate is typical to that of many Anglos, I was introduced not to the holiday itself but to the holiday’s paraphernalia: items such as sugar skulls, painted tin skeletons, and calacas, toy miniatures of skeletal people engaged in various activities. The idea of a death-related toy, or even the idea of depicting death in a humorous manner, was an odd concept to me. Rather than being repulsed, I was intrigued and wanted to know about the symbolism behind the toys and to what use they were put.

My inquiries directed to the store personnel resulted in the half-hearted response, “Oh, there’s some holiday in Mexico where they celebrate the Dead. I’m not sure what it’s called.” In subsequent travels throughout Texas and other southwestern states, I encountered other stores which sold similar items. Unfortunately, my questions about the meaning of the items for sale were met with the same kinds of vague statements. In fact, on a number of occasions I had the
feeling that the employees thought it bizarre that I would even inquire. The only burning issue on their minds seemed to be whether or not I was going to make a purchase.

It is my contention that establishments which merchandise Day of the Dead artifacts in this manner also communicate messages, albeit tacit ones, to their patrons. When Day of the Dead objects are marketed to consumers on the basis of their aesthetic appeal or because they are quaint, cute, or unusual, customers are likely to see them as mere novelty items and not as part of a serious or bona fide cultural tradition. For example, Brandes comments that sugar skulls are often purchased in the United States as "... an expression of Anglo sophistication, artiness, or kitsch" (1997:287). The idea is conveyed that the Day of the Dead is an odd, even strange holiday. That which is exotic is, after all, intriguing and alluring. This sense of difference, of Otherness, attached to objects is a selling point, "... tourist art constitutes a special commodity traffic, in which the group identities of producers are tokens for the status politics of consumers" (Appadurai 1986:47). Jules-Rosette states, "The art object may be perceived on several levels by both the artists and the consumers, and it becomes an emblem that represents a cultural experience" (1984:10). In the ethnic art boutique or gift shop, the social circumstances surrounding production don’t need to be understood for the art to be enjoyed by consumers. In my case, however, as a budding anthropologist, I felt a need to understand the cultural context of the items I encountered in the stores.
Years later in October of 1994, while reading the newspaper section listing art

gallery receptions, I came across an announcement for a Day of the Dead exhibit

(*Plain Dealer Friday Magazine*, October 2, 1994). Attending this event proved to be

both entertaining and enlightening, and I vowed to myself that someday I would

research the holiday. The exhibit, at Pedro Sanchez’ Folkarte Gallery, approached

the Day of the Dead from several angles and is worthy of detailed attention.

Upon entering the gallery, each visitor was given a “bus ticket” and a mask

made from a brown paper sack. The masks depicted human skulls. Eye-holes were

cut into the sacks so that the entire bag could be placed over one’s head, transforming

the wearer into a walking, talking, “living skeleton.” Black paint was used to

emphasize the teeth and the holes which are often left in a skull when the eye sockets

and nasal area have deteriorated. The masks and the “tickets,” the visitors were told,

were to be used to gain admission to the “bus ride” which would take place later in

the evening. During the interim, one could observe the Day of the Dead altar which

Mr. Sanchez and his wife had constructed to honor their relatives. The significance

of the altar and its contents, such as copal incense, food, and marigold flowers, were

explained both verbally and in written fliers. In addition to the altar, one could look

at or purchase photographs of Day of the Dead celebrations in several locations in

Mexico, shiny black ceramics from Oaxaca, various Day of the Dead toys, or Day of

the Dead inspired fabric paintings made by a local artist.

Mr. Sanchez asked for everyone’s attention and spoke to the assembled people

about Day of the Dead customs in his native Mexico and what he does each year to
celebrate this holiday. Curtis Fukada, a California-based photographer, then gave a slide show featuring scenes of Oaxaca, Mexico and of his Japanese-American grandmother’s home altar in California. Mr. Fukada described the similarities he had found between the Mexican and Japanese customs of remembering and honoring deceased relatives, and how each of the respective traditions had positively influenced his approach to death and to life.

To conclude the evening, the guests were directed upstairs, where they were told to put on their masks and board the “bus.” The “bus” was a nearly life-sized replica of a Mexican bus, complete with chrome attachments, wheels, seating for about thirty, and crowned by an overstuffed luggage rack on the roof. Upon turning in one’s “bus ticket,” the passengers were greeted with statements such as, “Come on in, there’s always room for one more,” or “You’re in for the ride of your life.” The ticket-taker/tour guide and bus driver wore skeleton paper bag masks and military uniforms. Once the doors closed our “journey” commenced. To simulate a bumpy and curving road, our hosts jerked up and down and occasionally swayed abruptly to one side or the other. The route seemed to become progressively more hazardous. Along the way the tour guide pointed out sites of interest, saying, for example, “Look, there’s where you used to live.” Suddenly the driver slammed on the “brakes” and announced that we had reached the end of the road. Our hosts removed their masks, revealing white-painted skeleton faces, and removed their jackets, revealing white T-shirts with black, painted bones further suggesting their hidden but “true” skeletal
anatomy. The passengers were told that our “journey” was the journey of life. The inevitable destination for all passengers was death.

I don’t recall any of the people in attendance being upset at being tricked into participating in this skit which simulated their demise. On the contrary, most people laughed, indicating the sponsor’s point was well received. The event was a wonderful, unifying testament which underscored the transitory nature of all human life. Many people lingered after this final event of the evening to talk with Mr. Sanchez. I scheduled an appointment to discuss the Day of the Dead with him at a later time. Mr. Sanchez proved to be a wonderful source of information. Not only did he share his personal experiences, but he directed me to others in the community and encouraged me to observe the holiday. To the reader who has experienced similar densely layered celebrations of the Day of the Dead, the above description may not offer any great surprises. However, this celebration took place in a gallery in the Little Italy section of Cleveland, Ohio.

Significance of the Study

The above scenario has been described in detail in order to illustrate the fact that observances in the United States are not restricted to cities in the southwest or to cities with especially large Latino communities. Historic archaeologist Robert Ascher has suggested that scholars of material culture should expand their foci to include not only items associated with elite culture but items of popular culture as
well. Rather than ignore or discount the mundane, scholars should be alert to the fact that any commonly encountered object, which he terms a “superartifact,” is likely to be culturally significant (1982:333). While Day of the Dead celebrations are in no way a ubiquitous feature of the cultural landscape, they are occurring with greater frequency and can be found in diverse geographic locations (e.g. Chicago, Detroit, St. Paul, and Toledo). The Day of the Dead is being introduced to, appreciated by, and even celebrated by increasing numbers of people throughout the country.

In the pluralistic setting of the United States, varying degrees of acculturation to the ways of mainstream Anglo society can be found within any ethnic group, so that no group can truly be considered homogenous. Rosaldo deconstructs the fictitious idea of hermetically sealed, pure societies: “The notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous, internally coherent universe is no longer sustainable... (1989:217). Turner observed that what were once deemed “impure” or “contaminated” societies are now considered worthy of analysis (1982a:77). Abrahams has noted that expressive forms must be studied where they are found. According to Abrahams, “To be sure, these speculations bring us to the border between folklore and popular culture - but that problem has been constant, and moreover, has posed some of the most interesting questions for performance-oriented folklorists” (1981:320). As scholars pay increasing attention to urban contexts, they are likely to encounter traditional practices which have meshed with mass culture. The result of this interface and interaction is the emergence of new or altered forms of expression. Tradition provides a foundation upon which new elements are constantly
being layered. The Day of the Dead is adapted for public viewing and consumption: commemorations provide celebrants with a stage upon which to display and recreate folk culture, meaning, and identity.

As the holiday is recognized and observed by a growing number of people the types of commemorative activities continue to expand and diversify. And yet, contemporary public celebrations of the Day of the Dead in the United States have not yet received a great deal of scholarly attention. The majority of publications devoted to the Day of the Dead are concerned with the holiday as it is celebrated in Mexico. In providing a case study of contemporary public commemorative activities in the Texas cities of Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, this project will help fill a void in the literature pertaining to the Day of the Dead as it is currently encountered in the United States. I hope to document observations in other regions of the United States in the future.

**Research Methodology**

My methodology for this project consisted of library research, field observations, and the gathering of information from sponsors via interviews and surveys. Sponsors are the individuals who organize and promote Day of the Dead activities in public settings and make their offerings available to public view. I also spoke with artists whose works were on display. I will elaborate on my data collection methods below and provide a review of the literature in Chapter II.
Participant-Observation

Fieldwork consisted of attending as many exhibits as possible. Because events simultaneously occurred in each of the three field sites, I was unable to attend every one each year. However, because the Day of the Dead has come to be celebrated for an extended period of time (not just on November 1st or 2nd), I was still able to visit over 90 organizations over the course of the three years I worked on this project. Many gallery owners or businesses which erected altars, for example, left their displays up for a month or longer. I feel confident that I have a comprehensive understanding of the available offerings in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio.

While in the field I observed what was on display or watched performances, and later recorded my observations in field notes. I took approximately 350 slides. I paid particular attention to the following: the items on display and the manner in which they were displayed, the sponsors' efforts to provide information to the audience, and audience reactions. I also noted the degree to which changes have occurred from the traditional commemorations in Mexico as documented in the literature. I tried to determine whether these alterations were the result of a shift in locale to the United States or whether they represented conscious decisions made by sponsors. Throughout the comparative process I paid particular attention to the way in which various promoters presented the holiday.
Watching and participating involved mentally switching back and forth, alternating between the role of audience member and researcher. Clifford describes this experience as follows, "Participant-observation serves as shorthand for a continuous tracking between the 'inside' and 'outside' of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts" (1988:34). Because I am interested in the messages which sponsors convey, I wanted to get a "feel for" each event from the perspective of an outsider who was unfamiliar with the holiday. I tried to approach each exhibit or celebration as if I were being educated about the Day of the Dead for the first time. Smith has noted that festivals affect participants on both cognitive and affective levels, "Therefore the significance of festival behavior must be looked for in the responses of those toward whom it is directed, in the meaning they assign to it" (1976:5).

I knew from past observations of public Day of the Dead commemorations that even a single celebration can include multiple events and frames. Before I went into the field I decided that it would be wise to narrow my focus. I did not want to risk being overwhelmed to the point of gathering incomplete data. The complexity of many of the events themselves, the fact that I was working alone, and that I was trying to observe as many celebrations as possible in a brief time span necessitated that I concentrate on a particular segment of the population. I reasoned it was unlikely that audience members would be willing to discuss their observations or
interpretations during the events because, after all, they were there to enjoy themselves.

On the other hand, I could contact sponsors of events or exhibits at their places of business to schedule interviews. It seemed reasonable to assume that a sponsor who went to the trouble of promoting an exhibit or celebration, essentially inviting the public into their domain, would be willing to discuss their objectives. Moreover, it is the sponsors who hold the most interest for me. They are the individuals who make decisions about how to present the holiday.

**Structured Interviews**

At each establishment I visited, I attempted to speak with the key organizer of the Day of the Dead programs. I presented myself as a curious graduate student researching a thesis and found that many people were eager to provide information or to dispel misconceptions about the holiday. I got the impression from several people that they were dissatisfied with past media coverage of Day of the Dead events. These individuals happily agreed to be interviewed in depth at another time when they were not so busy. During structured interviews I used a prepared list of questions in order to obtain responses to the same questions from each informant (Bernard 1988:205). A copy of the interview schedule is attached as Appendix B. While a portion of the schedule asks for general information, such as how long the organization has been in existence and how long it has sponsored Day of the Dead
programs, the bulk of the questions are deliberately open-ended. I was trying to avoid yes-no responses and to encourage informants to reflect upon their personal experiences and opinions.

Although none of the questions could be deemed threatening or even of a sensitive nature, potentially controversial questions such as “Do you think it is appropriate for non-Latinos to observe the holiday?” were placed toward the end of the interview schedule. This decision was influenced by Devereux and Hoddinott (1993:31), who note that it is best to establish a sense of trust and rapport with informants before plunging into more serious topics. I also reasoned that if by chance an informant became uncomfortable with a line of inquiry at the end of the interview, I would have at least obtained responses to the majority of my questions. The final question in any interview conducted was always “Do you know of anyone else in the area I should talk to?” In some cases this question had the desired snowball effect and directed me to other establishments sponsoring public Day of the Dead commemorations.

I tape recorded some of the structured interviews. I obtained informed consent prior to the interviews and informants were made aware of the fact that they had the option of stopping the interview at any time. In no case did an informant choose to do so, and in fact four of them contacted me later to provide additional information.
Informal Interviews

The majority of my interviews were unstructured. In these cases instead of following an interview schedule I asked questions from a shorter written list, covering the topics I felt were most important. The questions were of the same nature and again were open-ended. Although the structured interviews ensured that each informant responded to the same questions, the unstructured interviews had their own strengths. Unstructured interviews allowed informants more control over the interview and thus, after my initial proding, they themselves introduced the topics which they felt were most important. I brought up questions which were relevant to their organization, skipping over topics on the interview schedule which did not apply. Also, in some cases I instinctively felt that a potential informant would be put off by the sight of a three-page interview schedule, even if I had made an appointment, assuming that it would take too much of their time to answer such a long list of inquiries. I feel that these sponsors were actually more generous with their time than they would have been if I had attempted to conduct a structured interview.
Questionnaires

I left questionnaires and informed consent forms at 36 businesses. A self-addressed stamped envelope was provided to encourage a reply. I opted to have sponsors respond to these survey forms when either the key organizer of their Day of the Dead program was unavailable at the time of my visits or when organizers seemed more willing to respond to a written questionnaire than to be interviewed by appointment. The questionnaires were identical to the interview schedules used during structured interviews. Knowing that people sometimes show a willingness to help but then later get distracted and forget their promises, I made follow-up phone calls to those individuals from whom I had not heard after one month. Some informants elected to be interviewed over the telephone. In total, 25 of the 36 questionnaires were completed, a return rate of approximately 70%.

Potential informants were ensured that they had the right to request that their responses be kept either confidential or anonymous. If I did not personally meet the respondent but only left a questionnaire for him or her to fill out and return, the respondent was informed of this right in the Internal Review Board Informed Consent form. None of my informants asked to have their identities protected. However, in this thesis I have changed the names of all individuals and organizations and in some cases use anonymous quotes. Following standard ethnographic convention, I have adopted this approach to guard the privacy of all informants.
In order to locate establishments sponsoring events I used several tactics. I began the project already aware of the presence of some, as I had visited these locations in previous years as a tourist. The majority of organizations placed ads in their local newspaper or entertainment listing magazines. I also talked with representatives of Chambers of Commerce and made cold calls from the phone book. In some cases pamphlets displayed at one location led me to others, or gallery owners suggested possible contacts. A few of the bakeries and restaurants were found by serendipity. A listing of businesses and organizations which I visited is attached as Appendix C.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of my thesis topic, I found it necessary to familiarize myself with literature from a number of fields. Although the approach I adopt is that of a cultural anthropologist and folklorist, disciplines such as sociology, ethnic studies, history, art history, and ritual studies address some of the same subjects which concern me. Issues which cross-cut the disciplines are the significance of ritual, the exhibition of art as a form of cultural representation, and the concept of tradition. I also drew upon works written by scholars of multicultural education and burial customs. In this chapter I will review primarily those sources which deal directly with the Day of the Dead but will also highlight some of the works from other fields which were most influential in grounding my ideas.

Accounts of Mexican Commemorations

Most articles and books on the Day of the Dead fall into one of three categories: historical accounts, ethnographies, and articles written by contemporary tourists. Because modern-day celebrants frequently say that the holiday has its origins in Aztec customs, I searched for evidence to back up this claim in the works of those individuals who were among the first Europeans in Mexico, the Spanish Catholic missionaries. The Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún lived in central
Mexico beginning in 1523. Sahagún wrote extensively on Aztec death festivals in his twelve-volume *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* (1969), but he does not use the term “Day of the Dead” to describe any of the Aztec holidays. His contemporary, Father Diego Durán described two Aztec festivals which are often linked to the Day of the Dead, the Little Feast of the Dead and the Great Feast of the Dead, in his books *History of the Indies of New Spain* (1967) and *Book of the Gods, Rites, and the Ancient Calendar* (1971). While these holidays may bear certain similarities to the Day of the Dead, one cannot definitively state that either is the direct precursor of the present holiday.

In the mid 1500s in what may be the earliest account of the nascent syncretism of indigenous memorial practices with the Catholic holiday of All Souls Day, Fray Toribio de Benavente documented that people in Tlaxcala and Texcoco placed food and flowers on the graves of their loved ones on the anniversaries of their deaths and also made similar offerings on All Souls Day (1951:144-45). Thorough discussions of 16th century indigenous Mexican death customs can be found in Adams (1991), Brundage (1979, 1985) Keen (1971) and Weaver (1981). Thomas Gage described the native custom of providing offerings for the dead on All Souls Day in the 1620s (Thompson 1958).

By 1763, when Francisco de Ajofrín was in Mexico City, a holiday specifically referred to as the Day of the Dead was observed (Ajofrín 1958:87). Ajofrín, like many early travel writers (e.g. Calderon de la Barca 1843, Gooch 1887, Lyon 1828) describes the bustling markets which sprang up in the days preceding the
Day of the Dead. Clearly when anthropologist Franz Boas was in Mexico in 1898, he too was amazed by the plethora of Day of the Dead paraphernalia available for sale: he listed over one hundred objects which were sold in the markets, including all manner of toys, food, and decorations (MacDonald 1992:545).

As anthropology is a young science, ethnographic descriptions of the Day of the Dead generally come from the 20th century and hence reflect more than four hundred years of Spanish influence. The majority of these accounts describe a given ethnographer’s total experience living among the people of a particular town, with the Day of the Dead treated as a component of the ritual calendar (e.g. Covarrubias 1946; Lewis 1951, 1969; Oakes 1951; Parsons 1936; Redfield 1930). The Day of the Dead is not the primary focus of such works and hence the subject receives only limited attention. Nonetheless these sources shed light on early twentieth century customs. Numerous more recent ethnographers similarly make brief mention of Day of the Dead practices among various communities (e.g. Beals 1970; Carrasco 1990; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986; Van Zantwijk 1989). Within the last two decades articles have been published which address the Mexican holiday more completely. These works focus largely on commemorations in the states of Oaxaca (El Guindi 1977), Mexico (Strupp Green 1980), Michoacán (Brandes 1988), and Tlaxcala (Nutini 1988b).

Of most interest to my research are studies which present diachronic views or examine the changing nature of the holiday. For example, Stanley Brandes has explored the history of the Day of the Dead in two articles; *Sugar Colonialism, and*
Death: *On the Origins of Mexico's Day of the Dead* (1997) and *The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and Mexican National Identity* (1998a). Brandes' perspective is radically different from that of other scholars. He maintains that while the Day of the Dead is a syncretic blending of indigenous and Spanish Catholic elements, it is erroneous to assume that the holiday has roots that reach far into pre-Columbian history. I find Brandes' arguments to be both compelling and refreshing. Nonetheless, the importance of modern day celebrants' claims that they are observing an ancient (typically cited as Aztec) holiday should not be overlooked. Individuals who choose to emphasize the holiday's indigenous aspects over its Spanish ones are making a statement about how they perceive themselves and their pasts. In *Power and Persuasion: Fiestas and Social Control in Rural Mexico* (1988) Brandes devotes a chapter to a discussion of the effect that government tourism promotion of the Day of the Dead has had on the town of Tzintzuntzan in Michoacán. The village has been made famous for its "traditional" celebrations, and yet many of the activities which now occur around the Day of the Dead are recent introductions. Brandes' works demonstrate that the Day of the Dead in Mexico is not static but changing, just as it is in the United States.

Kristen Norgert has written an excellent article entitled *Beauty and the Feast: Aesthetics and the Performance of Meaning in the Day of the Dead, Oaxaca, Mexico* (1996). Norgert sees Oaxacan Day of the Dead rituals as performances which model an idealized version of the way the cosmos should operate and which reflect community moral codes. As such, the rituals display a group's vision of itself.
Although I did not discover her article until I had already reached the same conclusions about public performances of the Day of the Dead in Texas, I was glad to find another scholar with the same opinion.


Carmichael and Sayer’s Skeleton at the Feast (1991) makes two valuable contributions. The book relays the impressions the Day of the Dead made on early travelers to Mexico, and it provides lengthy first person narratives of contemporary practices observed by modern day celebrants living in various Mexican states. Included are two interviews of residents of Veracruz, a state which has received little attention in the literature. Hugo Nutini wrote a richly descriptive account of Day of the Dead practices during the 1960s in Todos Santos in Rural Tlaxcala: A Syncretic, Expressive, and Symbolic Analysis of the Cult of the Dead (1988a). A major focus of this work is the delineation of indigenous versus Catholic elements in an attempt to
understand the process of syncretization. Nutini demonstrates that the holiday continues to undergo modifications, but Nutini suggests that recent elaborations of the holiday signal a last dying gasp of a decaying tradition. I disagree with his conclusion that the Day of the Dead is doomed to an inevitable extinction.

There are an abundance of accounts of Mexican Day of the Dead festivities penned by contemporary travel writers. The bulk of these deal with activities in Michoacán and Oaxaca and paint colorful portraits in the hopes of encouraging tourist excursions to these states. The articles typically appear in both newspapers and popular magazines such as American Craft (Wilcox 1984), Gourmet (Martínez 1997), Gentlemen's Quarterly (O'Toole 1991), Natural History (Day 1990) and Vegetarian Times (Viegas 1996) in the weeks immediately preceding the holiday. These articles have been of value in writing this thesis because they allowed me to track the rising popularity of the Day of the Dead as a tourist attraction. Also, because they describe contemporary practices, such articles provide something of a baseline for considering how Day of the Dead rituals are celebrated and adapted in Texas.

Additional information related to Mexican Day of the Dead commemorations can be gleaned from the works of others courting a popular audience. For example, the plot of Malcolm Lowery's novel Under the Volcano (1985 [1947]) unfolds over a twenty-four hour period on the Day of the Dead. Videocassettes on the subject include Celebrating the Day of the Dead (1992) and La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead (1989). In Mexico According to Eisenstein Karetnikova (1991) provides still photos from the epilogue of Eisenstein's 1931 film Que Viva Mexico (which was
never released during his lifetime or in its entirety). The Russian filmmaker was fascinated with Mexican rituals and intended his footage of the Day of the Dead to be evocative of the Mexican conception of life and death as a cycle. Gonzalez-Crussi’s *The Day of the Dead and Other Mortal Reflections* (1993) is partially based on his experiences filming a documentary for Britain’s BBC television. The holiday has inspired poets such as Button (1995), Herrara (1992) and Rios (1981).

Perhaps the most popular description of the Mexican holiday is offered by poet, author, and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, who devotes a chapter to the subject in his widely read book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950). Paz is frequently quoted by authors writing on the subject of the Day of the Dead and is so strongly associated with the holiday that shortly before his death he jokingly referred to his failing battle with cancer as “the art of playing hide and seek” with death (*Houston Chronicle* November 14, 1997). In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* Paz promoted the idea that Mexicans are able to celebrate and poke fun of death because they are indifferent to suffering due to the fact that they have been oppressed for centuries. He essentializes “The Mexican,” painting a portrait of a nation filled with fatalistic individuals resigned to living meaningless lives. Although the book is beautifully written, Paz writes in the ethnographic present, providing a picture of a country which is frozen in time and unchanging. In addition, Paz uses the first person plural, implying that his personal views are shared by all Mexicans, which is unlikely given that he was a member of the privileged elite class.
The Holiday in the United States

Green provides observations of the custom of decorating graves on the Day of the Dead in Laredo, Texas. Green's article is interesting because it deals with the period prior to World War II. He estimates that in the 1920s and 1930s up to 25,000 people flocked to the local Mexican-American cemeteries every year on the second day of November (1992:16). However, by the 1960s vendors were banned from the premises and the holiday seemed to be declining in importance. Quite the opposite is true in San Antonio, Texas, where the tradition of cemetery visitation and grave adornment still thrives. Turner and Jasper comment that outside San Fernando II cemetery, traffic is often slowed to a crawl because so many people jump out of their cars to purchase flowers from vendors located on the streets surrounding the cemetery's gates (1988:7).

The bulk of publications addressing the commemoration of the Day of the Dead in the United States consist of museum catalogues and exhibition reviews. Museum catalogues and reviews of museum shows generally describe exhibits featuring material culture from Mexico, not the United States, and favor photographs over words. Examples include Chicago's Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (Chávez and Sanchez 1998, Hardman 1998), the Los Angeles Museum of Cultural History (Childs and Altman 1982), and Santa Fe's Museum of Fine Arts (Flores-Turney 1996). While they also deal with the holiday as it is manifested in Mexico, two museum catalogues are important because they provide scholarly interpretations


In an excellent article by folklorist Olivia Cadaval, “*The Taking of Renwick*”: *The Celebration of the Day of the Dead and the Latino Community in Washington DC*, (1985) the author reflects on her sometimes frustrating experiences as curator of an exhibit at the Renwick gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. The exhibit designers’ original plans to create a generic, pan-Hispanic presentation of the holiday were altered to the point where the project took on a life of its own. The Smithsonian invited the participation of people hailing from a variety of Latin American countries.
Each had his or her own idea of the proper way to present the Day of the Dead to a North American audience and saw the exhibit as a means of not only displaying a custom from their country but of representing their country of origin in general. The result was that the "...program is somewhere between a real event and a media event, documentation and presentation, enactment and display" (p. 190). Cadaval's article lends merit to my view that Day of the Dead exhibits in the United States are manifestations of conscious decisions made by celebrants regarding the representation of ethnic identity.

Only two in-depth studies of the holiday as it is celebrated in the United States have been published. In Sommers' (1995) study of three holidays in a Michigan community, entitled *Fiesta, Fe, y Cultura: Celebrations of Faith and Culture in Detroit's Colonia Mexicana*, she writes that the first public exhibition of the Day of the Dead in Detroit was mounted in 1989 and that over time sponsors of the commemorations have increasingly taken into account their role as presenters of culture, "Traditions previously observed only in private in-group contexts have been revitalized for audiences of outsiders and fellow Mexicanos" (p. 26).

A dissertation by Morrison (1992), entitled "Mexico’s Day of the Dead in San Francisco, California: A Study of Continuity and Change in a Popular Religious Festival," focuses on commemorations staged by galleries in the city’s Mission District. The holiday was revived in the area in 1972 as a means of fostering Mexican pride and today approximately 10,000 people participate in the various festivities. The strength of both Sommers’ and Morrison’s works is that rather than
merely focusing on material culture, each scholar pays attention to the people who actually observe the holiday. These two case studies view the holiday as an emergent tradition which is being adapted to reflect the reality of life experiences of a minority group in the United States.

The Use of Ritual

The study of ritual has long been of interest to scholars in various fields. Despite the huge body of literature dealing with rituals, there is no general consensus on what ritual is or even on what rituals accomplish. My own views of ritual have been influenced by the works of Victor Turner (1974, 1978, 1979). Turner’s model of ritual is based on the stages of a rite of passage proposed by Van Gennep (1909); separation, margin, and aggregation. Turner emphasizes the middle phase, which he terms the liminal period, a time during which inversion of social norms creates a feeling of being betwixt and between normal reality and fantasy. It is during this phase that one is transformed by experience, gaining a new identity in the process.

Paralleling the model of rites of passage is Turner’s understanding of ritual as social drama, which he describes as consisting of crisis, redress, and reintegration (1967, 1969). Social dramas have a plot and a purpose: by encouraging reflexivity they provide a means to heal a breach in the social order. Day of the Dead commemorations can be read as social dramas. A crisis is precipitated by the death of a loved one. The annual holiday allows survivors to reflect upon their losses and at
the same time, by spiritually reuniting with the dead, survivors reincorporate the 
deceased into their world. Conflict is recognized and then redressed via an 
affirmation of unity.

Clifford Geertz also sees rituals as mechanisms for the resolution of problems 
or contradictions. Geertz popularized the idea of religious ritual as a "model of and 
model for reality" (1973:92). Rituals both expose a group's conceptions of the 
existing cosmological order and their ideas about the way the world should ideally be. 
Because they encapsulate and fuse people's conceptions of order and their 
dispositions for action, rituals provide a special vantage point for the anthropologist. 
Geertz and others (e.g. Marcus and Fischer 1986:61, Ricouer 1971:529) equate rituals 
with texts: a close reading of ritual activities reveals what is most important to a 
society.

Two critical overviews of ritual theory were penned by Catherine Bell and the 
strength of these books lies in their reviews of existing scholarship. In Ritual Theory, 
Ritual Practice (1992), Bell explores various theories about the nature of ritual in 
order to provide an assessment of the current state of scholarship. Bell disagrees with 
the dichotomy often made between thought and action and with notions of ritual as 
universal and natural. In Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions (1997) she elaborates 
on her thesis and explores the reasons why people turn to rituals.

In recent years notions of rituals as cultural performances have become 
increasingly popular. As articulated by Milton Singer (1972), rituals can be 
considered discrete events which express culture and exhibit it to observers. One
merit of the cultural performance approach is that it recognizes the importance of the audience. Performances are communicative devices directed towards not only participants but outsiders. Seminal works on the subject include Ben-Amos (1972), Bauman (1984), and Goffman (1974). Performance theory has since been applied to a wide variety of ritual phenomena, including games, sports, speech acts, politics, and theater. A text which examines a wide range of actions from a performance perspective is Stern and Henderson’s *Performance: Texts and Contexts* (1993). Another work which demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the performance approach and the many genres to which it may be applied is Fine and Speer’s *Performance, Culture, and Identity* (1992).

**Ethnicity and Display**

There is a huge body of literature examining the formulation of ethnic identity. Helpful starting points for understanding how identity is configured are offered by Brass (1985), Gellner (1983), Reminick (1983), and Rothschild (1981). Anderson (1983) shows that ethnic groups, movements, and revolutions become nationalist in orientation as a means of separating group members from non-group members. Ethnic groups perceive of themselves as communities of like-minded people, individuals who share a common past and future. Nash sees the post-1500 rise of the modern nation-state as responsible for the formation of ethnic categories. According to Nash, “Those people who were not politically dominant in the nation-state and who still had significant cultural markers of difference and sufficient social
cleavage from the dominant political majority were 'ethnic groups'” (1989:2). Rather than fostering homogenization, modernization has heightened imbalances of power. According to Nash, ethnicity offers an asylum for the retention of traditional culture and ethnic group membership provides a platform for those minority groups struggling for recognition and authority. Eriksen also notes that while modernization in some ways causes people to become more similar, it simultaneously emphasizes ethnic differences (1993:147).

Example of books which focus on the Latino presence in the United States include Chavez (1991), DeVos and Romannici-Ross (1982), Jiobu (1988), Langely (1988), Maldonado and Moore (1987), Vigil (1984), and Weber (1973). Numerous scholars have addressed the inherent problem of descriptive terms which amalgamate rather than accurately define the diversity within ethnic groups. Gates (1992) writes that efforts to recognize diversity in the United States precipitated the “the culture wars,” debates which questioned the assumptions about identity and the Other. Falcon’s (1995) interview of Puerto Ricans in New York City shows that even within a single subset of people described as “Hispanic” there is a great deal of variety in how individuals see themselves in relation to mainstream American society. Portes and MacLeod’s (1996) interviews of second-generation Latin American immigrant children in Florida and California likewise reveals that immigrants who identify themselves by the Pan-ethnic term “Hispanic,” rather than by country of origin or by a hyphenated term, exhibit varying degrees of assimilation.
Of particular interest to my research are works which critically examine the collection or display of ethnic art or ritual items where objects are meant to stand for entire cultures. Public museums initially developed in 18th century Europe as royal collections were transformed into institutions which reflected the power of the nation (Von Holst 1967:229). For the next 200 years the museum both architecturally resembled and functioned like a temple, serving as a repository for culture which enshrined objects (Bazin 1967:198) and functioned to perpetuate the status quo (Bordieu 1984:7). Arranged into national schools, the typical national or state museum’s displays of art were intended to suggest to the patron an unbroken chronology in which Western art grew out of Egyptian, Greek, and Renaissance European precursors. The arts of non-Western and colonized nations were spatially segregated with little or no attention given to individual artists’ achievements. Duncan states that this museum ideal was the template for public museums until the advent of museums dedicated to modern and “primitive” arts in the 1950s (1991:99). More than half of the museums in the United States were established since 1950 (Weil 1990:3).

Museum historian Neil Harris states that in the 1960s financial considerations caused museums to become more responsive to diverse audiences (1990:50). Karp points out the impact of the anti-war and civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s on display policies, “Changes in civil and political society outside museums often provide the actual impetus for community requests and demands to the museum” (1992:12). In a debate which continues today, members of marginalized
groups expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that museum displays have historically been representative not so much of the people which they purport to represent but of the value systems of the curators. Cohen describes the Museo Shan-Dany in Oaxaca, Mexico as a political space where the manner in which artifacts are displayed assigns to them new meanings, “In the museum, we see material culture as more than it is. Through ostentation, single objects become signs and symbols for classes of objects - or at an extreme level, for total cultural systems” (1989:15).

Graburn (1976) uses the term “Fourth World” to describe arts originating in undeveloped countries. When these objects are imported to industrialized nations their owners typically attach to them new, etic meanings. Tourist art or ritual objects are elevated to the status of fine art when featured in a museum, but at the same time displays can perpetuate a perceived dichotomy between “us” and “them.” Clifford outlines the history of using art as a means to represent cultural groups and raises important questions about the criteria used to evaluate and label “savage objects” (1988: 229).

In recent years a number of ethnic groups in the United States, including Latinos, have objected to exhibits which strip art or artifacts of their cultural context. In Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian (1997) Richard Kurin recounts some of the complaints leveled at the Smithsonian Institution and the organization’s attempts to address these concerns. Kurin offers guidelines for the future and notes that museums themselves have become quite critical of their own former practices. Three volumes which document the ongoing debates about how to
adequately represent ethnic groups in museums are the edited volumes by Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991), Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine's *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (1992), and Marcus and Myer's *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (1995). Lavine states that currently “Museums are summoned to treat challenges not so much as problems to be surmounted, but as invitations to engage in conversations with the shifting publics who comprise their most important constituencies” (1992:156).

**The Issue of Tradition**

Simon Bronner claims, “As a point of social argument, ‘tradition’ undoubtedly has been one of the most common as well as most contested terms in English language usage...” (1998:1). When Edward Shils wrote *Tradition* in 1981, he noted that although there were countless books which described specific traditions, he knew of none which analyzed the concept of tradition itself. Up to that point, those who wrote about traditions generally assumed that the word was universally understood, but in fact the term was and continues to be used inconsistently, even among scholars in a single discipline. For Shils a tradition is something which has been passed down for a minimum of three consecutive generations. Although he recognizes that individuals adapt traditions over time, Shils claims that “…no generation, even those living in this present time of unprecedented dissolution of
tradition, creates its own beliefs, apparatus, patterns of conduct, and institutions” (1981:38).

In a 1984 article Dan Ben-Amos reviews stated and implicit meanings attached to the word “tradition” throughout the history of American folklore studies. Interestingly, as early as 1885 England’s Edwin Sidney Hartland provided a definition which seems salient even today despite his evolutionist leanings:

“Tradition is always being created anew, and traditions of modern origin wherever they are found are as much within our province as ancient ones” (1968:247).

However, in the United States until fairly recently tradition seems to have been construed as a superorganic entity, as the common past which a group shares and which guides their actions.

It was not until the mid-1970s that folklorists began to write of tradition as something which is also molded by those who invoke it. Dell Hymes proposed “... to root the notion not in time but in social life” (1975:348), highlighting the idea that tradition is a process of selectively drawing from the past which occurs in the present. Hymes and Williams (1983) both attend to the construction of tradition for the creation of group identity. In Tradition, Genuine or Spurious (1984) Handler and Linnekin argue against the old paradigm which saw tradition as a core of inherited traits. They focus instead on how traditions are ceaselessly changed by social actors, “We suggest that there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (p. 275).
In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) Hobsbawm and Ranger provide examples of traditions which appear to be ancient but which in fact have modern origins, such as the pageantry surrounding the royal family in Britain. Invented traditions imply continuity with the past in order to validate present practices. Models of the old are used for new purposes. Although the book documents cases in Britain and India, it has immediate bearing to this thesis. Sponsors of public Day of the Dead commemorations either explicitly or implicitly suggest that their celebrations constitute an unbroken link between past and present.

In 1995 the *Journal of American Folklore* issued a special edition which offered definitions of key terms used by folklorists in order to encourage uniform usage. It is interesting to note the degree to which the conception of the term “tradition” has changed since Shils’ publication. Henry Glassie starts his definition of tradition with the statement “Accept, to begin with, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (1995:395). Bronner (1998) likewise notes that in common practice, tradition is not only used to suggest precedent but to direct future action.

These recent interpretations of tradition apply to this case study. Sponsors of public Day of the Dead commemorations selectively choose elements from their cultural repertoires, or even borrow ideas from other groups or emulate practices about which they have read in books. Most of them did not grow up celebrating the holiday and only recently began to observe the Day of the Dead. In a break from tradition, they bring the custom of building an honorary altar out of the home and into the public domain. Festive aspects of the holiday are emphasized over the more
solemn ones. Some of the artworks or altars produced address contemporary issues. And yet sponsors consistently describe their displays and programs as "traditional," no matter how novel they may appear. Tradition is invoked to lend authority and authenticity to their interpretations. By placing the performances within what is believed or claimed to be a time-honored framework, celebrants legitimize their behaviors, beliefs, and their status.

Summary

The literature on Day of the Dead customs in Mexico demonstrates that the holiday has a dynamic history. Initially Spanish colonizers and missionaries attempted to suppress and supplant indigenous customs (Brundage 1985, D’owler 1987), but seeing that their efforts were only partially successful they later came to tolerate those traditions which did not directly oppose Catholic doctrine (Ingham 1986). The resulting marriage of native death customs with All Souls Day resulted in the hybrid, folk Catholic holiday of the Day of the Dead (Gosnell 1988, Juarez 1983, Navarro 1974). Today the Mexican government encourages and invents Day of the Dead celebrations, promoting them as shining examples of Mexican heritage and spirit.

In the United States promoters sponsoring public commemorations likewise look to the past as a means of connecting to their cultural roots. The Day of the Dead has been rediscovered and reclaimed by Tejanos and other Latinos in an effort to
make their voices heard. Public enactments of the Day of the Dead in the United States stimulate recognition of the Latino presence in society, display pride in ethnicity, and in some cases focus attention on social issues.
CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND ON THE HOLIDAY IN MEXICO

In Chapter III of this thesis I will set the stage for the examination of contemporary public Day of the Dead commemorations in Texas which will be taken up in subsequent chapters. An overview of historic practices, including typical commemorative activities, is provided in order to delineate what sponsors of public Day of the Dead celebrations in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio have in mind when they refer to their own events as being “traditional.” I will then discuss the impact of the Mexican government’s promotion of the holiday. Addressing these issues will provide a framework for understanding developments in the United States.

The Syncretic Nature of the Holiday

_Día de los Muertos_, or the Day of the Dead, is a Latin American holiday devoted to honoring and communicating with the souls of deceased relatives and friends and is most commonly associated with Mexico. Researchers and journalists alike (e.g. Beimler 1991, Carmichael and Sayer 1991, and Hernandez and Hernandez 1979) have focused almost exclusively on celebrations in Mexico, where the holiday has evolved in elaborate and unique ways. In Mexico the holiday represents a syncretic blending of elements taken from indigenous belief systems and from
popular Catholicism (Morrison 1992). Exactly how long the holiday has been celebrated has not and probably cannot be definitively ascertained. Nonetheless, it is quite common for scholars (see Fernandez Kelly 1974, Garciagodoy 1998) and authors writing for a popular audience (e.g. Bowman 1982, Hoyt-Goldsmith 1994) to state a correlation between ancient pre-Columbian practices and contemporary manifestations of the holiday. Those making such claims typically see the origins of the Day of the Dead as rooted in Aztec customs. There are several possible reasons for this association.

First, there is an abundance of information about the Aztecs, especially as compared to the general lack of Conquest-era documentation about other native Mexican groups. The Aztecs were one of the first groups to have sustained contact with the Spaniards, and importantly, their civilization was thriving when they were invaded. The works of early missionaries such as Sahagún (1956), Duran (1967), and de Benevente (1951) give detailed, if biased, accounts of existing indigenous commemorations of the dead and funeral practices. From these accounts it is clear that the Aztecs had a well-developed ritual calendar and that many of their holidays were devoted to the dead. Nutini (1988a) elaborates on six major festivals for the dead, drawing parallels between various Aztec ritual activities and Day of the Dead customs he witnessed in Tlaxcalan communities in the 1960s. Nutini never isolates a specific ancient precursor for the Day of the Dead, but his elaboration of six Aztec death festivals implies a connection which has been reiterated in subsequent publications (e.g. Cody 1991, Efrain et al. 1994, Gosnell 1992).
There are also ideological reasons motivating an association with the Aztecs. Since the beginnings of Spanish colonization the people in privileged positions in Mexico were those who claimed Spanish ancestry. Even today indigenous peoples hold little political or social clout and make up the poorest sectors of society (Knight 1990, Stephen 1990). However, the very system which continues to repress contemporary native peoples glorifies the Aztecs: the Mexican government promotes the idea that all Mexicans are related to this group in an effort to foster a sense of nationalistic pride and unity. The symbol of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, an eagle perched atop a nopal cactus with a snake in its talons, is the center point of the Mexican flag. The whole of the Mexican nation is mythically allied with this single, defunct group to create what Bonfil Battalia has called “the imaginary Mexico” (1996:21). Wilson has observed that “Aztec rhetoric and symbolism de-emphasized local cultural variation. Mexican indigenismo had romanticized the Aztecs as the symbol of all Indians and of a centralized Mexican government; it did not seek an ethnic resurgence of the country’s remaining Indian subcultures” (1997:100).

The few sources dealing with Mexican celebrations for the dead dating from the 17th century do not specifically refer to any holiday called “the Day of the Dead.” They do, however, describe All Soul’s Day practices. The peoples of Mexico would have been required, as converts to Catholicism, to observe this practice every November second. The exact process of religious syncretism which occurred is not documented, and most likely communities located throughout the vast territory of Mexico absorbed the imposed religion at different rates depending on factors such as
whether or not a priest was locally in residence, the degree to which the new customs meshed with existing philosophies, and the degree to which the community's structure had been disrupted. What can be definitively stated is that by the time a holiday called the Day of the Dead came into existence, Spanish Catholicism had been a part of the Mexican experience for some two hundred years. Therefore the Day of the Dead represents a blend of Catholic and indigenous elements, and although we can pinpoint the introduction of the Catholic influence to 16th century Spaniards belonging to the Franciscan and Dominican orders, we cannot positively identify the influence of any specific indigenous cultural group or groups by name.

Religious syncretism was abetted by the fact that Catholic rituals coincidentally shared many similarities to indigenous ones: “In sixteenth century Mexico, the parallels between Catholic supernatural figures and indigenous gods were especially remarkable and the resulting syncretism was unusually coherent” (Ingham 1986:9). The following is a partial listing of the twenty-five similarities noted by Weckmann (1992:185-186); the cross, baptism and holy water, presentation of newborn babies in the temple and circumcision, psalms, fasting, admiration for chastity, bloody sacrifice translated into symbolic sacrifice, the use of incense and flowers, confession, a priestly hierarchy, monastic schools, and the permeation of religion in all spheres of social life. While the parallels between native customs and Catholic ones encouraged the adoption of particular symbols or practices, acceptance of new ways of religious observance did not necessarily signal the total abandonment of old practices.
Initially the missionaries were enormously pleased with the ease with which they made converts, but they soon realized that the natives were merely going through the motions, outwardly following Catholic rituals but inwardly thinking of them in terms of their own existing religious cosmology. Sahagún, who arrived in present day Mexico City in 1529, knew that he could not effectively assimilate the locals to the Spaniards’ ways unless he could first identify and suppress native rituals, “In order to preach against these things, and indeed to be even aware of their very existence, it is necessary to understand how they were used in pagan times; due to our ignorance of this, they do many idolatrous things in our presence without our being aware” (D’owler 1987:9).

Florescano suggests that indigenous people deliberately played the role of docile converts, readily adopting Catholic practices in order to ensure the survival of their own beliefs. For example, while they would recognize a Catholic holiday people would in fact be celebrating their own deities, in the guise of saints, on an adjusted date. According to Florescano, “These revitalizations of the ancient culture sought to incorporate the old into the present through the procedure of covering over it with a Christian veneer that permitted it to be accepted by the dominant culture” (Florescano 1994:114). Other examples of such acts are provided by Elizondo (1988) and LaFaye (1976). In 1929 Anita Brenner wrote “The Day of the Dead was fixed by the missionary friars according to the Christian calendar, but it was a habit long before” (1970:21). As Ingham observes, “The discipline imposed by the missionary friars in the late sixteenth century was severe, but it is clear that the Indians responded
with enthusiasm and reworked Catholic teachings according to their own needs and understandings" (1986:2).

**Early Accounts of the Day of the Dead**

The earliest descriptions of the Day of the Dead were penned by travelers to Mexico, not Mexicans, and they therefore reflect outsiders’ etic perspectives. However, these accounts are instructive in that they reveal historic precedent for many contemporary customs. Indeed, observations made by 20th century anthropologists would seem to suggest that many elements have endured with little change.

One of the earliest discussions of All Soul’s Day customs is provided by Thomas Gage, an English Dominican friar who traveled to Mexico and Guatemala between 1625 and 1637. Gage is generally considered to be a more reliable source than other missionaries because his accounts are extraordinarily detailed and he was less biased against indigenous people and their customs. Indeed, Gage was highly critical of church policies; “In his polemical memoir intended to inflame English readers against Spain and Catholicism, he spared no effort to describe Spanish exploitation of the Indian and to depict any unsavory Indians characteristics as a result of defective Spanish administration” (Hill 1992:24). One of the criticisms he made against the friars was that they were taking advantage of their charges by requiring that huge offerings be made to the dead on All Soul’s Day, offerings which
the priests kept for themselves. Gage stated, "So upon the second day of November... they offer moneys, fowls, eggs, maize and other commodities for the souls’ good. But it proves for the profit of the priest, who after Mass wipes away to his chamber all that the poor Indians had offered unto these souls" (Thompson 1958:238).

Several times in his journal Gage refers to the great quantities of candies and sweetened breads which were offered to the dead on All Soul’s Day. Several scholars (Morrison 1992, Nutini 1988b, Tullius 1994) have drawn a parallel between the contemporary custom of exchanging treats such as sugar skulls and panes de muertos (sweet breads made in special shapes such as humans, angels, or animals) among friends and the Aztec practice of offering anthropomorphic figures made of sweetened amaranth dough to the gods during festivals. Gage does not, however, describe the candies or breads of the mid-1600s as being unusually shaped. Given the fact that he had an eye for detail it seems reasonable to assume that he would not have overlooked such a practice if it had existed at that time. The exchange of skeletal-themed treats was more likely initiated at a later date by the Spanish. In Spain it had long been common practice for friars to ask for panes de muertos on All Soul’s Day in exchange for the recitation of prayers. Hoyos Sainz, a Spanish historian, remarked on the persistence of this custom throughout the 18th century in Leon, Salamanca, and Segovia, Spain (1976:42). Panes de muertos were and continue to be made of wheat flour, an item introduced by the Spanish, instead of the native staples of corn flour or amaranth.
In his analysis of the impact of the sugar industry on colonized nations, Sidney Mintz (1985) suggests a European origin for the contemporary cornucopia of death-related candy treats to be found in Mexico surrounding the Day of the Dead, "The artistic and ritual association between sugar and death is not a Mexican monopoly; in much of Europe, candied funeral treats are popular" (p. 186). The first known reference to alfeñique, sugar paste figurines, is provided by friar Ajofrin, who witnessed events in the 1740s, "Before the Day of the Dead they sell a thousand figures of little sheep and lambs of sugar, which they call ofrenda... they also sell coffins, tombs, and a thousand figures of the dead, clerics, monks, and nuns of all denominations, bishops, horsemen, for which there is a great market and a colorful fair..." (1958:123).

Ajofrin's description of the great quantities of Day of the Dead related items available for purchase show that the holiday was well developed by the time he traveled to Mexico. Ajofrin also provides the first use of the term "The Day of the Dead" to describe the events which occurred on All Souls' Day (1958:87). We can therefore infer that the term was coined some time between 1648 and the 1740s. Although many Latin American countries celebrate All Souls' Day, the use of "The Day of the Dead" to describe commemorations is unique to Mexico (Brandes 1998a:363). In Mexico the holiday was reconfigured in a unique way and given a new name during the late 17th or early 18th century. Unfortunately sources dating to the time period during which the holiday took on its present form do not exist, so its exact course of development is unknown.
Juan-Pedro Viquirca documented that in Mexico City in 1766, officials attempted to tone down the exuberance of celebrants by banning the sale of alcohol after nine o’clock in the evening and prohibiting gatherings in the cemeteries (1984:11). Brandes (1998a:363) cites a newspaper article dating to 1847 which demonstrates the relief felt by the authorities that festivities on the Day of the Dead that year did not get out of control. Brandes suggests that up to and during the 19th century, the Mexican press censored reports of disturbances. The fact that the government attempted to suppress elements of the holiday that they felt were dangerous to the social order indicates that at some time during this period the Day of the Dead became a popular folk holiday celebrated by the people outside the auspices of the church or the government.

Nineteenth century visitors to Mexico seem to have been uniformly impressed by the volume of business conducted around the holiday. Frances Calderón de la Barca commented in a letter dating to 1841, “The old women at their booths, with their cracked voices, kept up the constant cry of ‘Skulls, niñas, skulls!’ - but there were also animals done in sugar, of every species, enough to form specimens for a Noah’s ark” (1970:278). In 1864 Countess Paula Kolonitz of Austria commented on the strange custom, from her perspective, of marketing skeletal-themed toys and candies to children:

For many days beforehand, they set up poles and erect shops and stalls in the Main Square which are then gradually filled with games and sweets. All is symbolic. Everything recalls the Day of the Dead, so that all one can see are small coffins, skulls, skeletons, catafalques and priests... which are given to the children for their solace, delight, and amusement. Happy they run through the narrow
alleyways formed by the stalls in the square, looking, delighting, buying. So that this is a day of fiesta [1984:122].

Later, in 1945 Cerillo likewise noted “Candy vendors offer a horrifying assortment of gastronomic atrocities” (1945:19).

The writings of German Carl Christian Sartorius in 1824 and American Fanny Chambers Gooch in the 1880s describe Day of the Dead activities which continue until the present day. For example, Sartorius documents the custom of decorating the home altar with special offerings of food and drink for the enjoyment of the deceased and the use of candles, incense, and flowers (1961:55[1858]). Gooch was impressed by the beauty of the cemeteries in Mexico City, “Pictures of deceased friends and relatives were placed at the headstones, while garlands, wreaths, and floral emblems encircled them, almost concealing the tomb” (Gooch 1966:127[1887]).

Following accounts of the Day of the Dead such as the above, there were few additional reports made until the twentieth century. Robert Redfield (1930:142) described funeral customs in Tepoztlán in the state of Morelos in 1930, but did not specifically address the annual holiday devoted to the dead. Oscar Lewis (1951) devoted a chapter to mourning rituals in Tepoztlán but only mentioned the Day of the Dead in an endnote. Francis Toor described and illustrated toys and crafts related to the Day of the Dead (1939) and provided a description of holiday activities in A Treasury of Mexican Folkways (1947:236-244). Fergusson’s (1934) and Milne’s (1965) works concentrated on Mexican fiestas, and each offers a brief sketch of the Day of the Dead.
George Foster's account of events in Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán is noteworthy on two accounts. Foster (1948:220) itemizes the expenses incurred by the brother-in-law of a young woman killed by lightning. When the girl's godfather failed to fulfill the obligation of remembering her with style on the Day of the Dead, the brother-in-law took up the responsibility. Fulfilling this duty cost him a total of $202.50, quite a sum for those days. The fact that this individual sacrificed so much money suggests a strong sense of ritual obligation existed in the 1940s. Additionally, Foster's description of events during this time period can be contrasted with those of more modern times, which have been documented by Brandes (1988). In Tzintzuntzan today the holiday has been elaborated into a spectacle for tourists. Government promotion of the Day of the Dead in this community have impacted residents and exposed many North Americans to the holiday.

Typical Elements of Modern Mexican Commemorations

As with any folk custom, there is a great deal of variation in the manner in which the Day of the Dead is observed. Mexico is a large country and is home to many ethnic minorities and religious groups. Thus, it is not surprising to find that specific customs differ by location. People use locally available resources and the date the holiday is observed varies by region. The degree of attention the holiday receives can also be a factor of a family's income level and social status. Many urbanites belonging to the upper classes are less interested in the holiday and consider
it to be a superstitious or pagan ritual which is beneath them. An informant interviewed by Carmichael and Sayer commented, "Among 'educated' city-dwellers, this sense of the 'sacred' has diminished and intimacy with the dead has lessened" (1991:134). Garciagodoy refers to the Day of the Dead as a holiday belonging to the "humble people" (1998:46). The majority of individuals interviewed by Carmichael and Sayer (1991), who come from the popular classes, commented on the considerable financial outlay involved in their commemorations of the dead. Compared to more wealthy individuals, these informants have less disposable income and yet they allot a significant portion of their funds toward the annual commemoration of the Day of the Dead.

Despite the variations, a general pattern is readily discernible in Day of the Dead commemorations. Those practices and ritual items which are commonly encountered are what celebrants in the United States have in mind when they refer to their own observances as being traditional, and hence are worth elaborating. The summary provided below draws from many sources in order to paint a portrait of the form celebrations found in Mexico typically take. It is not intended to be all-inclusive or even in-depth, but to highlight the basics considered essential to the holiday. Readers interested in more thorough descriptions are directed to the works of Garciagodoy (1998) and Nutini (1988b).

In most regions the Day of the Dead stretches over two days, November first and second. Its primary goal is to honor dead loved ones and to provide them with the creature comforts they enjoyed as mortals. The dead are believed to come back to
earth on these days and expect to have treats provided for them. It is the moral
obligation of relatives to see to the needs of the dead on this day, and in fact, failing
to do so may result in negative repercussions such as loss of income, illness, or death.

Many legends of the consequences suffered by those failing to remember the
Veracruz resident Fredy Mendez, who estimated the cost of the non-food materials
used in his 1987 ofrenda at 30,000 pesos (then approximately 125 U.S. dollars),
provided the following story:

Our duty is to make them [the dead] happy. The poor must do the
best they can... Some people, however, make no ofrenda. They have
lost faith in the return of the souls. “Why should I spend my
savings on the dead?” they ask, “I can use my money in better
ways.” These people frequently fall ill... People who neglect their
dead have been known to fall, to sicken with fever, maybe even to die
[quoted in Carmichael and Sayer 1991:80].

In most communities, it is claimed that the spirits of deceased children return
on the first of November, which is sometimes referred to as El Día de los Angelitos,
the day for the little angels (Marino 1997:45). El Guindi observed that among the
Zapotec in Oaxaca, unmarried adults are buried and commemorated as children
regardless of their age because single men and women are not socially considered
adults (1986:34). Angelitos leave by the following day (the time at which they are
believed to depart varies, but they are usually gone by midnight), at which point the
souls of adults visit. In some areas an additional day is set aside for remembering
those who died violently. Commemorations occur in both the homes of the living and
in the cemeteries where the individuals being honored are buried.
In the home, an altar is either constructed separately or an existing home altar is redecorated to mark the occasion. Figure 1 provides an example of a home altar in Oaxaca, Mexico decorated for the holiday. The ofrenda is more than the sum of its parts. It is a symbolic reminder of the deceased’s former presence in the house and a testament to the fact that they are still considered a part of the family.

Metaphorically, the ofrenda can be considered a gift or sacrifice made by the living to the dead (the term ofrenda is used to describe both the altar itself and the offerings placed upon the altar). As such the altar is a sacred site, the place where mortals and souls come together once a year. Nutini comments “Symbolically, the personal ofrenda is a reaffirmation that the living and the dead are part of a single universe of existence that cannot be categorically dichotomized, and that the social structure of the living also obtains among the dead” (1988a:197).

Altar decorations may be simple or elaborate, depending on both the income level of a family and importance of the holiday to celebrants and the community. Altar decorations can be indicative of a family’s financial success, but even families of simple means embellish altars to create objects of beauty. Altars are typically placed against the wall, and many people believe that the north wall is the most suitable location. The base of the altar may be covered with a bright tablecloth, oil cloth, or paper. In some cases papeles picados, sheets of colored paper which have punched or cut out designs, are used on the base of the altar or hung on the wall as a backdrop. Items placed on altars can be divided into three categories; food, other ephemeral items, and objects associated with the deceased.
Food is perhaps the most important element: no altar would be considered complete without food and drink. The dead are weary after their long journey back to earth and require sustenance (Sonntag 1995:55, Siller 1989:23). Certain dishes, such as mole or tamales or panes de muertos are considered customary fare (Leal 1983:3). Bread is generally purchased from a professional baker, but mole and tamales are labor intensive dishes prepared in the home. Care is taken to include the foods and beverages most enjoyed by the deceased, “The food for the ofrenda is always the most labor-intensive, expensive holiday fare, which may take several days to prepare” (Garciagodoy 1998:9). The souls of children are given water and adults usually receive alcohol. Foodstuffs may also be incorporated as decorative motifs. For example pretzels, bagels, or ears of corn may be strung across the top of the altar or fruit may be arranged in a deliberately stylized manner.

Many of the other items used to dress up an altar are of an ephemeral nature. An example is flowers, which are considered a basic requirement of any altar. The most favored flower is the cempasuchil, a type of marigold, although numerous other flowers such as cockscomb and babies’ breath may be used. Flowers are strung up, bent into arch shapes, placed in vases, or their petals are plucked and used in the making of designs. In some communities custom dictates that families create a path of marigold petals leading from the house’s threshold to the altar. It is believed that the aroma and bright color of flowers help the deceased in navigating their way to the altar. Copal incense and candles are ubiquitous features as well. Additional items which are widely found are ceramic jugs, place settings of dishes, and toys for
deceased children. In some areas skeletal figures of various kinds figure prominently into displays.

Finally, altars typically include referents to the person being commemorated. These may include clothing, tools used in the line of work, domestic items such as comales (griddles used to make tortillas), and favorite leisure items such as games or crafts. Photographs and documents, such as marriage papers, also appear.

Returning souls are believed to enjoy the essences of the foods provided, not to physically consume them. Some people claim that they know the dead have entered the home when the candles flicker (Dingus 1992:144, Standish 1996:162) or when black moths appear (El Guindi 1977:4). One can tell that the dead have partaken of the food and drink offerings because afterwards they are less flavorful (Fernandez-Kelly 1974:528, Hopkinson 1990:144). Puebla City resident María Antonieta Sánchez de Escamilla explains, “It is the spirit, or essence, that the dead extract. We always offer water and, do you know, the level really goes down... If we put out a full glass of water, it is often half full the next day” (Carmichael and Sayer 1991:121).

Once the dead have had their fill of food and drink, the family members and their friends are free to consume the “left-overs.” People often use the occasion to visit neighbors and friends, share items from their ofrendas, or to drink a toast in honor of the dead. The custom of exchanging food among households is referred to as enviar muertos, sending the dead (Norget 1996:57). Altars are generally returned to their pre-holiday appearance on November third. In many regions, all phases of
food preparation, construction, and dismantling of the altars are considered the responsibility of female household members (Salvo 1997, Beezley 1997. See also Turner 1990 for Mexican-American women's home altars).

The other component of Day of the Dead commemorations is more public in the sense that it takes place in the outdoor setting of the cemetery. In Mexico, unlike in the United States, most cemeteries do not offer perpetual care of the graveyard. The responsibility for maintenance of plots falls on the families of the deceased. The Day of the Dead ensures that at least once a year gravestones are tended to, and one might witness individuals pulling up weeds, rearranging fallen decorations, or applying a new coat of paint to a tomb. With these preliminaries out of the way, the graves are then decorated. Grave decoration is done less ritualistically than altar decorating as there are no established requirements in terms of style or offerings. Nonetheless, many graves become places of beauty. Flowers are again an important offering for the dead, and their petals are often arranged in elaborate geometric designs or in motifs such as hearts, crosses, or wreaths (see Beimler 1991). Food and drink are usually placed on the graves as well.

In some communities people visit the cemetery during the day, while in others they remain throughout the night keeping vigil. In such cases the cemetery becomes aglow with hundreds of burning candles and fills with the aroma of incense (Sonntag 1995:50, Winningham 1986:147). People socialize with others, commending them on their fine job of decorating their loved one's graves, children might play games such as El Ancla (the anchor) and La Oca (the goose) (Strupp Green 1969:10), and in
some communities musicians stroll through the cemeteries. The mood in the
cemeteries is at once somber and festive. People may quietly reflect or weep as they
remember their loved ones, and yet they might have a picnic.

Much has been written about the bittersweet nature of the holiday. Visitors to
Mexico have been and continue to be stunned to learn that there is a holiday for the
dead which is actually a joyous occasion. As Morrison notes, “Their attentiveness is
not negative and depressing, but indicative of respect for and enjoyment of life”
(1992:190). The fact that skeletons and skulls serve as inspiration for so many
decorations, toys, and foods - items designed to deliver pleasure - is testament to the
fact that Day of the Dead celebrants in Mexico have a unique view of death.

The Mexican perspective is frequently attributed to the fact that they conceive of
life and death as stages in a cycle. Life and death go together as two halves of a
circle, like yin and yang. While they are opposing conditions, they are
complementary opposites. All humans both live and die. While I find problems with
the way in which Octavio Paz claims to speak for all Mexicans, I include the
following quote because it captures the spirit behind the Day of the Dead:

Death lacks meaning for the modern Mexican. The word death is not pronounced
in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in
contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates
it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is as much
fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away: he
looks at if face to face, with impatience, with disdain or irony. “If they are going
to kill me tomorrow, let them kill me right away” [1950:58].

Leal comments, “The attitude of the Mexican towards death is one of mockery to the
point of making fun and joking about it. It is for that reason that there are so many
humorous names with which death is associated" (1983:4). Indeed, Lope Branch (1963) published a vocabulary of Mexican death terminology more than one hundred pages in length which is filled with examples.

Nowhere is this jocular relationship with death more apparent than in *calaveras*, satirical, humorous poems about the living often directed at authority figures or celebrities. *Calaveras*, which are told from the perspective of the dead, poke fun at the living no matter what their social station and emphasize the point that life is just a passing phase. Weckmann (1992:1156) suggests that *calaveras* were introduced by the Spanish, who had distributed *pasquines* (lampoons) of a similar nature on the continent since Medieval times. In Mexico *calaveras* became popular in the late 1800s as a means of protesting against and ridiculing the pomp of affairs of state during the dictatorship of Díaz Porfirio (1875-1910). In San Antonio, Texas, retired professor Moises Espinó del Castillo has lampooned local figures in his *calaveras* for over twenty years.

The term *calaveras* is also used to describe prints of skeletal figures engaged in human pursuits, another form of mocking the living. Graphic artists like Manuel Manilla and Santiago Hernández resurrected the *danse macabre* form and their illustrations often accompanied the poems on broadsheets. The most famous images were made by José Guadalupe Posada. Today the prints of Posada are widely distributed in Mexico, and in the United States they are popular on postcards, T-shirts, and all manner of Day of the Dead accouterments. For examples of Posada’s work, see Berdecio and Appelbaum (1972), Tinker (1961) and Westheim (1953), and
for a semiotic analysis of their iconic meaning, the reader is referred to Garciagodoy (1998).

**Government Promotion of the Day of the Dead**

Following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), a newly installed government faced the onerous task of establishing a sense of national identity for a fragmented society. In an effort to unify the populace, the government promoted the idea that all Mexicans came from a common stock, one which consisted of Spanish and indigenous ingredients. The belief that diverse peoples could be welded into a pan-Mexican creation guided efforts to preserve ancient and indigenous customs and art forms (Kaplan 1993:119).

In the 1920s Secretary of Education José Vasconceles proclaimed that mixed-blood mestizos were the “cosmic race,” destined to lead the world. In 1930 philosopher Samuel Ramos wrote *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* as a call for an end to what he perceived as a massive inferiority complex among the Mexican people. Rather than looking to the United States or to the French for guidance, Ramos suggested that Mexicans rediscover their own heritage. Indigenismo policies extolled the virtues of the native, even if “The native” was essentially a creation of the policymakers and emphasized dead Indians over living ones (see Knight 1990).

Keen notes, “The Mexican cult of ancient Mexico reflects above all an intense nationalism... however, the cult has more pragmatic uses. It encourages an influx of tourists, it improves Mexico’s image abroad, and at home it serves to conceal the
continued tragic division of Mexico into two nations” (1971:467). The impact of these policies is complex and has already been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Bartra 1987, Gutmann 1992, Schmidt 1978). I call attention to these nationalistic efforts because they were in part responsible for the creation of a huge tourism industry which centers around the marketing of an idealized past and a sanitized version of the present. The government’s involvement in the Day of the Dead has markedly impacted the form and feeling of celebration in certain communities. Also of relevance is the fact that some Day of the Dead celebrants in Texas glorify the Aztec in a manner quite similar to the way the Mexican government lauds “The native.”

Although in the past leaders of church and state have condemned the Day of the Dead, in the 1960s the government reversed its stance. A Puebla City schoolteacher interviewed by Carmichael and Sayer (1991) reflected on the changes she had witnessed. When growing up, authority figures discouraged commemorations on the Day of the Dead:

In the 1950s, when I was a child in school, we were ridiculed for believing in ofrendas. If we admitted to having one at home, we were laughed at for our credulity. Those who honored the Days of the Dead, so it was said, were the victims of superstition and hallucination. My teacher asked me to explain this to my parents: “Tell them this is nonsense; tell them they are making a foolish mistake. The dead can never visit us here on earth” [Carmichael and Sayer 1991:118].

A generation later, the Day of the Dead was not only accepted but encouraged:

By 1972, when I started teaching, the position had changed... So the authorities revised their views and decided to support our vanishing traditions. It suits the Government for us to stay as we are; if we awake from our slumbers and our passivity, good and bad things might happen! Now the Government wants to shore up our sense of pride and national identity. When official policy was reversed, La Secretaría de Educación [The Ministry of
Education] asked schools and nursery schools to promote Mexican culture; teachers who had mocked our traditions were told to endorse them [ibid:119].

The Mexican government began to promote the Day of the Dead as a tourist attraction in the 1970s. Rural communities with traditional celebrations were targeted for development, as it was believed that urban Mexicans and tourists from abroad would be attracted to areas which had "the genuine article." The draw was not only the Day of the Dead but the celebrants themselves. According to one writer, "The Indian was regarded as a 'national asset' and attempts were made to revive Indian myths. As a result, the government now participates in the promotion of "The Feast of the Dead" (Siller 1989:24). Despite the fact that there are very few biologically "pure-blood Indians" in Mexico, the government promulgates the idea that residents of certain rural communities are not only less assimilated but more representative of Mexico's pre-conquest glory days.

In 1971 three government agencies in the Michoacán capital of Morelia, La Casa de Cultura (the House of Culture), La Casa de Artesanías (the House of Crafts), and La Secretaría Estatal de Turismo (the State Department of Tourism) began concerted efforts to "develop" the Day of the Dead in Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán. Tourism is the second largest source of income in Mexico and according to 1987 figures, "The Banco de Comercio Exterior estimated that tourists spent about 18 percent of their monies on crafts and popular art works, or artesanías, in Mexico" (Kaplan 1993:114). Since government promotion of the Day of the Dead, the holiday and the town of Tzintzuntzan itself have been dramatically transformed. Handler's report on the effects of the Canadian government's promotion of Quebecois folk
traditions parallels the situation in Mexico, “To select aspects of a social world as traits, and then to isolate chosen traits in a new context - to photograph them, inscribe them, perform them on stage, immure them in museums - necessarily changes the meaning that those traits have to objectifiers, trait-bearers, and onlookers alike” (1988:77).

The case of Tzintzuntzan is instructive. The town receives thousands of visitors each year, most of them from abroad and many from the United States. Tourists relate their experiences to friends back home, and those among them who are travel journalists convey their impressions to a broad audience. Tourists may come away from the experience believing the government brochures and hype, feeling fortunate to have witnessed an “authentic” version of one of Mexico’s “most ancient” customs. Tourists are given the impression that they have, to use Goffman’s analogy (1974), passed from the “front” region of the restaurant dining room to the “back” region of the kitchen, where people let their guards down and are in their natural element. Ironically, what currently passes for traditional Day of the Dead commemorations in Tzintzuntzan and the neighboring towns is actually a recently invented, imposed version of the holiday. In a similar vein, Grimes has observed that the Zozobra effigy was added to Santa Fe, New Mexico’s DeVargas Entrada fiesta in the 1920s, but many people mistakenly believe this aspect of the festival is ancient (Grimes 1976:207).

George Foster has spent decades doing research in Tzintzuntzan and during that time has witnessed many changes. Foster’s account of the Day of the Dead
written in 1945 and his recollections of conditions in 1961 show that formerly the holiday was an intimate occasion for remembrance and socializing among friends and family, “The emotional experience of the vigil, in all its details, and the opportunity to express the ties of friendship by food exchange fills such an important need in the villagers’ lives that it seems likely this custom will continue for a long time” (Foster 1979:321). In the 1960s few tourists came to Tzintzuntzan, as the government directed them to nearby Janitizio instead.

Foster and his colleague, Stanley Brandes, have noted the following transitions resulting from the vigorous marketing of Tzintzuntzan. Participation in el doble, the custom among young men of performing the service of ringing the church bells and begging for food and cash as payment, has been banned. Although the townspeople sanctioned el doble, the government apparently felt that it might encourage rowdiness and distract from the ambiance they sought to create.

The focus has shifted from the home to more public arenas. For example, in the past, a velación, or candlelight vigil, was held in the local cemetery between four o’clock and eleven o’clock on the evening of November second. Presently, the velación lasts far longer, starting earlier and ending later. The cemetery is open all night and the locals are joined by hundreds of tourists. The government, which refers to the Michoacán’s commemorations as “The Night of the Dead,” coordinates numerous activities during the evenings of November first and second. Community members refer to these collectively as La Feria (The Fair). La Casa de la Cultura’s theater company stages a production of the popular play Don Juan Tenorio (a Spanish
introduction) on November first, a performance which thousands of tourists pay to see but which most locals do not patronize. According to Brandes, “Most of the people, although proud that the play is so popular with the visiting public, balk at the thought of paying the four hundred pesos entry fee - equivalent to about one to three days’ income... In my experience, the people of Tzintzuntzan willingly lay out large sums for fiesta activities they value. Don Juan Tenorio is obviously not among these” (Brandes 1988:98). A similar situation has occurred in Trinidad, where many residents now abstain from participating in Carnival because they feel the festivities have become overly political and devoid of meaning (Stewart 1986:291).

Brandes likewise noted that in 1984 few community residents attended the state sponsored performance of Folkloric dances held in Tzintzuntzan, a free event. However, tourists were in abundance, as were camera crews. The featured dancers and dances were not from Michoacán. Yet to lend an air of authenticity to the proceedings, an announcer introduced one dance by explaining that it was based on a reconstruction of an ancient Tarascan dance. At several points during the evening this man lapsed in lengthy spells during which he spoke in Tarascan, a dialect which few in the audience could comprehend. In fact, as Garcia Canclini points out, “Tzintzuntzan is a mestizo town that no longer speaks the Indian language and is economically and culturally integrated into the national society” (1993:35). Nonetheless, the speaker’s digressions served the purpose of furthering the impression that Tzintzuntzan retains age-old customs.
An innovation which has more directly involved natives is FONDO’s (the National Handicrafts Fund’s) former sponsorship of a crafts competition. Substantial cash prizes were awarded to winners in each of three categories. This encouraged production and competition, as winners received not only money but enhanced social standing, and purchases made by tourists fueled the local economy. However, FONDO ceased holding the competition in 1981 so that today many Tzintzuntzeños who grew accustomed to earning extra cash during November now travel to nearby Pátzcuaro to vend their wares.

Among residents, the general opinion is that the effects of tourism have been positive. Many enjoy the attention and feel proud that their town has been selected as a model for development. Some enjoy the carnivalesque atmosphere. Most appreciate the extra income that tourists provide. According to Brandes, Tzintzunteños’ chief concerns are not the noise or congestion that tourists cause, but how they can better capitalize on the outsiders’ presence. As I have noted above, the Day of the Dead has long had a commercial aspect. The record shows that vendors of food, flowers, and various crafts have enjoyed brisk business in the weeks preceding the holiday for at least 250 years. However, as the case of Tzintzuntzan shows, the government now directly encourages and profits from holiday marketing. In Tzintzuntzan and other areas, markets no longer spring up spontaneously but are sponsored and directed by outside agencies who frequently charge fees to rent stalls.

What I find more disconcerting, however, is the way in which a popular religious holiday of the folk has been transformed into a sort of living re-presentation
of the holiday amid claims that the commemorations are among some of the most authentic and traditional in Mexico. Boorstin describes spectacles packaged for tourists a “pseudo-events,” noting, “These ‘attractions’ offer an elaborately contrived indirect experience, an artificial product to be consumed in the very places where the real thing is as free as the air” (1961:99). Rather than witnessing a genuine local manifestation of the holiday, tourists consume a version fabricated by and for outsiders. In Tzintzuntzan the Day of the Dead á la the Night of the Dead has become less focused on the family and the ancestors and increasingly concentrated on the presentation of a community image. As Brandes noted, “They were no longer actors in a ritual drama played out... by and for themselves. They were now performers, acting out ancient rites and beliefs for the benefit and amusement of others” (Brandes 1988:109). *La Feria* has transformed the entire location into a stage in which not only professional performers but Tzintzunteños themselves become actors. The Day of the Dead is framed “as if,” one step removed from reality. This is the Day of the Dead in the subjunctive mode.
CHAPTER IV

THE DAY OF THE DEAD IN THE UNITED STATES

Within the last thirty years an increasing number of United States residents have become aware of the Day of the Dead holiday, both as it is celebrated in Mexico and in the United States. Due to the Mexican government's promotion of the Day of the Dead as a tourist attraction beginning in the 1970s, scores of vacationers have witnessed events in Mexico, while the accounts written by travel journalists appearing in newspaper columns and in popular magazines such as *American Craft* (Hulick 1984), *Americas* (Reynosa 1980), *Gourmet* (Martinez 1997), and *Natural History* (Day 1990) have enabled even larger audiences to vicariously experience the holiday via the written word. In the United States, population growth and increased immigration have served to make people of Mexican descent and their customs more visible.

In this chapter I will discuss two additional factors which have brought about a heightened awareness of the Day of the Dead in this country: museum exhibits featuring Day of the Dead folk art, and the formation of Chicano groups whose goal is to reclaim cultural heritage. Exhibits and the celebrations hosted by Mexican-Americans who promoted pride in Mexican customs were responsible for introducing the holiday to many people. Today the Day of the Dead is celebrated in public venues not only in the Southwest, but in schools, galleries, and cultural centers located in diverse locations throughout the United States.
Museum Exhibits of Day of the Dead Folk Art

In the last two decades a number of museums have sponsored shows which feature folk arts produced by Mexican artisans, including Day of the Dead paraphernalia. Pomar has commented, "Popular art has been one of the cultural cornerstones of the Mexican people and it constitutes an element of communication and of national identity as important as the national language itself" (1987:19). Mexican folk art has been the subject of various publications (see Barbash 1993, Fergusson 1934, Milne 1965, Toor 1947) but it is only within the last few decades that museums in the United States have devoted exhibits to Day of the Dead objects. The roots of the newfound appreciation for this particular genre of Mexican folk art may be traced to a general trend in this country in which non-elite forms of art have been accorded an elevated status within the collecting and museum communities.

Starting in the 1920s, American folk arts began to be appreciated by members of the arts establishment (Rose 1967, Rumford 1980). In 1932 the curator of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Roger Cahill, mounted a large-scale exhibit which firmly positioned folk art in the art world. Metcalf (1992:29) believes that Cahill's catalogue for the exhibit, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in American, 1700-1900* (1932) presented a definition and valuation of folk art which has been so influential that his vision has dominated the direction of folk art collection and exhibition until recent times. Among Cahill's interpretations which influenced subsequent art critics and enthusiasts were the ideas that folk art is simple,
naive, created by self-taught individuals, and that it represents a window into the past. For many years folk art was considered by art historians and critics in terms of its aesthetic values alone, not in relation to its utilitarian or social functions. In seemed of little consequence to curators that the artists who created the items on display and the items' proveniences were generally unknown (Metcalf 1992:30).

Geertz (1976:1480) maintains that traditional art forms cannot be separated from their social environment because they not only reflect long-held community values but inform people's lives on a daily basis. Hence folk art is best understood not just as a representation of unchanging values passed down from generation to generation, but as the active process of reaffirming those values which hold the most importance to the artist and his or her community. While folk art may indeed provide a window to the past when skills are passed down over time, it is never a wholesale replication of what has gone before. As culture and societal values are not stagnant, neither are expressive forms. Moreover artists, as individuals, introduce variation into traditional forms and create new themes. Vlach has made the following suggestion regarding the future of American folk art scholarship, one which could be applied to Mexican folk art as well, "The future of American folk art [scholarship] needs to find its center - its center of meaning - so that it may grow and develop in an orderly fashion. The center is, I believe, where it has always been, in its folk artists" (1992:22). Rather than focus on the things, it behooves one to concentrate instead on the folk themselves.

Since the 1970s there has been a growing body of literature which criticizes the old school manner of displaying ethnic, indigenous, and non-Western arts, and these
publications have in turn impacted the way in which folk art is treated (see Bendix 1989, Clifford 1988, Marcus and Myers 1995, Sieber 1981). The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1984 exhibit "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern fueled widespread debate about the labeling and treatment of non-Western art (e.g. Fabian 1985, P. Manning 1985, Price 1989). In addition to the criticisms leveled by scholars and critics, museums have found themselves held increasingly accountable to the groups which they claim to represent.

Legislation which brought about decreased federal funding and denied large tax write-offs for beneficent donations means that museums today need to rely more heavily on public patronage and corporate sponsorship. The passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990 signaled demands for the return of tribal artifacts by various Native groups. Ethnic minorities have voiced objections to displays of art which are devoid of a social context or which fail to properly link ancient arts to living descendants. Kreamer points out, "Communities often look to museums as places in which identity is articulated. As a result, museums have the responsibility of ensuring that exhibitions embody dynamic, not static, depictions of history and culture" (1992:371). The result of these developments has been an increased attention to political correctness (see for example Gonzalez and Tonelli 1992, Jones 1992, Ybarra-Frausto 1991a). Although folk art continues to be displayed and sold based on its visual appeal alone, there has been increasing consciousness among the arts community that folk art can be better appreciated when the conditions of its production are understood. Three exhibits of
Day of the Dead folk art which explicitly made this connection will be discussed below.

One of the earliest museums to showcase the Day of the Dead in this country was the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, California, which mounted an exhibit entitled *Day of the Dead: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Mexico* in 1979. The exhibit consisted of photographs taken in the states of Mexico, Puebla, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Oaxaca and objects associated with the celebrations in these regions. Such items included wooden carvings, toys, ceramics, paper and candy skulls, *petates* (woven reed mats), *amates* (paintings on pounded bark paper), *papeles picados*, and papier-mâché figures. The exhibit was accompanied by a bilingual English/Spanish catalogue bearing the same name as the exhibit.

Although the authors of the catalogue (Hernandez and Hernandez 1979) devote a great deal of attention to presumed links between Aztec and modern mortuary rituals, they also discuss contemporary manifestations of the holiday in several regions of Mexico. The authors place the material culture on display within a living cultural context by explicating the uses of the objects in various Day of the Dead activities in Mexico. Importantly, they note changes in celebrations which occurred during the three years they spent researching the project, including an increasing trend toward secularization, the influx of tourists in Janitzio, Michoacán, and the influence of the North American Hallowe'en holiday in Mexican urban areas.
Pomar's bilingual catalogue for the Fort Worth Art Museum's 1987 Mexican Day of the Dead folk art exhibit, which was similar in format to the Triton Museum's, likewise situates the displayed objects in a historical and social context. Many of the items depicted in the catalogue are accompanied by descriptions of celebrations in the region or community from which they originated, and well-known artists are referred to by name. The author advises, "A beholder is perceptive when he can put aside the academic prejudices derived from the predominant aesthetic standards, which are alien to the native culture" (1987:19). Pomar asks the viewer to set aside preconceived notions about what constitutes art: Day of the Dead objects can be admired for their beauty, but their appreciation is enhanced when the patron is aware of their link to living artisans.

In her catalogue *En Calavera: The Papier-mâché Art of the Linares Family*, written to accompany a 1995 University of California Fowler Museum of Cultural History exhibit, author Susan Masuoka notes, "This publication is the first devoted exclusively to a single Mexican family of folk artists, who traditionally are hidden behind a veil of anonymity" (1994:xvi). The papier-mâché works of the Linares family are among some of the most well-known in both Mexico and the United States, and many of their creations are made in commemoration of the Day of the Dead. Family patriarch Don Pedro learned his craft from his father and was recognized as a skilled artist by the 1950s. Throughout his life he experimented with
the medium, pushing it to amazing heights, and continued to incorporate new images and themes into his repertoire. Don Pedro trained his sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, who continue the tradition today.

The creations of the Linares family were first exhibited at the Fowler Museum in 1969. Since the 1980s their work has been displayed in such various locations as the Contemporary Museum of Hispanic Art in New York City, the San Diego Museum of Man, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, the Mexican Fine Arts Museum in Chicago, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, among others. I have seen a number of the Linares' pieces in galleries in Texas. Their papier-mâché figures, called _alebrijes_, have also been exhibited in European museums, are on permanent display at Disney's Epcot Center, and have been featured in videocassettes and in John Houston's film adaptation of Malcolm Lowery's novel _Under the Volcano_. Many of the Linares' Day of the Dead _alebrijes_ are interpretations of Posada's _calavera_ figures and depict skeletal humans engaged in quotidian routines.

Masuoka does an excellent job of addressing the social environment surrounding this family of artists. The catalogue provides details on the creative process itself and also chronicles events in the lives of family members which impacted their artwork, such as a 1957 explosion in a fireworks factory which had the effect of increasing the demand for papier-mâché figures and the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, which inspired a large-scale tribute to victims on the Day of the Dead that year. Members
of the Linares family have often traveled to the locations where their art is exhibited, creating works on site and thus offering viewers a chance to meet the artists and understand the work involved in creating their figures.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Linares family has been instrumental in reversing the image of folk art as static and wholly tradition bound. To see the enormous variation in their Day of the Dead themes brings home the point that artists are products of their changing environments and that they can and do exercise considerable artistic freedom of expression. For example, when the Linares' were asked to design a piece for the Fort Worth Art Museum, they made a Texas-themed skeletal cowboy and horse, "This work reflects the imagination of these artists, who picture Texas as a place where rodeos prevail" (Pomar 1987:35).

Museum displays of Mexican Day of the Dead folk art have introduced thousands of patrons to this holiday. In cities which do not host commemorations accessible to the public, such exhibits may constitute one's sole exposure to the holiday. In cities where public observations of the Day of the Dead occur, museum patrons may be inspired by what they see and then participate in local commemorations. In either case, a well-produced museum show, meaning one which elucidates the social milieu of Day of the Dead objects, performs several services.

The Day of the Dead is shown in its cultural context, as a tradition which is alive and well and marked by regional variation. The creative artistic license permissible within a traditional form may be expressed, as witnessed by the idiosyncratic works
of the various Linares' family members. Additionally, the inclusion of such folk art items in museums, institutions formerly concerned primarily with the display of fine arts, elevates their status.

Compared to folk art gift shops which sell the same types of items which are encountered in Day of the Dead museum displays, the museum privileges the objects by displaying them in Plexiglas boxes and by providing informational labels. Museum curators have long been considered the arbiters of excellence. The inclusion of objects in a museum display confers on them an air of authority and value, "To describe a painting as being of 'museum quality' is to attest to its excellence" (Weil 1995:83). Museums are institutions which continue to serve as symbolic arbiters of meaning or "style," and which hold cultural capital. Lidchi has noted "A museum will endow objects with importance and meaning because these come to represent certain kinds of cultural value" (1997:205).

The Impact of the Chicano Movement

Organizations concerned with securing social, political, and economic rights for Mexican-American citizens have a history in the southwest extending back at least a hundred years. Two sources which provide excellent overviews of their development and goals are Rodolfo Acuña's Occupied America: A History of Chicanos (1981) and Mario Barrerra's Beyond Aztlán: Ethnic Autonomy in Comparative Perspective (1988). Both of these authors make a distinction between organizations formed prior
to the 1960s and those which came after. Organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC, began 1929) and the GI Forum (began following World War II), both of which had their origins in Texas, focused on gaining civil rights and upward social mobility for Latinos. Barrera describes the primary goals of such organizations as being equality and community, but objects to their view that assimilation into Anglo society is the best way to achieve these ends. Juárez describes them as "conservative and middle-class oriented" (1973:181).

In contrast to these and other earlier groups, those which formed in the late 1960s and the 1970s maintained that equality and community cohesiveness could be gained without suffering a loss of cultural heritage. Rather than emulate Anglos the newer groups emphasized their Mexican roots, stressing in particular their indigenous Mexican ancestry over their Spanish heritage. Whereas earlier groups employed descriptive labels such as "Latin-American" and "Mexican-American," organizations formed in more recent decades use the modifier "Chicano." Saldivar offers the following definition, "A Chicano is a Mexican American who does not have an Anglo image of himself" (1990:9).

The exact origins of the term are unknown, but most scholars believe that Chicano is a variation of the word "Mexicano." Vigil claims that the word stems from a corruption of the Nahautl word "Xicano," which means "children of the earth" (1998:xxiv). Prior to the 1960s the term Chicano was used as a pejorative, much like pachuco or cholo, to describe lower class Mexican-Americans, those with darker skin, or rebellious urban youths. In the late 1960s, member of youth movements gave
"Chicano" a political connotation (Acuña 1981.ix). What was formerly a derogatory term was co-opted and given elevated status. According to one scholar "By elevating a disparaging term to a badge of honor, the Chicano movement called attention to the underprivileged status of the lower class and proudly embraced its Indian origins. Chicano rhetoric and visual imagery also drew heavily from the Mexican nationalist movement of the 1920s" (Wilson 1997:159).

By 1970 many student organizations dropped the descriptive "Mexican-American" in favor of "Chicano." For example, most chapters of the United Mexican American Students (UMAS), the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), and the Mexican American Student Union (MASU) in California reformed as chapters of El Movimiento Estudiantil de Aztlán (MECHA, the Student Movement of Aztlán, or El Movimiento). In Texas, MAYO groups formed chapters of El Partido de la Raza Unida (PRU, the United Race Party). Influenced by the civil rights movement, the campaigns waged by the United Farm Workers Union, and upset by the seemingly inequitable distribution of funds from the Johnson administration's War on Poverty program, Chicanos were (and are) activists who confronted injustices and who rejected assimilation (Navarro 1974:74).

The Chicano movement, with its focus on indigenous Mexican customs and symbols, has been partially responsible for the rediscovery of the Day of the Dead by Mexican-Americans. While some of my informants dislike the term Chicano because of its past negative associations with the lower class or because of its more recent association with militancy or radicalism, other informants, particularly artists, choose
to describe themselves as Chicano. It is clear that regardless of the self-identifier used, many sponsors have been influenced by the Chicano idealization of the Aztec. This is evidenced by the inclusion of Aztec artistic motifs in altars, Aztec dance troupe performances, and explicit statements that the Day of the Dead is an Aztec holiday.

Chicano groups such as MECHA are guided by the belief that Aztlán, the mythical original homeland of the Aztecs, is located somewhere in the American Southwest. According to Aztec legend, the Nahuatl-speaking ancestors of the Aztecs, who in 1325 founded the great city of Tenochtitlán (present day Mexico City), migrated from an unknown location in the north, beginning their trek around 1168. Chavez (1984:9) suggests that this group was more likely based in the state of Nayarit, but that much further back in time some of these peoples' ancestors probably belonged to one of the Uto-Aztecan speaking tribes of the American Southwest. As Leal points out, pinpointing the actual geographic location of Aztlán is of little consequence, "What interests us in not determining where Aztlán is found, but documenting the rebirth of the myth in Chicano thought" (1993:11).

Aztlán was symbolically resurrected in 1969 by the poet Alurista (Alberto Baltazar Urísta), who during this year wrote poetry on the subject, lectured to his students at San Diego State University about it, and most importantly, developed the ideological framework which became a guiding light for Chicano youth movements, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (the Spiritual Plan of Aztlán). *El Plan*, unveiled at a
MECHA conference in Denver, in essence called for the unification of all classes of Chicanos in the struggle to gain control over economic, political, and educational institutions, and to resist oppression and assimilation (Anaya 1989:236).

Padilla suggests that the Chicano use of the legendary past is illustrative of the need to re-invent identity in the face of adversity. "It indicates the extent to which the Chicano, threatened with cultural and spiritual extinction, has struggled to maintain group cohesion through myth and a heroicized national past distinct from that of the United States" (1993:116). Amalia Mesa-Bains, director of San Francisco's Galeria de la Raza, an organization which has hosted Day of the Dead celebrations since the early 1970s, concurs that El Movimiento was driven by a need to reclaim a lost cultural heritage in order to counter a sense of exclusion from mainstream society. Public commemorations of the Day of the Dead became an important means of displaying pride in one's ancestry and hence in one's self. As Mesa-Bains contends, "Día de los Muertos has become a focus for Chicanos that continues to serve as a vehicle for continuity. The movement of the 1960s reconnected Chicano communities with this celebration and brought new forms into the contemporary observance... In Día de los Muertos, art empowers to indict the poverty of society in the presentation of cultural memory" (1989:3).

The rediscovery of the Day of the Dead by Chicano activists has helped bring the tradition to the public's attention. While many of the sponsors I interviewed did not specifically cite El Movimiento as influential in their own decision to host public commemorations, the vast majority did pinpoint the early 1970s as the time during
which celebrating the Day of the Dead in Texas began to carry less social stigma.

Since that time an increasing number of gallery owners and organizations have been using the Day of the Dead as means for expressing ethnic pride.

The Holiday's Rising Popularity in the United States

An early but isolated reference to public commemorations of the Day of the Dead refers to observances among the Chippewa and Ottawa tribes of northern Michigan. Walker (1949) documented an annually observed two-day festival, held on November first and second, during which graves were decorated and special foods prepared for the returning spirits of dead ancestors. Walker claims that the custom had been practiced for many generations and, "The hosts extend invitations to all the Indians of that region and to any strangers who may be in the vicinity" (p. 428). The similarities between Mexican and the Native American traditions described by Walker, particularly the use of the descriptive term, "The Day of the Dead" is intriguing.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, the current emphasis on public commemorations in the United States can be traced back only as far as the 1970s, and it was not until the 1980s that such observances were found outside of the southwestern states. In 1976 Macklin commented "Although All Soul's Day is not elaborately celebrated in Toledo [Ohio], this might be partly a function of the fact that
there is no separate space for the dead of the Mexican-American community, as well as the fact that this recent and young population has not yet had many dead" (p. 138). Conditions described by Macklin stand in contrast to those of today. The Latino Student Union at the University of Toledo and the Sofia Quinteros Hispanic Art and Cultural Center currently sponsor annual Day of the Dead remembrances. In 1994 the Toledo Museum of Art held a Day of the Dead folk art exhibit and offered workshops for local elementary students, whose artworks were on display. These activities are referred to as Day of the Dead events, not All Souls' Day commemorations.

In nearby Michigan, the earliest public observances were held at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Dos Manos in Royal Oak (both in 1987), Casa de Unidad in Detroit (1989), and the DePree Art Center at Hope College in Holland (1990). Prior to this time, according to one source, "In Detroit, with cemetery activities restricted, the streets seemingly cold and inhospitable, and ambivalent attitudes of the church, those inclined to observe Dia de los Muertos did so in the privacy of their homes" (Sommers 1995:47).

Anthropologist Ruth Behar describes how sad she was to leave her field site in Mexico shortly before the Day of the Dead in 1990. To her surprise, when she returned to the University of Michigan her friend, author Sandra Cisneros, was in residence to guide students in erecting an ofrenda at the University's American Culture Program office, "On that day, in a class discussion, Sandra Cisneros spoke of the newfound delight that she and other Chicanas have discovered in the spiritual
practices of Mexican women. Chicanas like herself, who have made it into the academy or the literary world, are reclaiming these practices, she said, because their families were often afraid that claiming them reduced you to being a backward Mexican" (Behar 1993:342).

The Day of the Dead has been resurrected in the Detroit area, as elsewhere across the United States, by Mexican-Americans wishing to connect with their cultural heritage. Commemorations are held in New York City, Boston, Denver, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Chicago, and Portland, among other cities. The cities which offer the greatest number of exhibits or events continue to be in the southwest, particularly in California and Texas. In general the further away a location is from the Southwest, the later the tradition has re-emerged (Sanchez-Carretero 1996:18).

Another indication of the holiday's rising fame is the proliferation of internet sites devoted to the subject. When I began this research project in 1996, approximately 50 sites related to the Day of the Dead could be found via any one of the various search engines. These sites would generally be posted in October and disappear by December. In the fall of 1998, I found over 400 sites posted by individuals or groups located throughout the United States and Mexico. Many of the sites provide brief descriptions of the background of the holiday, quite often making a putative connection between the current holiday and Aztec death rituals. Some sites describe events hosted by organizations, while others make sales pitches for books and videocassettes or offer activities geared toward school teachers. Both a site posted by and an article written by psychologist Dr. Roberto Vargas recommend
observing the Day of the Dead as a form of grief therapy (1996:74). Interestingly, Sanchez-Carretero (1996:20) notes that in 1995 she was unable to find a bakery in the Toledo area which made pan de muertos, and that the recipe used by local celebrants was obtained via the internet. This modern communication method is not only exposing potentially massive numbers of people to the Day of the Dead, but is in some cases influencing existing celebrations.

Additional testaments to the widespread recognition of the holiday can be seen in the use of skeletal calavera-style imagery: at one folk art store in Austin, Texas, 18 different T-shirt designs featuring such themes are available for purchase, not just in October or November but throughout the year. The work of Posada was featured on the cover of a Virginia's Wolf Trap Folk Masters program catalogue (Spitzer 1994), although the program was held in the summer and did not feature any events related to the Day of the Dead. Likewise, the cover of Victor Villaseñor's novel Macho (1991) features a Posada-inspired calavera mariachi band even though the book does not discuss the holiday. Taken from a painting by Texas artist Frank Romero, the title of the image, México, Mexico!, suggests that the holiday is both Mexican and Mexican-American.

Further examples of the Day of the Dead's entry into popular culture come from the medium of television. In February of 1998, an episode of King of the Hill, an animated comedy series set in Texas, depicted housewife Peggy Hill on a shopping excursion in Cuidad Juárez, Mexico. Mrs. Hill wanted to purchase papier-mâché fruits, but could only find Day of the Dead paraphernalia. In September of 1998 an
episode of *The New Flash Gordon* showed the hero vainly attempting to capture a criminal, who made his escape by blending in with the throngs of revelers parading down the streets of Los Angeles in celebration of the Day of the Dead. In October 1998, an episode of *Port Charles*, an ABC network soap opera filmed in Los Angeles but supposedly set in upstate New York, wove the Day of the Dead into a story line. Investigators and citizens became fearful when a serial killer left a note reading "The best way to celebrate the Day of the Dead is to send more souls to their heavenly reward." Because of the note, members of the police force knew that the killer intended to strike soon, "The Day of the Dead. That's the holiday after Hallowe'en. And by celebrate he means he's going to kill someone."

It is not possible at this point to definitively discern whether the Day of the Dead will reach a peak and then subsequently wane in popularity or if it will continue to be embraced over time. At the current moment, however, it is clear that the holiday continues to be discovered or re-discovered by more people each year. In the following chapters I will discuss some of the ways in which the Day of the Dead is publicly observed in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas.
CHAPTER V

LOOKING TO THE PAST: PRIDE IN ETHNICITY

In this chapter I will survey the types of public Day of the Dead commemorative offerings in my field site, central Texas. I will then describe a selection of these, with an emphasis on those observances which serve as a vehicle for highlighting pride in ethnicity. Public Day of the Dead events can be seen as exercises which not only honor the dead and celebrate life, but which define ethnicity and proclaim it to the world. Sponsors look to the past for guidance, build upon tradition, and use celebrations as a tool for the development of ethnic consciousness.

The Settings and the Sponsors

Austin, with a rapidly growing population of 500,000 citizens, is located in the center of Texas. As the capital city it is home to the state government and to the University of Texas, and is noted for its high technology industries. Austin is a "young city": the population’s median age is about 30 years old. The capital city is known as being quite liberal, with some Texans going so far as to disparagingly refer to it as a "hippie enclave." Austinites have a high education level, with the majority of the population holding at least a bachelor’s degree.
Houston, with a population of 1,700,000, is the fourth largest city in the United States. Located 60 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico, it is noted as the site of NASA, for its petroleum industry and medical facilities, as well as for its arts community. The Latino presence is more visible in Houston than in Austin. Houston has long served as a port of entry for immigrants and Mexican-Americans are more dispersed throughout the city than they are in Austin.

Of the three cities in which I conducted fieldwork, the influence of the Latino community is most readily apparent in San Antonio. The Spanish crown established its first Catholic mission in Texas territory in San Antonio in 1718. San Antonio was the most densely populated of the government’s three colonies in the sparsely settled backwater now known as Texas until control of the land changed hands in 1836 (Meinig 1993:32). Therefore many Mexican-Americans in San Antonio have a long history of residence in the area. Presently the population of San Antonio is approximately 1,000,000, making it the eighth largest city in the United States. The economy of the city, located 80 miles south of Austin, was long driven by the many military bases in the area and today is largely dependent on tourism.

According to the 1990 government census 23,000,000 Hispanics live in the United States, 65 percent of whom are Mexican-American. “Hispanic” is a catch-all term used to describe people who trace their ancestry to any one of the Spanish-speaking countries. The term is objectionable to many because it fails to capture the diversity within this group, and therefore I follow the lead of the majority of my informants by adopting the modifiers “Latino” and “Mexican-American.” In 1990
Latinos overall made up nine percent of the total population in this country, and comprised approximately 18 percent of the population of Texas. Twenty-five percent of the United States' Latinos live in Texas. The upcoming census in 2000 is predicted to show a marked increase in the number of Latinos living in both Texas and in the United States in general.

It is impossible to discern one's country of origin based on physical appearances or surnames and I did not question audience members about their ancestry. However, I did ask informants about their ancestry because I wanted to ascertain whether they had been introduced to the Day of the Dead in Mexico, another Latin American country, or in the United States. Sponsors were all either Mexican-American (as opposed to Mexican) or Anglo. My intuition that the majority of audience members likewise consisted of the same two sectors of the population was confirmed by sponsors.

A majority of my informants, approximately 90 percent, did not grow up celebrating the Day of the Dead in their homes. Some of them remembered that their grandparents or parents would clean and decorate the graves of deceased family members on All Souls' Day, but they did not remember their families using the term "The Day of the Dead" or "El Día de los Muertos." The parents of these individuals did not create altars in their homes, and at the time of their youths, there were no public commemorations for the dead with the exception of the national holiday Memorial Day, which is generally not considered a major holiday in Texas. A number of my informants said that they knew that their parents would not have felt
comfortable observing a holiday which was so clearly Mexican in origin because it would have set them apart from mainstream society and potentially make them the subjects of ridicule or ostracism. One of them told me, “This is a tradition they used to have to keep private. I mean, what would the neighbors think if they saw candles burning and skulls in your living room?”

Macario Ramirez, owner of a folk art gallery in Houston, described his first exposure to a Day of the Dead ofrenda, “The first time I saw one, I was a child at my grandmother’s house in Oaxaca. With the candles and the skulls and the angels hovering in the smoke up above, it scared the hell out of me! That’s why I’ve gone public with teaching people about ofrendas, because they are a wonderful experience I want people to have. We Latinos should share our cultural traditions, and the Day of the Dead is one of our better ones” (Caulkins 1996:14).

Richard Reyes, director of Talento Bilingue de Houston, is quoted in the same article as saying that growing up in Houston, he had no idea what the Day of the Dead was about and figured it was a Mexican version of Hallowe’en. As an adult he made it a point to learn about this custom of his ancestors and today teaches a new generation about the holiday. These experiences are typical of the people I interviewed, such as the director of Borderlands Gallery in Austin, who remarked, “This custom almost became lost, but the Chicanos rediscovered it. Now we want to share it with others.” In each of the three cities, sponsors have gone out of their way to learn about the tradition and have consciously revived the Day of the Dead.
Types of Commemorations

The types of commemorations can be described in terms of three categories: exhibitions, indoor events, and outdoor events. In addition there are many businesses which sell Day of the Dead merchandise or erect altars as a means of associating their establishment with the holiday, but the owners of these stores are in the business of selling, not observing, the Day of the Dead. In this chapter I will focus on the three categories listed above in order to provide a picture of how sponsors consciously present the Day of the Dead to an audience.

Exhibitions may include such works as paintings, drawings, sculptures, and papier-mâché figures among other items, but a ubiquitous feature is the ofrenda. Without exception, every museum, gallery, or cultural center which advertised their Day of the Dead commemoration had at least one altar and the majority had multiple altars. I also encountered altars in restaurants, colleges, at St. Edward’s University Chapel in Austin, at San Fernando II cemetery in San Antonio, at the offices of the Mexican Consulate General in Austin, a mall in San Antonio and in several public libraries. Ofrendas are so frequently encountered that they serve as an iconic representation of the Day of the Dead itself. Altars in these settings are often elaborate and even ornate in comparison to typical home altars (for comparison, the reader is directed to Salvo 1997 for a discussion of Mexican altars and Turner 1990 for Mexican-American altars). See Figure 2. for an example of a highly embellished ofrenda in a gallery in central Texas.
Rather than serving as sites of communion, where an individual might pray or speak with the dead, altars in the public domain are meant to be looked at and admired (or in some cases, as will be discussed in Chapter VI, they are meant to provoke a reaction). Turner and Jasper have noted, “Within the American gallery setting, Day of the Dead ofrendas become emblems of the tradition in Mexico and vehicles for memorialization, but they also achieve new meaning as artistic statements that knowingly appropriate aspects of the celebration for purposes beyond its original intent. In these new environments the spectacle aspects of the Day of the Dead in Mexico are imitated or refigured...” (1988:3).

Ofrendas tend to consist of assemblages of items, forming what Lévi-Strauss (1963) would term a bricolage. Items placed on altars include offerings of food and drink, flowers, candles, incense, personal momentos, Catholic referents such as crosses or images of saints or the Virgin of Guadalupe, photographs of the deceased, Mexican iconography, and referents to the Day of the Dead itself such as skulls and skeletons. Ybarra-Frausto describes ofrendas as “expressive forms of cultural amalgamation which fuse traditional items of folk material cultural with artifacts from mass culture” (1991a:132). Each element contains its own meaning and simultaneously reinforces the meaning of neighboring elements whereby the totality of the altar is greater than the sum of its parts.

Altars in public settings tend to be densely layered for two reasons. First, the creators know that outsiders, meaning people from outside the immediate family, will be viewing their efforts and therefore strive to make their altars things of beauty. The
skill of the designer reflects well on both the person who created the altar and on the person(s) being commemorated. Second, the heavy use of references to the deceased, which may include not only multiple photographs but birth, marriage, and death certificates or items such as letters or recipes penned by the individual, are provided as props for the observer. Since the bystander audience is unlikely to have known the deceased, the altar designer offers these visuals as windows into the deceased’s life, in essence extending an invitation to get acquainted with their loved one. On numerous occasions ofrenda designers seemed eager to decipher the meaning of objects on display or their relationship to the deceased, offering comments such as, “I gave my father this Carta Blanca because he didn’t like American beer” or, “This sheet music is for a song that my mother used to play on the piano.”

Indoor activities consists of a wide array of events including gallery receptions, parties, poetry readings, moments of silence, prayer, and musical and dance performances. Each of these is designed to draw together those in attendance. For example, at a poetry reading, every audience member is silent while one individual reads or recites. Everyone hears and communally experiences the poem at the same time, and individuals may later discuss the work with each other. The recitation of poetry creates an atmosphere which may be solemn or festive dependent upon the nature of the piece. Tributes to the deceased may move the audience to tears, while calaveras might stimulate laughter.

In San Antonio, Moisés Espino del Castillo has continued the custom of writing the humorous verses called calaveras for over twenty years, and many in the
city look forward to “the Duke of Calaveras” annual publications of poems. Contained in his booklets are satirical tributes to such notables as Hillary Rodham Clinton, former mayor Henry Cisneros, Cortez, and Octavio Paz. In the edition produced for 1998, del Castillo describes Monica Lewinsky as a vampire and personifies the erectile dysfunction drug Viagra as “the skeleton with cold kisses which has caused a great sensation among the elderly” (1998:8). Some of the figures who inspired del Castillo were in attendance at a poetry reading sponsored by the Aztec Center in San Antonio in the fall of 1998 and the poems directed toward them received the most enthusiastic response from the audience.

*Calaveras* are a form of ritual inversion. According to Kunzle, who has studied historic broadsheets in European countries, “The principle of ritual inversion is that there are two parties, the one dominant, the other dominated, whose roles, in some actions typifying their relationship, are simply reversed” (1978:42). The poems are written from the viewpoint of the dead, but are obviously penned by a living author. The subjects of the poems are usually the living, but the living are reminded in the verses that eventually they will join the narrator in death, losing their privileged positions. A major component of liminality, the center and central stage in a rite of passage (Turner 1969:94), is the exaggeration or reversal of expected norms. Babcock (1978:14) points out that inversion functions as a form of “spiritual shock therapy” by presenting alternatives to commonly held values. Myerhoff notes “Recent studies especially have shown how reversals can be used to make statements about the social order - to affirm it, attack it, suspend it, redefine it, oppose it, buttress
it, emphasize one part of it at the cost of another, and so forth” (1978:235). There is an abundant literature on festival inversions which revise history or challenge domination (see Beezely, Martin, and French 1994, Cohen 1993, Garcia Canclini 1995, Rowe and Schelling 1991).

Inversion is often couched in humor, such as parody, ritual clowning, comedy, or other forms of planned incongruity. On ordinary days, death is a serious subject, but in the calaveras distributed on the Day of the Dead, death becomes a source of amusement. Periodic “anti-structure,” Turner says, is necessary and results in a sense of communitas (1969:96). Calaveras ridicule the living, including authority figures, by reminding them that death is inevitable and levels all social differences.

A noteworthy aspect of the social bonding which is fostered by Day of the Dead events is that a temporary feeling of communitas is developed among people who may be total strangers to each other. While this is not unusual in and of itself (it happens at sporting events, for example), it does represent a departure from the norm when applied to the Day of the Dead. In Mexican commemorations centered on the home or cemetery, the bonds which are reinforced are those between the living and the dead and between the participants: they highlight their shared experiences and the continuity of the family line. Of all the events I have witnessed in Texas, I have often seen couples in attendance but have only twice, as far as I am aware, encountered a family. In fact, most events are patronized by members of a similar ages (the majority of people attending events are between the ages of 40 and 55). In Mexico, even the more outward-facing components of the Day of the Dead - the socializing
which occurs when friends visit each other's homes in the evening or when people mingle in the cemeteries - involves the interaction of individuals who are previously known to each other and who will continue to associate in the future. In Texas, the Day of the Dead brings together people who would normally not move in the same social circles. The insider audience invites the gaze and participation of the bystander audience. Events bear a similarity to the Smithsonian's Festival of Folklife, in that the central event is the encounter between visitor and participant (Cantwell 1993:5). Music, art, the consumption of food, the aroma of incense and burning candles, and socializing combine to create a festival atmosphere which affects all the senses.

Only a few organizations sponsor outdoor events. Each year a Catholic mass is held outdoors in the San Fernando II cemetery in San Antonio, and in both years that I attended (1987 and 1988), the mass was followed by an Aztec dance troupe performance. Outdoor events are free from the spatial limitations determined by the size of the room at indoor events and can accommodate larger numbers of people. At the San Fernando II event approximately 200 people were seated on folding chairs, about 40 spectators watched from behind the rows of chairs, and about 100 additional people were in the cemetery but did not actively participate. The largest crowd I have seen at an indoor event, people assembled for a slide presentation, consisted of approximately 100 people, but this was unusual. More typically, events are attended by 10 to 25 people at a time. Another factor working in the favor of outdoor events is that they do not require an admission charge and thus can draw in curious passers-by and may thus be attended by a more diverse crowd.
The other outdoor activities I witnessed were parades, one of which will be discussed below. Held in Austin and Houston, Texas, each of these parades went through the central downtown area of the city. A parade is quite different than a pilgrimage, because the later is a journey to a place which is already established as having ritual significance (Turner and Turner 1978). As a parade moves through the streets, on the other hand, it organizes and transforms ordinary space into a place with special meaning. Marchers temporarily make the space their own, creating a “home space” (Marin 1987:223), and in essence symbolically take possession of the territory. This feature of a procession can be very important to Latinos who ordinarily feel like invisible members of society. A parade allows such individuals to assert their presence in the community.

The Day of the Dead as an Expression of Ethnic Pride

As noted above, sponsors of public Day of the Dead events consulted for this research project are either Mexican-Americans who have been residents of the United States for some time or are Anglos. Almost without exception, they did not come from households in which the holiday was observed, but embraced the tradition as adults. Their celebrations are not direct imports from Mexico, but are based on Mexican customs they have either witnessed first-hand or, more typically, about which they have read.
Sponsors and their invited artists and performers stress the link between their own presentations and Mexican Day of the Dead commemorative activities, and in particular highlight those aspects of the holiday which they attribute to the influence of indigenous peoples. In her dissertation about Day of the Dead celebrations in San Francisco, Morrison remarked, "My impression from talking to sponsors of Day of the Dead in San Francisco is that they believe that what they are teaching is ancient, Mexican, and specifically, more Aztec than Spanish" (1990:335). The same is true of sponsors in the three urban central Texas cities I investigated, although some individuals stress indigenous groups other than the Aztec. I have found that Anglo sponsors are more likely to describe the Day of the Dead as a syncretic holiday, while Mexican-Americans generally attempt to downplay the influence of the Spanish.

Given that Mexican-Americans are members of a minority group which continues to be discriminated against in the United States, it is not surprising that Latino sponsors look with fondness to the distant past, a time when their ancestors enjoyed more autonomy. Since the formation of Chicano groups 30 years ago, the response to discrimination has been to reclaim indigenous heritage. In their ongoing struggle to prosper in the United States and yet retain their culture, sponsors select elements from the past and utilize them as instruments of empowerment and solidarity. Peterson has argued, "The ability of an ethnic group to maintain boundaries, and hence survive as a distinct entity, may depend on its ability to marshal an impressive array of symbols" (1982:7). Kertzer (1988) has also written on the importance of symbols in creating and perpetuating a sense of collectivity. The
promoters of public commemorations in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas realize and utilize the power of symbols quite well. Peterson also states that the groups most likely to resist domination are equipped with two necessary weapons; the material means to maintain their society and the ideological commitment to remain cohesive (1982:58).

Mendoza and Martínez (1981:74) distinguish three options available for Latinos in the United States attempting to retain a sense of their ethnic identity. “Cultural incorporation” involves assimilation into mainstream society without the loss of native customs. “Cultural resistance” refers to actively foregrounding one’s ethnic heritage and thereby resisting wholesale absorption. “Cultural transmutation” is a process of creating a new identity which incorporates elements of both the subordinate and dominant cultures. Evidence that each of these three dynamics is taking place can be found within the various sponsors’ interpretations of the Day of the Dead. An example of each will be discussed below. Individuals and businesses are referred to by pseudonyms.

Casa Blanca in Houston

Casa Blanca is located in Houston’s historic Heights area, a part of town which features numerous antique stores and trendy boutiques in a relatively upper-class section of the city. Manuel Roberts has been running this folk art gallery for over 20 years and he took over the shop from his father. The gallery receives no
public funding and relies exclusively on income generated from the sale of Mexican folk art, prints, post cards, calendars, and soft drinks. The gallery is small, approximately 20 by 60 feet, but is well known throughout Houston. This is due in large part to its annual Day of the Dead commemoration.

In 1998 Mr. Roberts hosted his 13th annual public observance of the holiday. These annual events are advertised in The Houston Chronicle and various local entertainment listing magazines. On the three occasions that I attended opening receptions (1996, 1997, 1998), a television reporter filmed the festivities for broadcast on the ten o’clock news. Mr. Roberts has also been widely interviewed by the press and is in the process of writing a book about the Day of the Dead. Several gallery owners in Houston and one in San Antonio referred to Mr. Roberts as an authority on the subject. Mr. Roberts has generously given me hours of his time and is an enthusiastic teacher.

Growing up in San Antonio a second generation Mexican-American, Mr. Roberts concentrated on assimilating into Anglo society. As far as he knows, his neighbors did not openly observe the Day of the Dead, and his own family did not. Mr. Robert’s first exposure to the holiday came when he visited his grandparents in central Oaxaca, Mexico. Mr. Roberts recalled that initially the idea of picnicking in the cemetery and deliberately calling the spirits of the dead into the home was an alien idea to him and one which filled him with horror. His grandmother, however, explained that these were the customs of his ancestors and that the living have nothing to fear of the dead if they treat them with respect. Remembering these words,
Mr. Roberts adopted the custom of annually commemorating the dead when his own father died.

Mr. Roberts provides an example of "cultural transmutation." He moves freely in Anglo society and is married to an Anglo woman, but at the same time he deliberately maintains a link with his Mexican heritage. Mr. Roberts feels that it is appropriate for all people, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, to celebrate the Day of the Dead provided they do so with a spirit of reverence. In his opinion, both the subordinate and dominant cultures can each learn from each other, and the sharing of rituals is one means to achieve that end.

Each year Mr. Roberts constructs an altar in memory of his father and mother. His wife likewise devotes an ofrenda to her own parents. Positioned side by side, these two altars take positions of prominence in the store, placed near the entrance so that they are visible from the street through the large glass display window. A path of marigold petals begins at the front door and leads directly to these two altars. In addition, each year Mr. Roberts invites ten individuals in the community to construct altars in his store. Over the years an ethnically diverse group of people have made contributions, including Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Anglos, African-Americans, and people who identify with their Korean, Japanese, or Italian heritages. Each ofrenda builder provides copies of a written explanation of the significance of their altar and the importance of the person it commemorates to his or her life.

The exhibits stays up for approximately one month, and at any given point during this time Mr. Roberts is willing to describe the altars in detail. In fact, he
makes it a point to introduce visitors to the individuals being commemorated and to the Day of the Dead tradition. He wants each person passing through his door to understand that “the Day of the Dead is not Hallowe’en and is not about ghosts and goblins. It is a holiday of remembrance and a sacred ritual.” The majority of the altars are erected against a single long wall (not all of them will fit in this space so others are in the central floor space of the gallery) and a rope prevents people from getting too close to them. The barrier conveys the message that what lies beyond is holy and should be treated with respect. On one occasion, I witnessed a visitor pick up a guitar which was a part of an ofrenda which because of the spatial constraints happened to be in the central portion of the gallery and was therefore not roped off. Mr. Roberts quickly jumped to his feet and told the man that he should not touch the objects on the altars because they were part of a sacred tribute to the dead. The offending individual was completely unaware that he had committed a breach of etiquette, and seeing this, Mr. Roberts took the opportunity to give the man a brief introduction to the significance of the holiday.

Although they are individualistic tributes, all of the altars at Casa Blanca follow a basic pattern. They consist of three or more tiers, with the uppermost considered the most sacred. Each of the altars features candles, copal incense, and food and beverages enjoyed by the deceased. Photographs and other referents to the dead, such as items associated with their line of work, are accompanied by Catholic icons such as the Virgin of Guadalupe.
I found two ofrendas in 1997 to be particularly compelling, especially when compared to one another. One of the altars was created by the wife and children of author Joseph Frantz, a historian who penned numerous books about life in the Texas border region. Mr. Frantz served as the state historian for Texas during Lyndon Johnson’s tenure in office and is buried in the State Cemetery in Austin. The altar dedicated to him was packed with Texas referents, including bluebonnets, a ceramic salt shaker in the shape of the Alamo, a picture of him receiving an award from (former) governor Anne Richards, a University of Texas watch, and books written by Mr. Frantz. The display made it clear that Mr. Frantz was proud to be a son of the Lone Star State. In contrast, a neighboring altar pointedly demonstrated that the deceased identified more with his Mexican ancestry. Items included corn and a metate (a stone used for grinding corn into meal), Mexican beer, a poster of Cesar Chavez, the Mexican flag, a cassette tape of corridas, and a red, green, and white sign which read “Parking for Mexicans Only.” Both men were Texans and while each of the altars dedicated to them were patriotic, they differed in their cultural focus.

When asked how much leeway for creativity an altar builder has, Mr. Roberts commented, “They don’t have to do it my way, they just have to do it right.” He feels that it is crucial that altars conform to guidelines established by convention. Mr. Robert’s ideas about what is conventional are derived in part from his memories of how his grandmother adapted her home ofrenda for the Day of the Dead, but are also influenced by information he has gained from research on the subject. Mr. Roberts has deliberately educated himself about Mexican manifestations of the holiday in an
effort to ensure that his own efforts are authentic. He in turn educates others, and has
influenced many Houstonite's perceptions of what is traditional. The people who are
invited to construct altars at Casa Blanca are familiar with Mr. Robert’s ideas about
what constitutes a “proper” memorial, as most have attended one of the altar-building
workshops he conducts.

San Antonio’s Aztec Center

An example of “cultural resistance” is provided by the Day of the Dead
presentation offered by Juan Ramos. Mr. Ramos actively resists being assimilated
into Anglo society and looks to the past as a source of inspiration and empowerment.
Although he has a Spanish name, Mr. Ramos makes it clear that in his mind he is an
Indian, a Coahuiltecan from the heart of Aztlán, which he pinpoints as having been
located in the San Antonio area. In his email correspondences with me, Mr. Ramos
signs his letters with his Coahuiltecan name. During an interview, Mr. Ramos told
me:

My grandfather was a Mexican and he had Spanish blood, but I tell you it doesn’t
matter. I am an Indian. The first time I fell down when I was a little was a little
boy, and I cut myself, I bled out all of my Spanish blood. You cannot dilute the
Indian spirit. You see, the difference between White people and Indian people is
that in White people like yourself, you can see their veins through their skin.
They look blue. You can’t see my veins because my skin is brown and I have
Indian blood [personal correspondence 1998].

Mr. Ramos is director of San Antonio’s Aztec Center, which is located in a
predominantly Latino section of the city. The mission statement of the Aztec Center
is "To develop, maintain, and promote Chicano, Latino, and Indian culture."

Admission to the center is free, and the organization receives funding in the amount of $70,000 annually from the combined contributions of federal, state, and local funds and the gifts of corporate sponsors. Mr. Ramos pointed out to me that this is a very insignificant sum compared to the amount received by Anglo-run arts organizations in the area. Aztec Center mounts approximately ten shows every year, focusing on locally produced visual arts. The center has held a Day of the Dead exhibit annually for 20 years, and Mr. Ramos avers that he personally pioneered public commemorations in Texas. I found no evidence of any organizations whose celebrations predate those of the Aztec Center nor did any informants make a claim for a longer history.

Each year attendance at the Aztec Center's events grows, and Mr. Ramos estimated that in 1998 approximately 500 people patronized the center while the Day of the Dead exhibit was displayed. Both times I have been present (1997, 1998) during the opening receptions, I would estimate the crowd at 30 people. The Day of the Dead exhibits generally run for one month, and the center enjoys a steady flow of visitors. Exhibits at the center consist of framed paintings related to the Day of the Dead and about 15 altars.

By and large the ofrendas at the Aztec Center tend to be fairly simple in comparison to other public altars. Mr. Ramos believes that too much embellishment can detract from the significance of an altar. He also stated his opinion that Mexican altars reflect hundreds of years of Spanish influence, and as such have been modified
from the "originals" created by the inhabitants of Aztlán. Such a statement is indicative of Mr. Ramos' refusal to be subordinated: he sees both Anglos and Spaniards as oppressors of indigenous customs.

In addition to the altars, the Aztec Center offers indoor events. One of these is the reading of *calaveras* by Mr. del Castillo, which has been described above. In 1998 the center also featured a Native American drumming performance carried out by Mr. Ramos, his two sons, and a friend. Before the music began, Mr. Ramos told the assembled crowd that it was important to remember one's traditions and the ways of the ancestors, and for that reason he has taught his sons how to drum. All of the men were seated around a single large drum, which they each struck with large mallets. The drum was made by Mr. Ramos, in part with the skin of a deer which he killed.

Prior to beginning, Mr. Ramos framed the performance by explaining to the spectators that the song of the drums was a form of prayer which called forth the spirits of the ancestors. Because their souls would be present in the room during the music, the taking of photographs during this time was prohibited. Mr. Ramos' assertion that drumming calls forth the dead souls may be derived from Coalhuiltecan beliefs or his own personal view. Although musicians sometimes play in cemeteries in Mexico, their songs are regarded as pleasurable diversions for the living, not as prayers. Nor are musical performances conducted elsewhere in the United States intended to communicate with the dead. Mr. Ramos has either incorporated a custom based on Native American sources or created a spurious tradition. Regardless, it is clear that Mr. Ramos is sincere and serious in his belief that performance is ritually
necessary in order to establish an atmosphere hospitable to the dead. I do not know if those in attendance at the center that night, who appeared to be primarily Latino and most of whom spoke Spanish (more so than at any other event I have witnessed), agreed with Mr. Ramos’ view, but everyone in attendance was respectfully silent during the drumming performance.

Austin’s Mexican Center

Located in the heart of downtown Austin, the Mexican Center was founded by local artists in 1983. Director Claudia Sanchez states the organization’s goal as “Preserving culture and tradition as well as promoting new and evolving contemporary art through high quality programming for the Austin and central Texas area and beyond.” The Mexican Center receives federal, state, and local funding and offers various categories of membership ranging in price from $20 to $1,000. For non-members, the center charges an admission fee of five dollars. Additional funds are generated from sales in the center’s gift shop.

The Mexican Center stages approximately 16 exhibits per year, and Ms. Sanchez informed me that the Day of the Dead show is by far the most popular. Approximately 300 people visited the show in 1998, with attendance peaking on the night of the opening reception party and dance. The center also invites elementary school students to come and create papier-mâché figures for the holiday. I have visited the center several times (1996, 1997, 1998) and during the course of the years
the center has alternately featured either a single large altar or several smaller altars, framed prints and paintings relating to the theme of death, live performances of Mexican music, and a continuously running video tape about the Day of the Dead. I turn my attention here, however, to the parade sponsored by the Mexican Center as it provides an example of an outdoor event.

The following description is based on the parade I witnessed in 1997. At the front of the ensemble were members of Danza Azteca, a dance troupe consisting of approximately a dozen bare-chested men dressed in costumes consisting of leather loincloths, beaded necklaces, and elaborate headdresses made from long, colored feathers. As the performers danced, some of them played wooden flutes or beat drums. This group was followed by people dressed as skeletons and angels. An ad in the *Austin Chronicle* invited interested people to participate, and I gathered that people responding to the ad were placed in this section. Staff and members of the Mexican Center were in this section as well, which was made up of about 30 individuals. Next came a group of young men dressed in mariachi costumes and young women wearing Mexican *china poblano* costumes, multi-colored, beribboned floor-length skirts used in folkloric dances. These youths had their faces adorned with black and white makeup so that they resembled skulls. Rather than walking, they danced down the street. The final section, the one which was received most enthusiastically by the spectators, was composed of approximately 20 men, members of low-rider car clubs. Observers cheered and clapped each time one of the drivers would "pump up" his car.
Note that the arrangement of the four groups of parade participants followed a chronological framework. The head of the parade, which represented the distant past, consisted of Aztec-inspired dancers. These were followed by people representing skeletons and angels, the spirits which return on the Day of the Dead. Next came mariachi and folkloric dancers, who represented the Spanish influence in Mexican history. The rear was brought up by young men in low-rider cars. Low-riders are distinctly Mexican-American and represent contemporary popular culture. They first became popularized in the late 1960s (Griffith 1988:57) and have since become a “forum for cultural participation” (Bright 1995:97). Taken as a whole, the parade formed a living representation of a historical timeline. It was a careful and calculated celebration which issued the statement that this group of people feel pride in their past and that they continue to develop their own unique traditions.

The parade route taken in 1997 was interesting for two reasons. The participants assembled at dusk on East Sixth Street, which is in the Latino section of Austin. The paraders proceeded west along this street toward downtown Austin until they reached the main street, Congress Avenue, at which point they turned left and continued until they came to the Mexican Center. The parade was followed by a party at the Mexican Center. The paraders gathered in an area of town which is considered Latino terrain and wound their way down Sixth Street, whose many nightclubs and shops make it a favorite stomping ground of Austinites. The route culminated on Congress Avenue, the exact center of the city which is shadowed by the gigantic edifice of the state capital building. Parades can be read as a symbolic
sanctioning of space and taking of territory, "A parade gives space a meaningful structure, and the places chosen for its route articulate the sentences of a spatial discourse" (Marin 1987:223). The paraders in this case emerged from the barrio to "take possession" of the most popular street in Austin and the heart of the city itself, "For a walking collectivity, the end point of a one-way march represents a symbolic victory for those ideas or persons deified by the march" (ibid:224).

I also found it interesting that at its place of origin, on East Sixth Street in the Latino section of town, there were only a few dozen spectators. Most of these were people who lived in homes positioned along the parade route who happened to be sitting on their porches when the parade filed past. I believe I was the only Anglo present. As the parade entered the portion of Sixth Street which is a trendy gathering site, the crowd increased incrementally. By the time the parade neared Congress Avenue, the sidewalks were packed with hundreds of visitors who were clearly waiting for the approaching parade: some of them came equipped with lawn chairs and coolers. The entire parade route was listed in the newspaper, but people congested only at its terminus. I wondered, were these spectators afraid to go to the barrio? Or did they simply find it more convenient to set up camp in the downtown area? At any rate, the following year the parade took place entirely on Congress Avenue. A volunteer at the Mexican Center told me that he thought the change of venue was prompted by the dictates of the parade permit they were issued. I suspect that the planners also had a role in the decision and opted to move the entire procession to its most visible location. A parade is, after all, a show designed for
public viewing, and "A parade fails unless it is a spectacle, unless it is seen" (Grimes 1976:74).

The stance of people affiliated with the Mexican Center would best be classified as that of "cultural incorporation" (Mendoza and Martínez 1981). As noted above, "cultural incorporation" consists of accepting the ways of the dominant society without permitting the extinction of native customs. Although I or no one else could speak for each of the many artists whose works have been featured at the Mexican Center over the years, my feeling - based on the center's mission statement, conversations with Ms. Sanchez, and my observations - is that the center and its affiliated artists are not actively resisting Anglo society nor are they attempting to bring about a synthesis of cultures. They are instead using art and performance as a means of maintaining a connection to their Mexican heritage and as vehicles for the expression of identity. These individuals are proud to be Mexican-American and want the larger community to be aware of their presence, as evidenced in the paraders' periodic cries, "Yo soy Mexicano."

In each of the cases described above, we see Mexican-Americans adapting Day of the Dead traditions to meet the needs of the present. The Day of the Dead has always been about reaffirming a link with the past and reproducing the social order via the commemoration of one's ancestors (El Guindi 1977:17). But in contemporary public observances, the holiday additionally becomes a celebration of one's self and of one's ethnic group, not necessarily as members of a localized community but as members of a minority community. Smith notes that festivals help "restore the sense
that lives are coherent, significant, and satisfying” (1975:2). Public commemorations of the Day of the Dead in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas accomplish these ends by historically and culturally grounding participants. They also send the message, “We are minorities here, but we are proud, we are strong, and we're here to stay.”

Invented Traditions

In the past several decades there has been a growing recognition that “tradition” is a process which can and often does embody both continuity and discontinuity. Bell comments, “Today there is a growing social legitimacy for many types of ritual improvisation...” (1997:224). Expressive forms are adapted and reconstructed to engage present circumstances. A given tradition, though people repeat it and respect it, may in fact be largely fictitious in that what is claimed to be old is actually a recently acquired or rediscovered custom. In the seminal work by Hobsbawm and Ranger, The Invention of Tradition (1983), Hobsbawm defines invented traditions as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983:1).

The invention of tradition may have only recently been addressed in the literature, but it is likely that the process has occurred throughout history. Trevor-
Roper provides an example from Scotland that brings to mind the Chicano movement's rediscovery of Aztlan and its use of the symbol in their struggle for power:

Today, whenever Scotchmen gather together to celebrate their national identity, they assert it openly by certain distinctive national apparatus. They wear the kilt, woven in a tartan whose colour and pattern indicates their 'clan'; and if they indulge in music, their instrument is the bagpipe. This apparatus, to which they ascribe great antiquity, is in fact largely modern. It was developed after, sometimes long after, the Union with England against which it is, in a sense, a protest [1983:15].

Further examples of invented traditions are provided by Kertzer (1988) and by MacAlloon (1984). Kertzer writes that the pageantry of British royalty, which appears to be and is promoted as being based on long-standing precedent, is in fact a deliberate rearranging of traditions which had waned, "The splendid elaboration of ritual that so colorfully marks the British royal family today represents not a simple continuation of long-held tradition, but a re-elaboration of old symbols to meet changing political conditions" (1988:175). MacAlloon points out that the carrying of the torch from Athens to the Olympic games site is intended to imply that the flame and the spirit of the festival has been burning since ancient times, but in reality the games were resurrected in 1896.

Public celebrations of the Day of the Dead in Texas represent invented traditions as well. Very few of my informants learned about the holiday from their parents and even those that did, did not observe it as children. As adults they found that the Day of the Dead had something to offer them and they thus embraced the custom. And yet, the frequent references by sponsors and participants to the fact that
the Day of the Dead is traditional, ancient, and most typically, that it is an Aztec holiday, imply that they are mentally placing themselves within an unbroken sequence of time.

People identifying themselves as Chicano in particular have used the past as a source of empowerment. The term brings to mind a renewed sense of pride in one’s Indian heritage. Chicanos reclaimed the myth of Aztlán, so that “The star of Aztlán has steadily risen in the firmament of world opinion” (Keen 1971:509). Today references to Aztlán or to the Aztec can be found in numerous book titles; there is a California-based publishing company called The Fifth Sun, and a periodical entitled *Aztlán: Chicano Journal of Social Sciences and the Arts*. There are an estimated 50 dance troupes in the American west which claim to be Aztec dancers, and one is most likely to witness their performances on the Day of the Dead. In the long run it does not matter that the majority of these dancers were born in the United States or that they may be unable to precisely pinpoint their family’s ancestral home in Mexico by region. Neither does it matter that promoters of the Day of the Dead may have only been celebrating the holiday in recent years. What is of interest is that the past is used to affirm and create an identity, one which assists individuals and groups in negotiating the world.
CHAPTER VI

LOOKING AT THE PRESENT: SOCIAL COMMENTARY

In the last chapter I examined some of the current manifestations of the Day of the Dead in Texas; it is utilized to renew pride in one’s heritage, to bring together people in a spirit of camaraderie, to call attention to Latinos as an ethnic group, and to establish a connection between modern people and imagined pre-Columbian ancestors who were not yet dominated by Spanish or Anglo forces. Each of these examples illustrates how people selectively reinterpret the past to accommodate the present. In this chapter I will describe a different use of the tradition, specifically how the Day of the Dead serves as vehicle of social commentary for artists. The commemorations illustrated below highlight the fact that the holiday is a springboard through which to explore current issues or to put forth a call for action. With one eye on the past and one on the present, artists use the Day of the Dead to explore today’s state of social and political affairs and hopefully to provoke changes resulting in social justice in the future.

Other Latino Uses of Art as a Vehicle for Empowerment

In 1847 the first Mexican illustrated newspaper, called *El Calavera*, began circulation. This paper used verses, essays, and drawings to critically examine politics and to parody government officials. *El Calavera* was officially banned after 31 issues and individuals associated with it were imprisoned, but the newspaper
influenced subsequent artists. Soon after the suppression of *El Calavera*, journalist Antonio Vanegas Arroyo hired José Guadalupe Posada to illustrate the broadsides which he sold at public gatherings (Brandes 1998b:202). Due to his images of "vivid and lively skeletons and skulls with grinning teeth dancing, cycling, playing the guitar, plying their trades, drinking and masquerading" (Wollen 1989:15), by the late 1800s Posada had come to be associated with the annual celebration of the Day of the Dead. As Childs and Altman point out (1982:56), people from all social classes were fair game as the subjects of satirical tributes. Brandes labels Posada’s style as one of “peaceful protest” (1997:334). One of the basic tenets underlying *calavera* poems and images is that death has a leveling effect: distinctions between groups on earth fall away when mortals enter the afterlife.

Posada real fame came posthumously. Brandes comments, “Posada’s influence on Mexican art and culture is incalculable. Largely ignored by artists of his day, he was discovered and popularized through the zealous efforts of artists and writers…” (1998b:202-203). Following the 1910 Mexican Revolution, a wave of nationalistic pride was expressed in the works of many Mexican artists who wanted to supplant the dominating influence of European art which had marked the years of Porfirian rule (1876-1910). Most notable were the works of “The Big Three” muralists: Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siquieros, and Diego Rivera. The biting satire of Posada’s images served the post-revolutionary ideology well and they were used by artists in the production of nationalist statements (Bakewell 1995:311). Rivera’s mural, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, incorporates
Posada's famous *La Catarina* (The Dandy) figure and a portrait of Posada, and this segment of the mural was later reproduced in papier-mâché form by Pedro Linares in the 1980s. In the 1930s Posada's works were reproduced in books by Rivera, who praised him as "an engraver of genius" (Macazaga and Macazaga 1979:19) and by Francis Toor (1930). During this time Posada's works became symbolic of Mexico and "The international art community had virtually declared these satiric skulls and skeletons a kind of high art" (Brandes 1998b:205).

Whereas the former government had previously banned the newspaper which was the source of early *calaveras*, in the 1920s new leaders were supporters of this art form. The government commissioned Rivera's tribute to Posada and encouraged the cultural nationalism invoked by Posada's prints. This may seem odd, given that officials were popular subjects of ridicule in *calaveras*, which "...offered the common people the opportunity, without fear of censure or reprisal, to express their dissatisfaction with political and social leaders and to define their grievances, real or imagined" (Beezley 1987:98). But post-revolutionary leaders promoted various indigenous art forms to foster a sense of unity among the populace and Posada's images seemed to hearken back to Mexico's glory days prior to European domination. *Calaveras*, in their association with the popular classes, challenged colonialism. Today Posada's images continue to serve as icons of the Mexican experience and they enjoy great currency in contemporary public Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States.
This practice by Latinos of looking to the past for guidance and the use of art to express nationalistic pride is seen in the Chicano mural revival which began in the United States in the 1960s. Griffith notes, “Inspired in part by the work of the great revolutionary muralists of Mexico, the movement turns urban walls into vivid statements of cultural identity and aspirations” (1988:51-52). A highlight of Chicano murals is the combination of ancient and pro-Mexican themes, such as the eagle, pyramids, Aztecs, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, with images drawn from contemporary Latino life experiences, such as the image of Cesar Chavez, peasants, scenes of the barrio, and portraits of living individuals.

This meshing of the past with the present represents cultural and political awareness and a struggle for recognition on the part of the artists and their communities, “The appropriation of the pre-Columbian genre was a major tool of cultural reclamation sanctioned by the political tenets of early Chicano Movement ideology...” (Sanchez-Tranquillo 1995:69). Sanchez-Tranquillo notes that this adaptation of the past must be understood as a form of discourse in which Chicanos map out their dual identities as Mexicans and Americans. Using images drawn from both the real and felt homelands of the United States and Mexico, artists visually manifest their bi-cultural experiences. The large format of murals and the fact that they are permanently affixed to the architectural landscape render them highly visible. By extension, the artists themselves and their causes become visible.

Chicanos muralists and Day of the Dead ofrenda builders sometimes employ the same motifs, such as placing images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Cesar
Chavez side by side. Ybarra-Frausto (1991b) has defined a particular style of Mexican-American art, *rasquachismo*, as a working-class aesthetic in which the underdog is valorized. Characterized by bright colors and the combining of sacred themes with scenes taken from ordinary life, "*Rasquachismo* is more than an oppositional form: it is a militant praxis for resistance to hegemonic standards in the art world" (Gaspar de Alba 1999:12). Ybarra-Frausto has applied the term to both murals and Day of the Dead *ofrendas*.

The 1960s also witnessed the birth of low rider automobiles as a form of artistry and Mexican-American pride. Low riders are generally large cars manufactured in the 1950s through 1970s which have been extensively customized. They are marked by their posh interiors, large amount of chrome detailing, high gloss surfaces which may feature artwork, and deliberately lowered axles. Because the cars are low, drivers must maneuver carefully to prevent the bottom of their cars from scraping the ground, "But slowness is actually a part of the style - one wants to see and be seen in one’s car" (Griffith 1988:55). Many low riders are equipped with hydraulic lifts which enable the driver, with the flip of a switch, to raise one or both ends of the car or to actually lift one end off the ground.

Bright (1995:105) suggests that this innovation arose as a response to the Los Angeles Police Department’s code, implemented after low riders became popular there, which prohibited any part of a car chassis from being below the wheel rims. She interprets low riders as a means of resistance against the police by Chicanos, who are frequently stopped and harassed when seen driving in upscale neighborhoods.
Bright argues that low riders are created as an alternative space for performance, "For low riders, the automobile is the center of a constellation of cultural practices, a mobile canvas for cultural representation and cultural critique" (1995:91).

We have already seen that low riders are featured in Day of the Dead parades in Houston and Austin, Texas. In parades, an art form which is symbolic of the Mexican-American experience of alienation is given the chance to be seen by, indeed literally paraded in front of, a diverse crowd. Parades are generally spectacles which are patriotic in nature; "In the United States parades are usually organized and supervised by civic leaders and civil authorities... Parades are typically for either sheer entertainment or the displaying of patriotic sentiments and military power" (Grimes 1977:73). Grimes states that it would be erroneous to assume that because parades encompass a festival component they are not important to participants. Low riders, frequently associated with gangs, are granted an elevated status in the parade. Their inclusion represents a reversal of the norm: low riders, rather than being hassled by the police, are allowed to symbolically claim the streets along the parade route as their own personal and collective territory.

A final example of the Latino use of art as a means of displaying ethnicity and calling for the recognition which leads to empowerment is provided in the example of José Varela. In her dissertation "'Este Soy y Yo': The Politics of Representation of a Texas-Mexican Folk Artist" (1989) Serifff profiles the expressions of a south Texas artist who is employed as a brick maker. Using the inexpensive material of concrete, Mr. Varela has over the course of many years decorated his community with evidence
of the Tejano presence there. In a town which is socially segregated into Texas-German and Texas-Mexican spheres of interaction, Mr. Varela has been commissioned by people and has voluntarily chosen to adorn the area with his Mexican-inspired creations:

José Varela donated his time, his talent, and in many cases, his finished product, so that the people of the community would be assured of their proper place and their proper mark on the larger cultural landscape. In building these public monuments, Varela carried the cultural identity of his people into the very heart of the dominant architectural landscape. In so doing, he successfully resisted the attempts of the dominant Texas-Germans of his town to shut out the presence of the mexicano community by segregating, and in this way silencing, its members. [Seriff 1989:199].

The illustrations provided above point to a tradition of using art to express ethnic pride. Lee (1985:164) has demonstrated that art can articulate the concerns of a cultural group. Graburn has noted “The arts... are a major tool in this struggle to provide some sort of unquestionable marker, to assert a new identity or reassert an old one, to ameliorate the past and to secure the future” (1976:32). Américo Paredes feels that Mexican-Americans, because they are subordinated, have experienced Anglos, but Anglos have only observed Mexicans (1978). Art can be used to call attention to people and groups who use the medium to symbolically proclaim that they will not be ignored.

In contemporary public celebrations of the Day of the Dead, many artists are using the tradition in this way. As noted above, ofrendas are a nearly ubiquitous feature of Day of the Dead commemorations. With the exception of bakeries, only two establishments I visited did not have an altar, and one of these featured chairs
converted into altars. Altars are the favored format of artists. Many of the altars displayed in galleries or cultural centers are created by professional artists who are specifically invited to present their interpretations of the holiday to the public, and some of the artists use the Day of the Dead as a platform to address issues such as the continued plight of Latinos, to draw attention to problems effecting the United States in general, or to issue warnings.

Altars Addressing Negative Experiences of Latinos

At Galeria Guadalupe in San Antonio in 1998, 14 artists were commissioned to design altars. Below I will describe three of these which were political in nature as they addressed recent tragic events impacting Latinos. Margaret LaToya’s altar was dedicated to murder victims in Acteal, Chiapas. In Acteal, 24 men, women, and children were gunned down, and it is widely believed that government agents were responsible for the killings although the government blames the murders on Zapatista insurgents. It is also believed that the victims were unarmed. LaToya’s altar featured a backdrop which was a collage of newspaper clippings about the incident. The base of the altar had an enlarged black and white photograph of the massacre site taken from a magazine, upon which were superimposed 24 lit, white candles. According to LaToya, each candle represented the life of an innocent person gunned down for no reason. She described her tribute in poetic terms: “The burning candles represent the brevity of life. We all burn out eventually, but no one knows when their time will come. For the Mexican peasant, especially in Chiapas, the government assassins
could come and wipe you out at any moment. The wind could blow through here and blow the candles out right now. Your life would be snuffed out just like that. This is what the peasants have to deal with” (personal correspondence 1998).

An altar created by Jorge Ross was similarly dedicated to a murder victim, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador. According to Ross, “Romero sympathized with the Indians and he paid the price. The government sent a message that everyone better keep their mouths shut.” Although it was not clear from the altar itself, which consisted of a large picture of Romero surrounded by numerous Catholic crosses, medallions, images of saints, candles, and rosary beads, Ross said that his altar was also dedicated to all those who had lost loved ones during the Guatemalan civil war. Ross had never been to Guatemala and is himself a Tejano, but he told me that he identifies with the plight of oppressed people everywhere. It is his belief that remembering those who died violently is the essential philosophy of the Day of the Dead. Ross based his interpretation on the fact that the Aztec accorded a special place in the afterworld for those who died in battle.

Also at Galeria Guadalupe was an ofrenda commemorating the brief life of Esequiel Hernandez Jr.. A native of the west Texas border town of Redford, 18 year old Hernandez was on his property tending the family goats in May of 1997 when he was mistaken for a potential illegal immigrant and drug smuggler and was shot to death by a U.S. Marine corporal on anti-drug patrol. The agent involved in the incident claimed that he heard shots fired as he approached Hernandez, and while Hernandez was carrying a .22 caliber rifle (not an uncommon practice among
ranchers in this part of the state), upon examination it was found that the weapon had not been fired.

The altar for Hernandez featured typical elements such as candles, food, and flowers, but was dominated by a large (approximately eight feet tall by four feet wide) painting which formed a backdrop. The painting was of a vertically-positioned United States flag superimposed with a portrait of the victim. The life-size image of Hernandez, with his gaze directed straight at the viewer, made the portrait realistic and drew the viewer into Hernandez' world. The red stripes of the flag dripped color onto the body of Hernandez, suggestive of drops of blood. I was not able to speak with the artist who designed the altar, but it is possible that the positioning of the flag was intended to be reminiscent of the American Indian Movement's (AIM's) symbol of protest, an upside-down flag. AIM's use of the overturned flag made the statement that in their opinion the United States does not own the land they claim to own because the government wrestled it from the control of the Indians, its original inhabitants, via a series of broken treaties, coercion, and warfare. AIM's occupation of historic American sites such as Plymouth Rock, Mount Rushmore, and Wounded Knee, was a liberation strategy meant to resurrect tribal autonomy (Talbot 1979:237). With El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán Chicano activists made a similar plea for the return of ancestral lands and for self-government.

In Austin, in 1997, I encountered an altar at Lechugia Gallery which was quite complex but which clearly made its point. The three tiers of the altar were made up of glass blocks. At the lowest tier were typical ofrenda gifts and on the second tier
were multiple small figurines made of hardened, clay-like painted dough, which represented Mexicans trying to cross the border into the United States. The uppermost tier, which was elevated significantly higher than the other two levels, was blocked off by chicken wire. Figures, both of living Mexicans and skeletons, clung to this “fence” On the opposing side were figures of armed, uniformed, Border Patrol agents.

The artist told me that his altar represented the uphill struggle of Mexicans to achieve economic prosperity:

My father was a Mexican from Chichihua, and he used to come to the United States to find work in the ’40s. He was a bracero. He needed to come here to feed his family. But when they took away the bracero program he had to sneak in illegally. He became an alien, an enemy of the government, even though the farmers, they needed the workers. The government knew this. They knew the Mexican labor was cheap and the farmers didn’t want to pay American wages. But they play this game, see, where they pretend you’re not wanted and they have to keep you on the other side, in your place. Eventually he moved here and got his papers, but it was an uphill struggle. He had to become American legally but he never really felt that way. So now I celebrate the Day of the Dead, because he couldn’t [personal correspondence 1997].

This particular altar seemed to draw the crowd’s interest more than any other on display that night. I overheard one gentleman observing it say, “This is the struggle of our grandfathers which still goes on today.”

A final example of an altar with political overtones comes from Houston’s Miracle Wonder gallery in 1997. The altar again contained typical offerings but these were covered with strewn pieces of shattered glass. Suspended above the altar by clear fishing line was a cloth doll-like figure of a man, about three feet in height. This figure, which artist Greg Narvez told me was intended to represent his brother,
was impaled by numerous pieces of splintered wood and wore a crown made of thorny twigs. The image was suggestive of both sculptures of Saint Sebastian and of Jesus. Narvez explained "My brother was martyred. He was shot down on the streets for no reason by what turned out to be an off-duty cop. Apparently he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, when the cop was having a bad day and felt like taking it out on someone."

The images presented by these individuals and their comments show that these people, and presumably many others, feel as though they are persecuted for being Mexicans or Mexican-Americans. They use the Day of the Dead as a form of protest, to call attention to this problem and to engage others. Since most of the Day of the Dead commemorations in these public venues are frequented by Anglos, the Day of the Dead provides an opportunity to point out problems to those outside the Latino community. From what I observed, it is clear that observers found these visual statements compelling.

Such artistic expressions are more effective and affective in driving home the consequences of discrimination and suffering than the news media. Each of us reads about such issues in the newspapers or hears about them on televised news, but the reports are depersonalized. To see the artistic statement of someone who has been personally impacted by racism or violence causes the injustice to register on a whole different level. The viewer becomes actively engaged, connecting with the individuals being commemorated and with those who speak out on their behalf.
Art Which Issues Warnings

An interesting ofrenda was erected in 1998 at San Antonio’s Mexican Heritage Center. The center is a meeting place and a museum with permanent displays on Mexican and Mexican-American history. The museum staff created a large (approximately 20 feet long by 4 feet high) altar in the lobby. Set against a white wall, the altar consisted of two long tiers. The wall itself was decorated with multiple colored papeles picados, most of which featured skeletal images. Candles and food were placed on the second tier, while the lowest tier supported a “corpse,” a mannequin dressed in clothes reminiscent of Hollywood depictions of the stereotypical Mexican bandito. The costume and the bandoleers, holster, and gun which the “corpse” wore were the genuine article, taken from the museum’s collection. The figure’s body was wrapped in a petate, as if ready for burial. This altar is depicted in Figure 3.

The figure held an empty bottle of tequila in one hand and a twenty dollar bill in another. Additional twenty dollar bills, actual legal currency, not props, were strewn across the altar and on the surrounding floor. Pulled half-way out of the breast pocket of man’s jacket’s was a plastic bag containing “cocaine”. At the man’s feet was a mirror with “cocaine,” a straw, and a razor blade. Surprisingly, given the fact that money was lying about, I could not find any staff members during the 30 minutes or so I spent in the center. Therefore my interpretations of this altar are my own, but I think it is clear that this altar was making a statement that drugs and alcohol kill.
A similar theme was found in an installation at Austin’s Vacarro Studio. On a wall was a large poster of the Marlboro man, surrounded on either side by *papeles picados* which depicted cigarette-smoking skulls. On the floor in front of the wall, arranged so that they formed a rectangular border reminiscent of the shape of a coffin, were approximately 300 loose Marlboro brand cigarettes. In the center of the square was a horizontal paper banner which read, “The surgeon general warns that smoking is hazardous to your health.” When I asked the gallery owner about the significance of the altar, he simply said, “He’s [the work’s designer] got lung cancer.” This commemoration was a tribute by a dying man to himself, and a warning to others to quit smoking before it led to their own deaths.

Each year since 1987 Houston’s Ferncliff Performing Arts Center, a publicly and privately funded organization in the arts district of the city, has hosted a Day of the Dead exhibit. In 1996 Ferncliff featured a large, centrally located altar upon which the public were invited to place their own offerings, but the center is most well known for its retablos. Retablos traditionally are paintings which either depict a portrait of a holy person (retablos santos) or a show a holy person involved in an act of divine intervention (retablos ex-votos). They are painted as commemoratives, to request help, or to repay the saints for favors granted (Wroth 1991). An example of a retablo incorporated into a Mexican home altar for the Day of the Dead is provided in Figure 4.

Every year Ferncliff distributes a four by seven inch tin plate to the first 120 interested artists, about 70 percent of whom are usually Anglos. As Ferncliff’s
executive director Nancy Wells explained to me, the artists are given free reign to express their own personal interpretations of the Day of the Dead, and are only instructed to create some sort of retablo, “We don’t limit our artists. I hardly think that would work. We don’t claim to feature traditional works, but rather a contemporary take on a traditional idea.” Indeed, many of the interpretations represent a radical departure from the traditional, and this has been unsettling to some of my informants. I will take up this issue later and focus for now on the artistic statements themselves.

With 120 artists who change from year to year bringing their unique experiences and interpretations to bear on the Day of the Dead, the Ferncliff retablos are diverse in style and thematic content and defy simple classification. Some artists adhere to the traditional format of depicting saints, and some contain prayers. The majority (typically about 80 percent in any given year) depart from what would generally be considered a retablo in that they do not depict saints. For an example of one artist’s interpretation of the retablo format, refer to Figure 5. The Ferncliff retablos run the gamut from portraits to abstract art. Some of them are allied with the altar and installation described above in that they issue warnings that certain behaviors may result in negative consequences or death.

An example is the retablo by Joe Stanton, which served as a call to himself to avoid drunk driving. Stanton created a box-like wooden frame around his tin plate, upon which he painted an image of a house in the background. In the foreground was a man, crawling out of the wreckage of a crumpled car. A caption read, “God grant
me the power to stay out of sleazy bars.” The frame was wrapped with twinkling white Christmas lights, and it supported a set of car keys and an inverted shot glass. Although the content of this retablo seems quite contemporary, it actually conformed to the spirit of retablos in that it was an appeal for God’s guidance.

Examples of other retablos that issued warnings contained the following messages; a plea to stop the cutting and burning of the Central American rain forests, a request to stop eating tuna fish until it is ensured that dolphins are not accidentally caught in tuna nets, a warning to always wear a helmet when riding a motorcycle, an urge to wear a seat-belt when driving, and a call for husbands to be faithful to their wives lest they be shot. In a very modern interpretation of the Day of the Dead, artist Martha Smith created a retablo entitled *Smoked Chicken*. As she explained to me, the retablo was meant to encourage vegetarianism, which she feels is a pure lifestyle healthier for the human body than eating meat and which is kinder to animals. The retablo consisted of a three-dimensional chicken carcass with golden feet, attached to the tin plate, whose body was ringed with feathers. Most spectators didn’t quite know what to make of the piece or understand its relation to the Day of the Dead theme of the show. One woman was overheard to say, “What the hell is that about?” and a man joked “Look! Dinner!”

**Art Which Addresses Other Social Problems**

In several locations I encountered *ofrendas* dedicated to AIDS victims. In 1997 at Marco’s Emporium in San Antonio an altar was the collaborative effort of
several friends and the caretaker of a man who had died of AIDS that past summer. The altar offered some of the deceased’s favorite candies and thin cigars and featured numerous photographs of the man. The light blue cloth which draped the altar was decorated with 27 looped red ribbons, the symbol of the struggle to find a cure for AIDS, one ribbon to represent each year of the man’s life.

An altar at San Antonio’s Carter Museum in 1997 likewise drew attention to the problem of AIDS, in this case by jointly commemorating six individuals in the care of a local hospice who had died in that year. The altar, as it celebrated so many people, was crammed with photographs and personal momentos. On the top tier was a replica of the hospice itself and at the base were some informational pamphlets about the hospice and printed descriptions of the favorite activities enjoyed by each of the dead individuals when he or she was alive.

In Austin, AIDS/SIDA Outreach (SIDA is Spanish for AIDS) hosts a Day of the Dead commemoration each year which shifts in location but which is always devoted exclusively to AIDS victims. These altars tend to be quite traditional in their shapes and in the content of their offerings. There are usually 12 ofrendas erected annually, and while a few of them are built by the same people and devoted to the same individual each year, most of the altars are dedicated to individuals who have fallen victim to the disease within the last year. In 1998 the exhibit included a large poster with graphics and text explaining the devastation of the AIDS epidemic in the United States and which urged safety precautions, such as using a condom when having sex. Informational pamphlets were placed throughout the exhibition space,
and a volunteer solicited monetary donations. The exhibit's organizer, Marco Perez, told me, "Too many people are dying of AIDS. Each year there's somebody else to build an altar for. It shouldn't be this way."

In association with the exhibit, AIDS/SIDA Outreach hosted a poetry reading in a restaurant located next door. This event was advertised in The Austin Chronicle, but I almost missed the opportunity to attend it because the restaurant owners failed to post any signs that the reading was taking place in the back room. One had to go through the restaurant and the kitchen to find the area. Being commemorated that evening was a Latino lesbian activist and arts supporter highly regarded in the Austin area.

Most of the people in attendance seemed to personally know the woman, as individuals took turns on the stage to offer personal anecdotes about the woman or to recite poems written by or for her. The mood was quite solemn. Several people in the audience cried during the course of the evening and one woman on the stage was visibly overcome with grief to the point that she was unable to continue reading her prepared comments. Although I didn't know the deceased, I found myself swept up in the emotions of the evening. I was again struck by the thought that news reports of social problems do very little to convey the affects of these problems on real peoples' lives. Day of the Dead commemorations, in contrast, can personalize the issues on a very deep level.

At Houston's Casa Blanca, a woman using the pseudonym Crystal has created ofrendas in the gallery annually for the past seven years. Crystal never attends the
opening receptions and prefers to remain anonymous, and yet she wants the world to
know about her negative experience. When she was nine years old she was raped by
her priest. As a child she was too afraid to tell anyone about the experience, and so
she had to endure years of contact with the man, who continued to molest her and
most likely other girls as well. Crystal considers the rape to be the death of her
innocence, and her altar marks the loss of her childhood. In the written information
which accompanies her altar, Crystal urges other women facing similar problems to
add to the altar if they wish and to get psychological counseling. When I asked Mr.
Ramos, the gallery owner who knows Crystal quite well, if he was aware of the fact
that an internet site describes Crystal’s altars, he remarked, “No I didn’t. But then I
don’t own a computer. My goodness, I don’t even have a color TV!”

Another example of a very compelling use of the Day of the Dead was
encountered at Ferncliff in 1996. On the upper floor of the gallery a room contained
two “altars” which were created out of chairs. One memorialized victims of the
Vietnam conflict and the other commemorated victims of the Holocaust. The
Vietnam memorial chair was painted army green and surrounded by white votive
candles. The chair’s seat was adorned with plastic toy soldiers and a toy army tank.
The back of the chair featured an enlarged photograph of a young Vietnamese girl
running down the street naked, her body partially in flames. This photograph created
quite a sensation when it first appeared during the Vietnam conflict, so much so that
the reader can probably envision the photograph which I describe because it has
become etched in the minds of many Americans. The photograph has not lost any of its power over time.

The Holocaust chair was equally visually striking. The body of the chair was painted black and the seat was emblazoned with a bright red swastika. The back of the chair was wrapped with barbed wire, while the top and side edges of the seat and back were studded with nails, their points facing outwards. The nails were painted red as well. A chair is a functional item meant to be sat upon, but clearly in this case anyone attempting to seat himself on this chair would suffer pain. The artist who created this tribute was not only commemorating the many people who died in World War II but was asking spectators to reflect upon the suffering experienced by victims of the Holocaust, to feel their pain. A pamphlet placed at the base of the chair advertised Houston’s Holocaust Museum.

Some further examples of social commentary, both of which deal with violence in America, are provided by retablos created for Ferncliff in 1998 and 1996 respectively. The first example addressed drive-by shootings. Entitled *Trigger Happy*, the artist had painted her tin plate solid yellow and used black paint to make little “smiley faces” along the border of the plate. In the center was mounted a toy gun. Artist Jacob Sternblitz explained to me,

Everyday you read about drive-by shootings. I think there’s lots of them that don’t even make the papers. I created the retablo to call attention to the problem and to make people think about gun control. Here in Texas we’ve got all these Charlton Heston, John Wayne wannabes who support the N.R.A.[the National Rifle Association] and concealed handguns. All it gets us is death. There’s a lot of people who should be represented here on the Day of the Dead, but
you don’t hear about them. My sister’s boyfriend was car-jacked, but fortunately he didn’t get shot. He was lucky. But if they [the car-jackers] didn’t have a gun I’m sure he’d still have his car [personal correspondence 1998].

The other piece was created for 1995’s celebration, the year that the O.J. Simpson trial preoccupied and upset many people in the United States. Entitled *O.J. Burns in Hell*, the retablo addressed the issue of domestic violence. Although many of Ferncliff’s artists embellish their tin plates with three dimensional objects, this piece by Maria Sanchez used the plate as a canvas. Her painting depicted Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman, the victims of knife stabbings allegedly at the hands of Hall of Fame football star O.J. Simpson, in pools of blood on the ground. Knives were thrust in their throats and their eyes appeared to be popping out of their sockets. Rather than lying supine, the figures, with looks of rage on their faces, crawled towards O.J., who was entering into hell. The man wore a football helmet, but it did little to protect him from the flames which were consuming his body. This retablo was very well received by the crowd.

At San Antonio’s Fiesta Gallery, an altar in 1997 was dedicated to all the victims of exposure to toxic chemicals. The artist told me that his tribute recognized not just the dead but also those who are living with diseases or with the fear that they have been exposed to substances which will eventually make them ill. Citing such examples as Love Canal, New York and Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania, he said that the government has been irresponsible in handling hazardous substances. Moreover, he dispaired that the government deliberately chooses to manufacture and bury potentially harmful chemicals in low income neighborhoods. His brother, a resident
of Houston, was currently involved in an effort to stop the placement of a storage site for toxic chemicals in his predominantly Latino neighborhood. The artist was soliciting signatures for a petition, and had already gathered about 50 when I talked with him.

A final example of the use of the Day of the Dead as a vehicle to express dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs comes from Austin’s Del Rio center, a gallery which in 1997 featured one ofrenda erected by the owner and numerous drawings and retablos made out of cardboard boxes created by high school students. The most powerful retablo was one the smallest (about eight by six inches) and most crudely rendered of the group. The box was slit down the front and the cardboard pulled back to create the effect of hinged doors, so that the viewer looked into the scene within. Therein were two figures, also created of cardboard, with their features drawn on with a black felt-tip marker. One of the figures knelt on the floor, praying, next to a cardboard bed. On the bed lay the other figure. Below was written a nine digit number. The young African-American woman who created this tribute explained to me:

This is for my friend whose baby died. She went into the hospital to have her baby, but they told her to come back, that she wasn’t ready yet. See, she didn’t have no money. She was a charity case. And so they told her to come back, even though she was in pain and she knew she was going to have that baby. They wouldn’t take her ‘cause she was just a number to them, a future welfare mom. So she had no choice but to go home where there wasn’t anyone to take care of her except her momma. Anyway, her baby died right there on her bed. She can’t even go in that room anymore. And that’s why I put the social security number here, ‘cause that’s all that people are to the system, just numbers, not people [personal correspondence 1997].

The descriptions provided in Chapters V and VI represent a
small sampling of how artists and other celebrants in central Texas make sense the Day of the Dead. Interpretations encompass a broad mix, from altars similar to those one might find in a home in Mexico to altars and artworks used as protest art. Some of the ofrendas making political statements seem quite modern, as they address current affairs, and yet people who made such altars and the gallery owners featuring their work consistently told me that tradition is very important to them and that they respect the spirit of the holiday. Other altars and retablos were dedicated to living people experiencing injustices, not deceased individuals. In some cases the victim was the artist him or herself. These provide examples of artists making a statement that our society is ill, that people are suffering and need attention addressed to their problems or they will die. The Day of the Dead, a holiday which is in its essence about maintaining a link between past and the present, is being utilized to critically access the past and present and is in addition being used to call for future change.
CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to write "conclusions" about public celebrations of the Day of the Dead in Texas because the holiday is observed by a large number of organizations which differ in their presentations, and because types of commemorative activities continue to expand and diversify. The Day of the Dead in Texas is both a resurrected and emergent tradition. According to Santino, "In one sense, all celebrations of a holiday are the 'same' because the occasion and frequently the symbolic components are socially and historically derived. In another way, no two celebrations are ever the same. Holidays are always manifested as particular circumstances, particular events" (1996:xvi-xvii). In Mexico the Day of the Dead has been undergoing the process of syncretization for over four hundred years. This process continues today, both in Mexico and in the United States.

In this chapter I will reflect upon my observations of public commemorations made during the last three years by addressing the questions posed in Chapter I. The discussion will verify my hypothesis that the Day of the Dead in Texas is as much a celebration of ethnic pride and identity as it is about remembering the dead. I will then offer some concluding remarks regarding the possible future of the holiday.
What Factors Motivate Public Commemorations?

As previously discussed, the late 1960s witnessed the birth of the Chicano movement and at this time Chicanos, and other Latinos who did not self-identify themselves as Chicanos, began to look toward indigenous Mexican customs as a source of inspiration (Kannellos and Perez 1995:250). The first public commemorations of the Day of the Dead in central Texas started in 1978 at San Antonio’s Aztec Center. Gallery director Juan Ramos claims to have pioneered public celebrations in the state of Texas and I have found no evidence to dispute his claim. According to Mr. Ramos, twenty years ago commemorations held in galleries and cultural centers were small affairs attended by Latinos only, who were primarily under the age of 30. Over time, more and more organizations have adopted and adapted the holiday and they have likely done so for differing reasons.

At one level, public commemorations in Texas are mounted in order to accomplish the same goals as those achieved by celebrations of the holiday in Mexico. On a predictable date each year, the dead return to earth for a short visit (MacDonald 1992:546). During this sacred time the living cease their normal quotidian activities in order to attend to the dead and to ponder the mysteries of life and death and their own existence (Garciagodoy 1998). The Day of the Dead heightens the awareness of participants, as their lives are brought into perspective, and therefore provides an opportunity to rethink whatever is unsatisfactory. But these
goals could be achieved in the privacy of the home, so why go public? I believe that a large motivating factor is that sponsors now feel that they can go public.

According to my informants, prior to the 1970s they would have been afraid to observe the Day of the Dead because to do so would have highlighted the fact that they were not Anglo. Clearly the perspective on life and death embedded in the Day of the Dead stands in opposition to the dominant Anglo view, which separates the living and the dead into two discrete realms (Turner and Jasper 1994:134). A Latino known to have invited the dead to earth stood the chance of being ridiculed and shunned. Only a handful of sponsors observed the custom in their homes as children because their parents felt that the best way to make inroads in American society was to assimilate. Glazer and Moynihan (1963:14) note that this response is common among immigrants. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that public commemorations are a recent phenomenon.

It is important to note that none of the Latino sponsors of public Day of the Dead events were born in Mexico. Those who have parents born in Mexico said that immigrants or first-generation Mexican-Americans probably would not feel comfortable enough in an alien environment to display their customs. In the late 1970s, with the support of the civil rights movement and Chicano movement behind them, Latinos felt less stigmatized by their heritage than their parents and thus felt able to celebrate and exhibit their traditions in public forums.

Moreover, celebrating ancestral customs in public venues enabled them to gain further ground in a quest for recognition by the dominant society. The early
public commemorations were vehicles for both rediscovering and preserving cultural traditions and for creating and affirming identity in an environment where Latinos were a minority (Mesa-Bains 1989:3). In an example of what Peterson (1982:187) refers to as “ethnic signaling,” celebrants realized that they could create an identity which reflected both their historic experiences as well as contemporary reality. Morrison makes the following observation regarding Day of the Dead commemorations in San Francisco, one which applies to the Texas locations I investigated as well, “For the Chicanos, then, recovering (i.e., rediscovering) yesterday also meant ‘recovering’ in the sense of soothing their wounds and freeing them today for the project of building a brighter tomorrow” (1990:532).

Public observations of the Day of the Dead today continue to be a way in which Latinos reconnect with their cultural roots. Participants look to the past for guidance: old customs are restored in order to reclaim a sense of self (Sommers 1995). Early describes the Afrocentric movement in similar terms, “Like every other oppressed group, Africans could only face the future if they could hearken back to some version of the past and if that future, in some ways, guaranteed a reinvention of a past that most defined the tradition that made them great” (1998:708). Strength is found via a common memory as celebrants re-member culture, literally putting it back together. Being seen by outsiders is an important part of this process. Hall describes identity as the meeting point between cultures:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the
process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves... Contrary to popular belief, identity is constructed through, not outside difference. It is the relation to the Other, that which is not, that constructs identity [Hall 1996:4].

Another reason Latino sponsors choose to publicly observe the Day of the Dead holiday is to foster a sense of community, both with fellow Latinos and with non-Latinos. By sharing customs with others like themselves, a common identity is forged. And by introducing these customs to Others (non-Latinos) and inviting their participation, differences between groups are temporarily leveled. From my observations, bonding or a sense of communitas is most strongly achieved at events which stress the more solemn aspects of the holiday.

For example, at Manzanita Gallery in San Antonio in 1998, a Day of the Dead commemoration was attended by several people who were close friends of a recently deceased man who was being honored that night. These individuals each spoke of the influence the man had on their lives and eulogized him as one might expect at a funeral. Even the audience members who were unacquainted with the man felt as if they got to know him a tiny bit, and thus felt sad that he was gone. We also felt privileged to be allowed to share in such an intimate commemoration. One might expect that those celebrations stressing festive aspects would encourage camaraderie. The more carnivalesque presentations do bring together larger numbers of people, but in a crowded party environment people are less likely to communicate with each other on a personal level. At the smaller, more personalized observances where the
issue of death is openly addressed, people are more likely to realize that despite ethnic or other differences we all face the same final end.

Some individuals are motivated to participate as contributors to public Day of the Dead events because they feel that they should in order to further their search for social justice. This is most readily apparent in manifestations of the holiday in which artists create works which call attention to social problems, such as ongoing discrimination. Day of the Dead celebrations, as they are attended and witnessed by large numbers of people, provide a forum for delivery of messages. Art is used to stir up sentiments or cause a reaction in observers in the hopes of initiating action on their parts or at least making them sympathetic to the suffering of others. In these cases altar builders use the Day of the Dead format to enlighten others.

How Is the Holiday Interpreted for the Audience?

More than just ethnic festivals, public presentations of the Day of the Dead can be read as cultural performances in which Latinos put their traditions and beliefs on display. Milton Singer describes cultural performances as scheduled, bounded displays of culture “in which the cultural content of a tradition is organized and transmitted on particular occasions through specific media” (1972:47). Cultural performances are characterized by “cultural foregrounding,” the deliberate emphasis on specific crucial aspects of culture. By throwing key elements into high relief, attention is drawn to core values. This is similar to Ortner’s (1973:1339) idea of
"summarizing symbols," symbols which represent an entire constellation of beliefs in an emotionally powerful way. The dynamics of performance allow it to "help create new social orders and relationships as well as simply reflect, mask, or invert existing ones" (Sommers 1986:20). Because it is a form of reflexivity, a cultural performance becomes a display for both outsiders and for the performers themselves.

Many of the people who currently attend public commemorations of the Day of the Dead in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas are non-Latinos, primarily Anglos. This has had a strong effect on the format of observances. Most sponsors recognize the need to explain their custom to those who are unfamiliar with it, and take steps to render the Day of the Dead comprehensible. One method is to verbally explain the background or meaning of the holiday. But sponsors are busy, especially during opening receptions, which tend to draw the largest crowds, and they cannot speak for the individuals whose altars or artworks they display. Even within the relatively short time span of the three years during which I have been attending events, there has been a noticeable increase in efforts to educate the public about the meaning of the holiday.

A common tactic is to print up informational fliers and pamphlets. At several locations I visited which featured multiple altars, each ofrenda builder provided written information about the relationship of the items on their altar to the individual being paid tribute. In some cases multiple copies were printed up so that patrons could take the information home with them. Several events included lectures or slide shows, and some played videotapes explaining the holiday in Mexico.
Additional interpretations of the holiday are directed toward children. Since the 1980s a number of works on the Day of the Dead have been published for school teachers, parents, or others working with children (see Cohen 1992, Cueto 1988, Domínguez 1991, Heath 1995, Hocker 1988, Salinas-Norman 1988). These books typically offer a brief background on the holiday but primarily feature arts and crafts activities. These publications have inspired educators working in museums, children’s museums, galleries, and libraries to use the Day of the Dead as a means of fostering an appreciation of cultural diversity among young people. One attempt to achieve this goal is to sponsor story telling sessions featuring juvenile literature which describes Mexican or Mexican-American Day of the Dead rituals from the viewpoint of children (see Ancona 1993, Hoyt-Goldsmith 1994, Krull 1994, Levy 1995). Another is to guide children in hands-on activities.

Examples of the activities directed toward children are workshops in which they create items such as masks or skeletal puppets or bake panes de muertos. In many cases the children are asked to relate the Day of the Dead to their own lives by thinking of someone they knew who has died and making a poem or drawing in tribute. I have witnessed many of these tributes on display in not only the locations mentioned above but in galleries which feature exhibits geared toward adults. It is shocking to see the number of children, including very young ones, who have lost relatives to violence. Thinking about and celebrating the life of a dead relative is no doubt a very therapeutic exercise for these children.
How Does the Shift in Locale Affect the Holiday?

Before discussing changes, it is instructive to first briefly delineate those Mexican customs which have been retained in the United States. Since celebrants pick and choose those features which they deem important, preserved elements represent what Shils would call “core values” (1981:45). Perhaps the most important maintained tradition is the use of the altar. The altar, in both Texas and Mexico, is without question the key symbol of the Day of the Dead. The altars seen in Texas generally conform to the pyramidal shape of Mexican ones, consisting of three or more tiers. They usually contain many of the same gifts, such as food and drink, candles, and flowers, as well as momentos of the deceased. However, in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, altars are frequently more embellished and personalized, as will be discussed below.

The other key referent to Mexican traditions is the skeleton or skull. As previously noted, it is customary in Mexico to exchange sugar skull candies on the Day of the Dead. Skeletal images are also seen in the popular prints of Posada, whose images are widely reproduced in other media such as papeles picados and in the papier-mâché figures of the Linares family. In Mexico skeleton icons are most frequently encountered in urban areas, where drawings in the style of Posada may be affixed to bakery windows, for example. Again, in the urban central Texas locations considered in this study, the use of this referent has been accorded even greater status. This seems to be true in California as well, as Barragán reports that in San Francisco
"the calavera is an indispensable tool for conveying an understanding and acceptance of the life-death continuum" (1980:1).

The differences between traditional home-based Mexican celebrations of the Day of the Dead and public celebrations in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio reveal much about the motivations of the sponsors and participants. More than a shift in locale, differences between commemorations in the two countries stem from a shift in ideology. In central Texas the Day of the Dead, as publicly encountered, in addition to serving its original function of honoring the deceased is about identity and the display of ethnicity. I will delineate some of the transformations which have occurred as a result of the shift in location to public venues in the United States below. The reader is reminded that there is a great deal of regional variation within Mexico and that in some locations tourism has recently altered the tone of celebrations. The descriptions of Mexican customs offered here for the sake of comparison are based on what may be considered typical commemorations in rural areas.

In most regions of Mexico, celebrations consist of three basic components: the offering of gifts at the home altar, the decoration of the deceased's graves, and the sharing of food among the living. In the rural areas cited in the literature as having traditional Day of the Dead commemorations, communities tend to be small and basically homogenous, with everyone carrying out similar ritual activities and holding the same beliefs. Turner (1979:53) describes rituals in such communities as liminal phenomena. Liminal events require the involvement of the whole group and serve to promote the well being of the collective by highlighting group cohesiveness. In
contrast, Day of the Dead events in Texas represent liminoid phenomena.

Participation in liminoid events is voluntary and only a portion of the populace participates. Turner states that liminoid events tend to occur in industrialized societies with distinct status differences and are typically initiated by marginalized individuals. In this case, those individuals are members of an ethnic minority group.

In Mexico the tradition is, obviously, an established one while the public celebrations in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio are examples of invented traditions. As described by Wilson, “Invented traditions rework serviceable fragments from our regional, family, and ethnic traditions, mixed with borrowings from other times and peoples” (1997:4). Villagers in Mexico observe the holiday for the combined factors that it is enjoyable, that it is considered proper and expected behavior, and in some cases it is believed that failing to do so is met with punishment of the living by the dead (El Guindi 1977:8).

Contemporary, urban, Texan celebrants are unlikely to believe that negative repercussions would result from a failure to observe the holiday, since they have only recently embraced the custom. They observe the holiday because they feel it is a proper tribute but also because they choose to highlight their Mexicanness. To publicly celebrate the Day of the Dead is to assert one’s identity: Texas Mexican-Americans feel a need to stake a claim because they are marginalized individuals. They feel like foreigners in their own country. If they were in Mexico instead of the United States, they wouldn’t have such a strong need to include Mexican referents. In Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, the use of Mexican iconography, particularly
Aztec images, is a reminder of one’s origins. Similar to family crests, Aztec symbols are visible manifestations of (an assumed) genealogy which are not just for members of the family to enjoy but are designed for show. Both are used to historically situate people, establishing them in a time frame, and to display pedigrees.

In Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas, the focus has shifted away from the cemetery or home and become centered on the gallery, museum, and cultural center. Within these settings the altar becomes the primary representative of the holiday and all its attendant meanings, including Mexican-American pride. The altar is a symbol, not a site of communication between the living and the dead. Jasper and Turner made the following observation about ofrendas in San Antonio, “Some of the treatments are personal, some are political, some are fanciful, but all of them remove the ofrenda tradition from its original Mexican folk context by making use of the altar not as a religious and familial site primarily but as a sculptural form that generates the potential for a multilayer assemblage of images, objects, and meanings” (1994:134). Many of the public commemorations described in this work were initiated by artists, so it is not surprising that altars, as vehicles of expression, have become elaborated and taken on unique forms. Ofrendas which make social commentary are becoming both more commonplace and increasingly acceptable to self-described “traditionalists.” For example Mr. Roberts, at Houston’s Casa Blanca, used to frown upon such interpretations but now encourages them at his store.

These altars provide an example of how the Day of the Dead has become less oriented toward the past and more toward the living. Public ofrendas in central Texas
settings are meant to be admired and in some cases to provoke a reaction. They invite the participation of the viewer, a living individual, rather than the dead. Communication is directed toward unknown patrons rather than deceased family members. Altars are left up longer, typically three to four weeks, so that as many people as possible can experience them. Some altars are not even intended as tributes to the dead, but to their builders.

In Mexico the Day of the Dead is an intimate affair, where individuals honor their ancestors in the company of their family and friends. People who join in celebration are well known to each other. Public commemorations in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, on the other hand, are more outward-facing. Strangers are invited to join the celebration. Particularly at venues which sponsor events, the focus is less on remembering the dead than it is on enjoying the company of the living. Families were conspicuously absent from public memorials I witnessed. Activities are either geared toward adults or children, but not both.

Many of the altars and retablos I have seen are not designed to honor ancestors but to pay tribute to celebrities. Examples include works devoted to Jerry Garcia, Selena, Octavio Paz, Posada, Che Guevara, Cesar Chavez, Versachi, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Tiny Tim, John Denver, George Burns, Marilyn Monroe, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Frank Lloyd Wright, among others. In 1996, the year Princess Diana died, dozens of tributes appeared. At Galeria Marquez in Houston, an elaborate “altar” was created out of a “crashed” automobile. Retablos have even been
devoted to living celebrities, such as Madonna, Hilary Rodham Clinton, and Michael Jordan.

Looking Toward the Future

Public celebrations of the Day of the Dead in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas do not represent simple cases of transplanting or diffusion. In many instances the Day of the Dead is a rediscovered, deliberately resurrected and emergent holiday. It represents an experimental cultural reclamation project, one which is not scripted by the church or the government but by the people, and which is likely to continue to change in the future. The holiday is growing steadily more popular, and as new players enter the arena they bring with them their own interpretations of what the Day of the Dead signifies. Some of the events I attended were patronized solely by Latinos, but typically Anglos made up more than half the audience or patronage. Many establishments merchandising Day of the Dead paraphernalia are owned by Anglos who observe the holiday. Many of the educators working with children are Anglos as well. This situation could be seen as ideal. It could be indicative that the Chicano goals of achieving equality have been realized, and Anglos and Latinos now freely mix and respect each other’s customs. But in reality minorities have not achieved social justice.

None of my informants were opposed to Anglos participating in celebrations or observing the holiday on their own, provided they understood the Mexican view of
life and death and that their tributes were done in a genuine spirit of respect. However, five informants expressed the fear that with so many people jumping on the cultural bandwagon, the Day of the Dead might become co-opted by outsiders. Each of these individuals lived in Houston, and each specifically referred to the installations at Ferncliff Performing Arts Center as pushing the limit of what can be called the Day of the Dead.

Recall that the center’s directors refuse to limit their artists’ freedom, feeling this would compromise the integrity of their work. Retablos at Ferncliff included electrified, amplified, and abstract creations, and other unusual takes on the holiday. One retablo, entitled *Puke*, featured a pink figure spewing vomit. Another, entitled *The Death of Father Christmas*, consisted of a plastic, illuminated Santa Claus seated on a toilet. An untitled piece was simply a section of a New York City subway map mounted on a plate, while to the left of it was positioned a portion of a jigsaw puzzle and to the right hung a retablo made of plastic and copper tubing and elbow joints. Works such as these provoked one informant to remark, “Let them get their own holiday. This is not the Day of the Dead.” Another, who feels that the artists are being blasphemous, is considering circulating a petition to get them to drop the use of the word “retablo,” since many of the pieces have no religious content.

The majority of Ferncliff’s artists are not Latinos. The overwhelming majority, perhaps 90 percent, of the people who attend their exhibits are Anglo. The retablos are available for purchase through a silent auction, the minimum bid set at $150, with the money split between the artists and Ferncliff. Almost every one of the
120 retablos on display are sold each year, and they generally fetch sums far larger than the asking bid. The Ferncliff show is the most popularly attended one in Houston. Graburn has commented, "Numerous examples could be cited to illustrate the process by which objects and symbols of one culture have been taken over by another to such a degree that they become a part of the public identity of the borrowing group" (1976:28).

Is this the Day of the Dead or is it appropriation? How much leeway is there for innovation within a tradition, particularly when change comes from outsiders? There are no easy answers to these questions. In most cases the artists who made the pieces on display were not present at the center to explain their work, even on the night of the opening reception. Some of them live out of state. No printed or verbal information was provided to help decipher meaning. Therefore it is impossible to say if the more unusual or risqué retablos do in fact have some basis in the Day of the Dead. What is of interest is the fact that the Day of the Dead is interpreted, reinvented, and even manipulated by a diversity of people who bring their experiences to bear on the holiday.

Beginning in the 1950s folklorist Richard Dorson, fearing contamination of folk traditions by mass culture, began his decades-long rebellion against what he termed "fakelore." Worried that folk forms were being appropriated by the untrained and sullied by modernism, he decried fakelore as "highly commercial, blatant, loud, aggressive" (1971:5). The problem with Dorson's argument is that it raises the following question: Who decides what is fake and what is real? Also, Dorson
preferred to work in small, rural areas and discounted urban settings as impure. Scholars now recognize that no setting is “pure.” Garcia Canclini states that today all cultures are hybrid cultures and that modernity is not a state one enters in and out of but a condition which all people confront, adding, “It seems that we anthropologists have more difficulties with modernity than do the social groups we study” (1995:178). The summer 1999 Journal of American Folklore was a special edition solely devoted to the issue of hybridity which featured articles contributed by scholars from numerous fields. The publication of the special issue reflects the fact that social scientists increasingly turn their attention to the impacts of transnationalism and post-modernism, studying groups which in the past might have been considered too contaminated.

The Ferncliff show, though very popular with the elite arts community in Houston, has generated a clash of opinions as traditionalists have been offended by some of the artists’ interpretations and by the commercialization of the holiday. At present, Ferncliff represents an isolated incident. I suspect that people who are not genuinely into the spirit of the Day of the Dead will soon become bored with it and move on to the next “exotic” custom which strikes their fancy. It’s possible that the Day of the Dead has already reached its peak in popularity. An organization which usually sponsors a parade in Houston did not this year, and several organizations in Austin failed to mount a show in 1998. Each of these cited a lack of funds, and said they hope to hold commemorations in the future. Saturation might discourage some from entering the foray as well.
Because the holiday is currently popular, readings of the Day of the Dead are varied. I claim that non-traditional variants are not contaminations but represent a new form of popular culture worthy of scholarly attention. Appadurai states that newly emergent forms of folklore "...do not necessarily constitute a degenerate and kitschy commercial world to be sharply contrasted with a folk world we have forever lost. In fact, it may be the idea of a folk world in need of conservation that must be rejected, so that there can be a vigorous engagement with hybrid forms of the world we live in now" (1991:474). Gaither likewise sees the meshing of cultures in a positive light, "The American cultural arena is a vital and competitive place. In it cultural expressions from all corners bump into and influence one another. Out of the resulting cacophony, new forms and ideas are born" (1992:59).

I predict that the Day of the Dead will continue to be observed by the people it is important to for a long time to come. It is a tradition which speaks to individuals on a very deep, personal level. Given that it has endured for hundreds of years, even in the face of ecclesiastical and governmental suppression, the holiday seems in no danger of dying out any time soon. In the case of Mexican-Americans who use the Day of the Dead to call attention to themselves in order to find a voice in society, continued discrimination will be a motivating factor. For many others, the Day of the Dead provides a valid alternative to the dominant North American worldview which sees death as final.

Richard Rodriguez provided the following reflection on his experience of speaking to a group of Anglos about the Day of the Dead:
On Día de los Muertos a few years ago, I stood on the stage of the Annenberg Auditorium in the Palm Springs Museum. An elegantly dressed audience had come to learn about the Day of the Dead. But why? Everyone knows that Americans don’t die - they pass away into euphemism. And Americans don’t get old, they get plastic surgery. Amidst the velvet and plush of the evening, my audience sat waiting. I didn’t know how to tell my listeners that in Indian Mexico, death takes place certainly, but death is not final [1997:9].

I think Mr. Rodriguez was a little out of touch with his audience. These particular people were there to hear about the Day of the Dead because they were fascinated, not repulsed, by the Mexican attitude towards life and death. For these Anglos the Day of the Dead’s appeal is that it offers a means of reflecting upon life and death in a culture which treats death as a taboo subject. Huntington and Metcalf have stated that “This endless shying away from a confrontation with mortality is undeniably a marked feature of American culture” (1998:59).

Whereas in Mexico death is given hundreds of humorous and endearing nicknames, such as “the boney lover,” in the United States the avoidance of death is reflected in the use of euphemisms. Jackson feels that the denial of death has created a sense of dislocation, “One traditional dimension of identity has been the understanding of a clear relationship, individually and collectively, to the generational stream from past to future. The ability to do this has been significantly weakened in recent years and that problem has surely at least been aggravated by the steady movement toward denying the dead world a role in the living world. This denial is after all a rejection of both our past and future” (1977:241).
Many people in the United States are hungry for ritual. “In the last few years there has been a revived interest in ceremonies and ritualistic occasions (Bastien and Bromley 1980:48). Lots of individuals feel a need to experience life in a spiritual sense because their lives lack meaning. MacCannell believes that this condition is what drives tourists to visit other countries which they believe are more spiritually attuned than their own, “Tourism is a response to a pervasive fear that modern life is increasingly inauthentic and profane. Tourism is a nostalgia-driven quest for the authentic” (1976:154). The desire to find meaning in a post-industrial society is evidenced in the creation of new rituals and traditions.

A company in California called Rites of Passage Incorporated offers teen-agers a chance to fend for themselves in the wilderness as a means of achieving independence (Grimes 1990:113). Robert Bly created an entire “Men’s movement” with his suggestions in Iron John: A Book About Men (1990). Juneteenth, a holiday celebrating the day when African-American slaves in Texas received word of emancipation, is rapidly spreading throughout the country (Abernathy et. al 1996, Wiggins 1987). Kwanzaa is a wholly invented “African” tradition created in the United States in 1966 which provides a sense of meaning to African-Americans by giving them roots (Bell 1997, Karenga 1988). For the people who enjoy celebrating Kwanzaa, it does not matter that these roots are fictitious and that the holiday’s traditions are fabricated. Likewise, it does not matter that the Aztec dancers in Texas are Texans or that they may have never even been to Mexico. For those who self-identify with the Aztecs, the presence of these costumed dancers provides a sensation
similar to that experienced when one sings the National Anthem along with thousands of other fans at a baseball game.

In 1988 Nutini predicted, based on his fieldwork in the late 1960s, that the Day of the Dead in Tlaxcala, Mexico, would soon die out. This has decidedly not been the case. In Mexico and in the United States the Day of the Dead continues to undergo transformations. In the public commemorations of Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas, the holiday is consciously created anew each year. Within any custom there is always a dynamic tension, an interplay between conservatism and innovation. Change does not signal decay but is the hallmark of a healthy tradition. Only when a tradition is repeated wholesale, by rote, without any adaptations or personal involvement by the actors, is it in danger of the stagnation which signals decline. We live in a pluralistic society where cultures interface and at times even mesh. I feel fortunate to live in an age when researchers are no longer concerned with categorization, when various branches of scholarship recognize the blurring of genres, and when emergent traditions are increasingly being deemed worthy of attention.
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Bourdieu, Pierre

Bowman, Lemma

Brandes, Stanley


Brass, Paul
Brenner, Anita

Bright, Brenda Jo

Bronner, Simon J.

Brundage, Burr Cartwright


Button, Margo

Cadaual, Olivia

Cahill, Roger

Calderon de la Barca, Frances

Callahan-Henderson, Kathryn

Cantwell, Robert
Carasco, David

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Dingus, Anne

Domínguez, Miguel

Dorson, Richard. M.

D'owler, Luis Nicolau

Duncan, Carol

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Milne, Jean

Mintz, Sidney W.

Morrison, Suzanne Shumate

Myerhoff, Barbara G.

Nash, Manning

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Norgen, Kristen
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Oakes, Maud  

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APPENDIX A

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
Office of the Vice President for Research and Associate Provost for Graduate Studies
College Station, Texas 77843-1112
(409) 845-8565  FAX (409) 845-1855

February 4, 1999

MEMORANDUM

TO: Hilary A. Standish
Department of Anthropology


The above referenced protocol has been:
   X Approved April 1, 1999 to April 2, 2000
   — Conditionally approved (see remarks below)
   — Tabled for future considerations
   — Disapproved (see remarks below)
   — Not Considered


The study is approved for one year. As stipulated in the IRB Guidelines all protocols are subject to annual review and any changes must be approved by the Board.

E. Murl Bailey, Chair
Institutional Review Board - Human Subjects in Research
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE/QUESTIONNAIRE

General Information about the Organization

Full Address of Business/Organization-

Director-

Goal of Organization-

Number of Employees/Volunteers

Approximate number of exhibits/programs per year-

How long in operation-

Sources of funding-

General Information about Day of the Dead Programs

How long have you been sponsoring Day of the Dead events?

What did you do last year?

What other types of events have been sponsored?

About how many people attended last year?

What types of people attended (ethnicity, estimated income, any gender disparity)?

Would you say your Day of the Dead events drew a different audience than other events which you have sponsored?

What was the audience reaction? Did people ask questions about the holiday?

Do you have Day of the Dead items for sale during events? Are sales good?

What percent of income is generated during Day of the Dead shows?
How do you advertise events?

How long do exhibits generally stay up?

Does your organization make any efforts to educate the public about the Day of the Dead? Who specifically is targeted in these efforts? How would you rate the effectiveness of such efforts?

Do you work with any school groups? If so, do you work with the teachers? What can you tell me about how teachers are presenting the Day of the Dead in their classrooms?

Who creates the exhibits? For example, how are artists recruited? Who designs ofrenda?

What were the most and least successful aspects of last year's show?

Do you have photographs of past events or pamphlets which I can see?

Would you like to see my slides of some of the Day of the Dead events I have attended?

What are your plans for this fall?

Personal Background

What is your background related to the holiday? Did you observe it when you were growing up or start as an adult?

Did you ever feel stigmatized for celebrating the Day of the Dead?

How did you learn of the holiday if it was not a part of your heritage?

Have you seen or participated in Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico or elsewhere? If so, how did they differ/how are they the same?

How would you describe the significance of the holiday?

Do you do anything special at home or with family to observe the Day of the Dead?

What other events in the area are you aware of? Do you attend other organizations' programs?
Observations on Public Celebrations

Have you noticed any changes in the way the holiday is celebrated?

Do you think the Day of the Dead is becoming more popular? More accepted by mainstream audiences?

When somebody who is unfamiliar with the Day of the Dead comes into your business, what are the three most important things that you would like them to know about the holiday?

How would you describe audience reaction to the events you sponsor?

In building an ofrenda, what pattern does a person follow? Are certain elements considered essential?

Would an altar created in a gallery/center differ from one in a home?

I am very interested in how some people use the Day of the Dead as a vehicle to make social commentary (for example, to generate public awareness of AIDS). Has your organization sponsored exhibits which fall into this category? Describe.

Are you aware of other organizations which sponsor such events?

If you sponsor a parade, who is in the parade and who generally watches the parade?

Would you say your events build upon tradition? How important is this?

Are you aware that some psychologists are recommending that people create ofrenda and observe the Day of the Dead as a form of grief therapy? Do you think this might be effective?

Is it alright for non-Latinos to observe the holiday? What is important for them to know?

How much leeway is there for variation in Day of the Dead observances/artwork? Do you think there is a point at which the meaning is lost?

Have you ever been offended by the interpretations of other groups? Have you ever felt that some stores/organizations are capitalizing on the Day of the Dead as a marketing ploy?
Do you think the Day of the Dead will continue to be important? Become more or less popular?

Is there anything else you want to tell me or ask me?

Do you think there is someone else in the area I should contact?
APPENDIX C

A LIST OF BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS VISITED

AUSTIN:

Academics America International Gallery 2101 East Ben White
Adobe Pueblo 2117 West Anderson Lane
Antigua 1508 South Congress
Austin Children's Museum 1501 West 5th Street
Curra's Grill 614 East Oltorf
Don Limon's Bakery 1121 East 7th Street
Eclectic 916 West 12th Street
El Aguila Bakery 5311 South Congress
El Interior 1009 West Lynn
El Sol Y la Luna 1224 South Congress
El Taller 8105 Shoal Creek Blvd. #109
Galeria Sin Fronteras 1701 Guadalupe
Juarez Bakery 1701 South Mays
La Mexicana 1924 South 1st Street
La Pena y Allgo/Informe SIDA 212 Congress Avenue
La Placita 220 South Congress Avenue
Las Americas Fine Art Gallery 1103 East 7th Street
Las Manitas Cafe 211 Congress Avenue
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<th>2326 E. Cesar Chavez Avenue</th>
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<td>San Antonio College, Koehler House</td>
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San Antonio Children's Museum, 305 East Houston
San Antonio Museum of Art, 200 West Jones
San Fernando II Cemetery, 746 Castroville Road
Say Sf Studio, 1414 S. Alamo, Studio 103
Southwest Craft Center, 300 Augusta
St. Lukes Episcopal School, 11 St. Lukes Lane
Tafolla Middle School, 1147 Cupples Road
Talavera Gallery, 6812 West Avenue
Taller des Artes, 1619 McCullogh
Tesoros Mexican Art, 12033 Starcrest
Textures Gallery, 5148 Broadway
Tienda Guadalupe Folk Art, 1001 South Alamo
Turqoise Door Gallery, 630 North Star
Witte Museum, 3801 Broadway
APPENDIX D

A GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN TERMS

*alebrijes*- Fanciful papier-mâché figures that resemble people, animals, or skeletons.

*alféñique*- Sugar paste used to make skulls or figures made of sugar.

*amaranth*- A cereal crop native to Mexico which can be used to make dough or bread.

*angelitos/angelitas*- The spirits of deceased boys or girls. Literally little angels.

*calaca*- Slang for skull or death. Also skeletal figures.

*calavera*- Literally skull. Satiric poetry, mock obituaries, skeletal images.

*compasuchil*- (and variant spellings) A type of marigold.

*comal*- A griddle used to cook tortillas.

*copal*- Incense derived from tree sap.

*cholo*- Literally half-breed. Derogatory term for mixed-heritage individual.

*Día de Todos Santos*- All Saints' Day. November 1.

*Día de los Muertos*- The Day of the Dead. Usually November 2

and 2

. Dates can vary by region.

*Día de los Difuntos*- Alternative term for the Day of the Dead.

*el doble*- The custom where boys ring church bells in exchange for food or tips.

*enviar muertos*- Literally sending the dead. The exchange of food among friends.

*mestizo*- Of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry.

*metate*- A stone used to grind corn into meal. With a mano, works like a mortar and pestle.

*ofrenda*- An altar or the gifts placed on an altar.

*pachuco*- Literally over ripe or soft. Slang for an urban youth or gang member.

*panes de muertos*- Bread of the dead. Sweetened bread shaped into figures for the holiday.

*papel picado*- paper banners featuring punched or cut out designs.

*Tejano*- A Texan Mexican-American. Denotes dual heritage of one born in Texas but with Mexican ancestry.

*velacion*- Candlelight vigil for the dead, usually in the cemetery.
APPENDIX E

FIGURES

Figure 1. Altar in Oaxaca, Mexico.
This photograph shows a home altar in the community of Santa Ana del Valle, Oaxaca decorated for *Dia de los Muertos*. Placed on the altar are *panes de muertos*, fruits, flowers, candles, and incense. The wall behind the altar features religious images.

Photograph taken by and used with the permission of Jeffrey H. Cohen.
Figure 2. Altar With Multiple Referents to the Deceased.
This photograph shows an altar displayed in Houston’s Casa Blanca Gallery. Note the heavy use of visual referents to the deceased because the altar is in a public location. Placed on the chair in the lower left were fliers describing the deceased so that viewers could appreciate the man being commemorated.
Figure 3. Social Commentary Altar.  
This large altar was displayed in San Antonio’s Mexican Center in 1998. On the base of the altar was a “corpse” wrapped in a petate as if ready for burial. The “deceased” was surrounded by twenty dollar bills and held an empty tequila bottle in his hand. From his uniform pocket jutted out a plastic bag containing “cocaine,” and additional “cocaine,” a razor blade, and a rolled twenty dollar bill were placed on a small mirror near the man’s feet. The altar showed the negative possible outcome of drug abuse.
Figure 4. Mexican Retablo.
This retablo was included among the decorations of a home altar in Santa Ana del Valle, Oaxaca. Traditional retablos portray saints, who are sometimes depicted in an act of divine intervention.
Figure 5. Retablo Interpretation by a Texas Artist. Houston's Ferncliff Gallery has featured a Day of the Dead exhibit of retablos for over a decade. Many of the artists' interpretations of the Day of the Dead holiday and of the retablo format are non-traditional, such as the retablo depicted here. A dog, "Saint Petula," is given saintly status. The caption reads: Saint Petula, Sovereign of the Canine Realm. O Sacred Heart of Petula. To you we come in search of enlightenment and peace. We trust in your wisdom. Amen."
VITA

Hilary Anne Standish received her B.A. degree in Art History from Mount Holyoke College in 1986. For the next decade she worked in art galleries as a salesman and a conservation picture framer in Dallas, Texas and Cleveland, Ohio. In 1994 she worked as a volunteer in the archaeological laboratory at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and during that summer participated in the excavation of a late Woodland Indian site in northeastern Ohio. From 1993 to 1995 she took coursework in anthropology at Cleveland State University before enrolling in the graduate program in anthropology at Texas A&M University in 1995.

While at Texas A&M University, Ms. Standish worked as a non-teaching graduate assistant for one and a half years and taught undergraduate anthropology courses for one year as a graduate assistant. She has presented papers at the Bowling Green State University Conference on Holidays, Ritual, Festival, Celebration, and Public Display and has presented her research on the Day of the Dead to undergraduate courses at Texas A&M University. Volunteer activities include working as an interviewer at a local food bank, as a Meals on Wheels driver, and as a tutor in a local elementary school. Ms. Standish’s permanent address is: 32250 Burlwood Drive, Solon, Ohio 44139.