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Calaveras in the Streets: Chicano Death, Art, and Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles, 1970-1980

"For the Chicano-Mexicano death defines life."
Judithe Hernández

Abstract

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is arguably one of the most recognizable aspects of Mexican culture. Typically celebrated in Mexico on the second day of November, All Souls's Day in the Roman Catholic world, the holiday is characterized by gatherings of friends and family to remember loved ones who have passed away by building *ofrendas*, altars, and visiting cemeteries to decorate their gravesites. In the 1970s, Chicano artists in East Los Angeles reconceptualized the holiday by making it a public celebration of Chicano culture and resistance during the height of the Chicano Movement. A necropolitical examination of Día de los Muertos reveals that the holiday emerged as a response to the social and economic conditions that historically contributed to the deaths of Chicanos in Los Angeles. After the Chicano Moratorium and the death of Ruben Salazar in 1970, Chicano artists utilized the holiday as a new way of affirming their cultural resilience through a public expression of celebration, healing, and mourning. This holiday was part of an artistic movement that enabled Chicanos to publicly discuss the structural inequalities that brought them closer to death.

Introduction

For one day every November, the streets of Boyle Heights are full of skeletons. In the Self Help Graphics and Art archives, a photograph captured a parade of calaveras from 1977. They followed behind an old truck decorated in colorful paper, wearing a painted skeletal mask

on the grill like a toothy grin atop a stoic, chrome expression. Some of the skeletons towered over others, their lumbering forms supported by the smaller ones clad in the clothes of their previous lives. Some of them were dressed to the nines in the old clothes of a previous generation. Some of them are dressed in the same clothes they wore to work. Seven years after the march against the Vietnam War that filled Whittier Boulevard and Laguna Park in East Los Angeles with the energy of the living, the dead danced and called for the community to mourn together, to mourn publicly, and to mourn while making merry.

During the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Chicano artists reconceptualized Día de los Muertos as a cultural and political celebration that addressed pressing issues in the Chicano community.[1] Housing instability, displacement, police violence, education inequality, and the Vietnam War contributed to the exploitation, oppression, and early deaths of Chicanos. In 1973, the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles hosted one of the earliest public celebrations of Día de los Muertos, a development that moved the holiday away from the private, religious realm that defined its practice in Mexico. As part of the Chicano Movement, these artists sought to politically and culturally empower the Chicano community through the creation of art that reclaimed historical narratives and aesthetic values from the dominant Anglo-American structures of power and culture. At the same time, this holiday was informed by the history of death and oppression that Chicanos faced in the city, thus offering a way to publicly mourn loved ones while also addressing collective traumas that affected their lives.

[1] While a gender-neutral variation, Chicanx, has gained popularity in recent years, I will preserve the historical voices of activists and scholars by using the term 'Chicano/a'. Additionally, names for the historical events and movements that use the original 'Chicano' will be preserved. Even though I do not use Chicanx, I still wish to honor the presence of queer, trans, and nonbinary community members who did not have the opportunity to live openly during this time. Additionally, the term 'Mexican American' is used in instances that refer to a previous generation's cultural identity and as an ethnic classification. While Chicano emerged as a political identity, activists and writers continued to use the term Mexican American in the 1960s and early 1970s, demonstrating the rather fluid nature of these identities. This paper seeks to honor their visions and voices as well.

My approach to examining the history of Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles utilizes the lens of *necropolitics*, a field of critical scholarships that examines relationships between the state and death. In doing so, I seek to move beyond the emphasis recent scholarship and popular media has placed on the current, modern iteration of Día de los Muertos and its future within American culture. Despite its relatively recent development, necropolitics provides an important framework to examine how popular holidays that honor the dead address histories of death, marginalization, and inequality. For the Chicanos in Los Angeles, necropolitics provides a perspective that offers a more complete picture of Día de los Muertos by rooting the holiday in the politics of the movement and the efforts by Chicanos to reimagine their Mexican American identity. The holiday is an intersection of several aspects of Chicano art, history, life, and death in the city. All of these elements are brought together to form an analysis that properly places Día de los Muertos within the larger history of Los Angeles and examines the structural inequalities that have contributed to the oppression of Chicanos. Furthermore, necropolitics offers a new language to describe the realities of life and death that Chicanos already knew. In the iconography of artworks, in the pages of neighborhood newspapers, and in the discussions within organizations, the barrios of East Los Angeles engaged with these discourses surrounding death and subjugation while encouraging political and cultural empowerment.

Studying Día de los Muertos and Chicano Cultural Production

The historical foundations of the iconography and themes of Día de los Muertos has been the subject of attention and debate from scholars of Mexican history and culture. Amongst these scholars, the discourse is centered around the authenticity of Día de los Muertos as a holiday with indigenous origins. The skeletal image in Mexico can be traced back to Mesoamerican

cultures like the Aztecs, the Maya, and the Toltecs. The Aztecs produced some of the most recognizable skeletal iconography such as the *tzompantli* (the rack of skulls), Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlantecacihuatl (the Lord and Lady of the Dead), and earth deities like Coatlicue and Tlaltecuhtli.[2] These entities represented the duality of life and death, of the earth giving and the earth taking. However, scholars link modern depictions of skeletons during Día de los Muertos to the political prints of José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), who used the skeletal form to critique politicians and upper-class Mexican society. Claudio Lomnitz's examination of death and Mexican identity challenges arguments put forth by anthropologist Stanley Brandes that Día de los Muertos and its skeletal imagery are mostly a commercial and political construction popularized in the early 20th century, during the post-revolutionary government.[3] The history of death in Mexico reveals that the Catholic Church attempted to legitimize the colonial project's role in the death of indigenous people and the poor by controlling the appropriate methods of mourning and burial practices.[4] Lomnitz's work reveals that Día de los Muertos has always maintained some level of subversiveness, usually through visual and literary elements that mock the circumstances and conditions of death. Using the skeletal figure to critique and mock the state has always been part of Mexico's history.

The development of Día de los Muertos in the United States is primarily studied through the lenses of art history, media studies, and anthropology. Regina Marchi's study provides the most comprehensive examination of the holiday's history and its present status as a recognizable, yet commodified piece of Mexican culture. As an artistic expression, the holiday and the people involved with the organizations that helped establish it as a public celebration have become part

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[2] Betty Ann Brown, "Historic Roots and Popular Representations of Mexican Days of the Dead" in *Día de los Muertos: A Cultural Legacy, Past, Present, and Future*, ed. by Mary Thomas (Typecraft Press, 2017), 14.
[3] Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 55.
[4] Lomnitz, 293.

of the canon of Chicano art history. Many of the artists and collectives involved with Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles were also instrumental in creating the visual language of Chicano culture such as Los Four (Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert Luján, Frank Romero, Robert de la Rocha, and Judithe Hernández), Asco (Patssi Valdez, Glugio "Gronk" Nicandro, Willie Herrón, and Harry Gamboa Jr.), Ofelia Esparza, Yreina Cervantes, Leo Limon, John Valadez, and many, many more. Early scholars of Chicano art like Sybil Venegas identified the holiday as an expression of *Chicanismo*, which she defines as the experience and essence of being Chicano: "It takes into account history, cultural practices, geographical circumstances, spirituality, icons, bilingualism, biculturalism, or … the condition of being Mexican in the United States."[5] The uniqueness of Chicano artistic expressions is rooted in the feeling of being caught between two cultures, choosing to remix and transform elements from history into an aesthetic that embodied their lived experiences, their spiritualities, and their dreams.

While scholars studying the holiday acknowledge that Self Help Graphics and Art in East Los Angeles established one of the first public celebrations in 1973, they typically shift their analytical focus to Galería de la Raza and the history of political Latinx art in San Francisco. As a result, the history of Los Angeles is relegated to the background, as a historical set-up for analysis about the modern iteration of the holiday. However, scholars like Laura Medina and Gilbert Cadena center the holiday's practice in Los Angeles and demonstrate that Día de los Muertos has a healing role within the Chicano community. More importantly, Medina describes the holiday as a form of *nepantla* spirituality, a unique kind of hybrid spirituality that fulfills the

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[5] Sybil Venegas, "The Day of the Dead in Aztlán: Chicano Variations on the Theme of Life, Death, and Self-Preservation" in *Chicanos en Mictlan: Día de los Muertos in California* (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 2000), 44.

cultural, political, and spiritual needs of a group of marginalized people.[6] "It is art that expresses joy, pain, and a people's resolve to survive and prosper, not as individuals, but as a collective."[7] Cary Cordova's study on Latinx art in the Mission District of San Francisco contains a deep study of the holiday's development and its relationship with the politics of mourning. She writes, "The event addresses a critical hole in U.S. culture: mourners deal with death publicly, openly, humorously. To mourn is not to accept the loss passively but to celebrate the dead and thereby to find spiritual fulfillment and political empowerment."[8]

The appropriation and commercialization of Día de los Muertos in mainstream American culture concerns much of the current scholarship on the holiday. Marchi's work also addresses those that might question the authenticity of Día de los Muertos as it is practiced in the United States, since it has become fairly removed from the way it is traditionally practiced in Mexico.[9] An undeniable influence on Día de los Muertos's current existence and future evolution in the American cultural imagination is the film *Coco*. Released in 2017 by Disney-Pixar Studios, *Coco* is an animated film set in Mexico about a boy named Miguel who travels to the Land of the Dead on Día de los Muertos to discover the history of his family. The film was met with critical acclaim for its storytelling, the visuals that display the richness of Mexican culture, and its respect towards the holiday. However, in 2013, the film's development was brought to a halt when the Disney Corporation made a request to trademark the name 'Día de los Muertos' for the

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[6] *Nepantla* (translated as "in the middle") is a Nahuatl term used by Chicano/a Studies scholars to describe the hybrid nature of Chicano culture in the American Southwest, the borderlands.

[7] Lara Medina and Gilbert R. Cadena, "Día de los Muertos: Public Ritual, Community Renewal, and Popular Religion in Los Angeles" in *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, ed. Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 88-89.

[8] Cary Cordova, *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 209.

[9] Regina Marchi, "Hybridity and Authenticity in U.S. Day of the Dead Celebrations," *The Journal of American Folklore* 126, no. 501 (Summer 2013): 292.

film's title and merchandising rights.[10] The move sparked outrage from Mexicans and Chicanos in the United States, further highlighting how much of the holiday's aesthetics had been commercialized and appropriated. As a result, new questions about the holiday's future and authenticity have arisen, prompting scholars to focus on documenting the holiday's evolution and modern practices.

In examining Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles, I draw upon the theory of necropolitics to deepen my understanding of the history, politics, and conditions of death among Chicanos. Developed by philosopher and theorist Achille Mbembe, necropolitics examines how the state utilizes its social, political, and economic power to control how people live and die. Mbembe builds upon Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower, in which the state asserts its sovereignty by deploying mechanisms of control that shape the way people live, lording over the realms of life and death.[11] However, necropolitics goes one step further and explains how the state creates the *conditions* that expose people to death, thus determining their right to live or die. Mbembe engages the most with the postcolonial work of Frantz Fanon, expanding on his concept of colonial occupation that explains how necropolitics operates through the seizure and fragmentation of geographic areas, resulting in surveillance from the police and isolation from the rest of a region.[12] The notion of living in occupied territory is echoed by scholars that study Los Angeles as a carceral city such as Mike Davis and Kelly Lytle-Hernández. Chicano artists, writers, and journalists also utilized this concept throughout the movement in the 1970s, speaking directly about police terror, surveillance, housing policies, and urban renewal initiatives

[10] Adolfo Flores, "Disney Withdraws Trademark Filing for 'Día de los Muertos'," *Los Angeles Times*, published May 18, 2013, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-xpm-2013-may-08-la-et-ct-disney-dia-de-los-muertos-20130507-story.html.
[11] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 66.
[12] Mbembe, 79.

that confined entire communities to certain areas of the city, ready to be displaced, discarded at the whim of powerful developers backed by the city. While Mbembe's historical analysis of necropolitics forms a crucial foundation of my scholarly lens, my research seeks to center the voices and creative responses of the marginalized, those who are most affected by necropolitics. Chicanos used art to process their relationship with death, their understanding of the state's role in their deaths, and how they reclaimed their humanity through alternative mourning practices.

The history of Chicano death in Los Angeles looms over Día de los Muertos's emergence in the city yet remains an unexamined aspect in much of the scholarship about the holiday. While scholars often discuss Día de los Muertos's relationship with the most well-known elements of the Chicano Movement, the history of death lingers in the background because the holiday is usually framed as an artistic expression of Mexican or pan-Latin American culture that Chicanos adapted for their lives. Events like the Chicano Moratorium were major turning points for the movement, but systemic inequality, criminalization, and violence against Chicanos existed long before the 1970s. Chicanos have always had a close relationship with death, and they were well aware of the way it encroached on their everyday lives. The holiday was a way for Chicanos to reclaim their Mexican cultural heritage, drawing upon the ancient Mesoamerican civilizations and the revolutionary political movements of the early 20th century. Importantly, schools did not teach histories of Mexico or the American Southwest aside from Manifest Destiny narratives, thus cultural knowledge was denied to Chicano students. As a result, Chicano activists and artists had to become their own teachers, conducting their own studies and research. Día de los Muertos addressed not just the physical death of individuals, the destruction and incarceration of marginalized bodies, but also the death of Mexican culture and history in a younger generation that was pressured to assimilate.

The emergence of Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles is rooted in the way Chicanos reconceptualized elements of their Mexican culture in order to reclaim spaces and identities that were denied to them. Doing so meant crafting new symbols from their shared experiences as a people shaped by the politics of the borderlands and reimagining Mexican resistance within the context of *Chicanismo*. The transition from Día de los Muertos from a private ceremony to a public procession is one of the many expressions of Chicano culture that reclaimed public space and mobility. Though Self Help Graphics was established as a printmaking studio, their artists set out to democratize the practice and engage with the community through other popular art forms. Furthermore, Chicano art thrived in the inventiveness and resourcefulness of *rasquachismo*.[13] Denise S. Sandoval's study of Black and Chicano lowrider clubs in Los Angeles reveals how these public and artistic expressions of culture challenged the confinement and lack of mobility that city policies and the police placed upon marginalized communities. Chicanos proudly displayed low, slow-moving, opulently designed vehicles that honored Mesoamerican ancestors, Mexican history, and Chicano beauty; they displayed the past, present, and future of the barrio. Importantly, these cars also memorialized deaths within the community: the homie, the homeboy, the homegirl, *la familia,* and *la raza*. Through the public nature of the lowrider, the mural, and the procession, Chicanos utilized symbols of life, death, and history to create a visual language that asserted their culture the way one declares the presence of a deceased loved one: *presente.*

For my analysis, sources pertaining directly to Día de los Muertos are drawn from Chicano art, including photography, murals, and written resources. Photographs of the Día de los Muertos celebrations are abundant in Self Help Graphics's uncatalogued home/studio archive

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[13] Defined by Tomas Ybarra Frausto in his 1989 essay *Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility* as the "resilience and resourcefulness [that springs] from making do with what's at hand *(hacer rendir las cosas)*."

and the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA) at the University of California, Santa Barbara via Calisphere. They demonstrate the evolution of the celebration as it became more well known as an artistic expression of Chicano culture. Within the realm of Chicano art, murals have received extensive attention from art historians and museums seeking to document them, given that their existence in public also places them in an ephemeral state: they are subjected to being painted over, damaged, or destroyed when buildings are demolished. Those that have been preserved offer important insight into the use of iconography pertaining to history, death, and memory. Additionally, printmaking has received ample attention from curators and scholars, especially as a formal practice among many of the Chicano art centers in California. While I utilize murals to discuss how public Chicano art discusses death, the main focus of my study is alternative creative works like altars, papier-mâché, face painting, fashion, and lowriders. The other major group of primary sources pertaining more directly to my necropolitical lens are articles written by Chicano publications like *Regeneración* and *La Raza*. These voices show that Chicano writers engaged with a kind of early necropolitical discourse during the time of El Movimiento, creating an awareness of death that facilitated the need for Día de los Muertos.

Challenging the Chicano Death World

Death defined the Chicano world in Los Angeles, manifesting in various forms through the conditions city and national policies had facilitated over decades. Mbembe defines a 'death world' as "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*."[14] While Día de los Muertos enabled Chicanos to embody and mock this status for one day of the year, they

[14] Mbembe, 92.

navigated their everyday lives with the knowledge that one day they or their loved ones could meet an early death. Thus, interactions with the entities that controlled their lives and contained them within the barrio influenced the ways they perceived themselves within society and informed the decisions they made. At the same time, the Chicano Movement in urban Los Angeles emerged as a response to the daily injustices inflicted upon Chicanos with goal of promoting of ethnic and cultural pride amongst Mexican Americans, encourage political empowerment, participation, and pressure to force the end of discriminatory laws and practices that affected the way they lived and worked.[15] In Los Angeles, Chicano publications like *La Raza* and *Regeneracion* documented the everyday lives of Chicanos in the city and turned their pages into a platform for activists, organizations, and residents of the Eastside to bring these issues to the forefront of the movement.

One of the pressing issues Chicanos faced in Los Angeles was unequal housing and residential segregation with little access to resources or social services. The history of East Los Angeles is marked by red-lining, displacement, and geographical fragmentation. Neighborhoods in East Los Angeles were often selected by urban renewal policies for redevelopment, resulting in evictions and the destruction of homes. The violent eviction of the last residents from Chavez Ravine in 1959 in order to make way for the building of Dodger Stadium and the construction of the freeways through Boyle Heights during the 1960s bore deep, lasting wounds. The freeways fragmented many Chicano neighborhoods, carving up the bodies of land and space, affecting people's access to the city's resources and their interactions with one another and the city at large. Cultural studies scholar Raúl Villa Homero underscores this displacement, "By the 1980s, freeway construction had consumed 12 percent of the land in East Los Angeles while displacing

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[15] Edward J. Escobar, "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1492.

approximately 10 percent of its residential population, thereby adding to the chronic shortage of decent and affordable housing on the Eastside."[16] According to the Los Angeles County Department of Urban Affairs in 1968, only 28.67 percent of the houses in East Los Angeles were considered suitable for living situations.[17] In the first volume of *Regeneración* published in 1970, Manuel P. Mendez, a member of the Mexican-American Council for Better Housing (MACBH), wrote that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) hindered the ability of Chicanos to receive mortgage loans in barrios and highlighted that there were no Chicanos in positions within the FHA that could advocate on behalf of the community: "We learned that there are no Mexican-Americans in policy-making positions, and we were informed that funds were not available for the hiring of specialists, consultants in this field."[18] *La Raza* reported on MACBH's journey to Washington D.C. to confront the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1968. In their report, they found that HUD did not agree with the plans for better housing submitted by the East Los Angeles Improvement Council, claiming that the cost of land was too high.[19]

Welfare not only contributed to the lack of adequate housing of Chicanos, but also to their inability to escape poverty. Recipients often described the process of obtaining any kind of welfare as a dehumanizing experience, especially for women. Black and Chicana mothers that received welfare were subjected to degrading procedures from caseworkers such as intrusive

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[16] Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 82.
[17] Ernesto Chavez, *Mi Raza Primero, My People First: Nationalism, Identity, and the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002) 63.
[18] Manuel P. Mendez, "Why Housing For Americans of Mexican Descent Has Not Been Possible," *Regeneración* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1970), University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, 7.
[19] "Mortar and Bricks...Are Not a Home," *La Raza*, February 7, 1968. University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll18/id/342.

questions about their personal lives and sexual histories.[20] Additionally, because welfare recipients received very little housing allotments, they remained trapped in deteriorating and dangerous homes that were unsuitable for anyone to occupy, let alone an entire family. This often resulted in hyper surveillance from social workers where any transgression would result in children being taken away and given to the foster care system.[21] Publications like *La Raza* played an important role in documenting poor Chicanos experience with the welfare systems and gave activists like Alicia Escalante the reach of all of the Eastside and mobilized support for welfare recipients and advocate for their rights through groups like the East Los Angeles Welfare Rights Organization. Escalante stated, "I grew up in the barrio. I know that my fight is here with Chicanos on welfare -- especially the women. You don't know the many problems for women on welfare. Too many people believe the lies about people on welfare."[22]

Police violence and harassment dominated the experiences of Chicanos in the barrio and became one of the central issues that activists and journalists sought to address during the 1960s and 1970s. The history of Los Angeles is marked by police aggression towards marginalized communities, oftentimes resulting in tense and hostile environments. The Sleepy Lagoon murder in 1942 sparked campaigns that criminalized Mexican American youth, targeting pachucos and their clothing for being un-American. "The wartime hysteria in Los Angeles over a fictional wave of Mexican-American juvenile delinquency resulted in the Zoot Suit riots of June 1943 and popularized …. within police circles the idea that Mexican Americans were criminally

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[20] Alejandra Marchevsky, "Forging a Brown-Black Movement: Chicana and African American Women Organizing for Welfare Rights in Los Angeles" in *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*, ed. Dionne Espinoza, Maria Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 232.
[21] Marchevsky, 232-233.
[22] "The Battle for Welfare Rights," *La Raza*, March 28, 1969, University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll18/id/30.

inclined."[23] By the 1960s and 1970s, the police were a constant presence in the barrio, subjecting residents to harassment, intimidation, and violence. Chicano newspapers and magazines documented these instances, oftentimes highlighting that the youths the police targeted were not gang members or doing anything unlawful. In the September 3, 1968 issue of *La Raza*, activist John Contreras described the feeling of the constant police presence in the barrio: "The placa patrols the Chicano neighborhoods like the Chicano was some type of animal which has to be kept in a cage."[24] That same year, a meeting of local Black and Chicano leaders led by Walter Bremond of the Black Congress and Carl Vazquez, a Chicano activist, met to demand an end to the police violence that plagued both communities. In an article written in *La Raza*, Vazquez writes of the everyday reality Chicanos faced in their interactions with the police, "Daily incidents involve the beating of teenagers, constant citizen harassment on commercial streets, arrogant interfering with family social functions, and … the daily insults meted out to Black and Brown people in their contacts with officers."[25] In a 1970 issue of *Regeneración*, Celia L. de Rodriguez wrote about Aurelio Sevilla, a 22-year-old student, who tried to intervene when he recognized an acquaintance being beaten by Hollenbeck police officers.[26] Sevilla said that after the police turned their attention to him, he was put in the back of the police car, where he was called derogatory names by the officers and then detained at USC Medical Center.[27] Rodriguez highlights the fact that the young man was an art scholarship recipient, emphasizing the situation

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[23] Escobar, 1489.
[24] John Contreras, "Los Barrios se Juntan/La Hazard Habla/Sangra Against Police Brutality" *La Raza*, September 3, 1968, University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll18/id/306; "la placa" was one of the many slang terms Chicanos used for the police.
[25] Walter Bremond and Carl Vazquez, "Barrio and Ghetto Communities Protest Police Violence" *La Raza*, September 3, 1968, University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, 5.
[26] Celia L. de Rodriguez, "Art Scholarship Recipient Beaten by Police." *Regeneración* 1, no. 7 (1970), University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, 15.
[27] Rodriguez, 15.

that many Chicano youths found themselves in. As they attempted to better themselves, their families, and their communities through educational achievements, they were still subjected to violence and suspicion from the police.

Education inequality dug its claws deep into Chicano youth for generations and created a schooling crisis in East Los Angeles. Deteriorating school buildings caused by the Los Angeles County Board of Education funneling economic support away from schools in poor neighborhoods, the National Education Association's refusal to advocate for bilingual education, the lack of Mexican or Latino teachers, instances of corporal punishment, cirriculums that excluded Mexican history and culture, intelligence testing, and overcrowded classrooms deeply affected Chicano students and the quality of education they received.[28] Segregated housing confined marginalized people to large regions in the city, which the Los Angeles Unified School District utilized to assign children to schools in these neighborhoods.[29] These schools were staffed by mostly white teachers and administrators that pushed Chicano youth towards vocational jobs rather than college or other academic pursuits.[30] A school board survey of Los Angeles schools in 1967 found that of the total 138,210 Latino student population, only 2.7 percent of the teachers had a Spanish surnames.[31] Furthermore, budget cuts worsened already crumbling schools and there was next to no Mexican American representation on the school board.[32] An article in the September 4, 1967 issue of *La Raza* documented the complaints

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[28] Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2021), 366-368, 377.
[29] Henry J. Gutierrez, "Racial Politics in Los Angeles: Black and Mexican American Challenges to Unequal Education in the 1960s," *Southern California Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 53
[30] *Artbound*, "La Raza," directed by Dignicraft in association with the Autry Museum of the American West and UCLA Chicano Studies and Research Center, published April 2, 2018, on KCET, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/la-raza.
[31] Rodolfo Acuña, *Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 1984), 157.
[32] Acuña, 157-158.

teachers, students, and parents made about the Skills Center in East Los Angeles: "Some teachers and students complained of the 'prison camp' atmosphere and 'correctional style' of discipline … Others spoke of preferential treatment, lack of materials, too many administrations and not enough teachers, inadequate training, and high rate of dropouts."[33] With the help of teachers like Sal Castro, students organized and demanded reforms be made to the schools, the administration, and the curriculum. In early March of 1968, an estimated 10,000 students, parents, and progressive teachers from six high schools in East Los Angeles walked out in protest of the worsening conditions in the schools and the constant discrimination.[34] However, the protests in March were met with backlash from administrators, but most notably the police. Officers from nearby stations descended upon the students with such violence, beating teenagers with their batons, dragging them by their clothes and hair, and arrested the leading organizers.[35] The Chicano Blowouts marked an important milestone in the development of the political Chicano identity by empowering the younger generation and ushering them to the forefront of the movement.

Perhaps the dominant issue that Chicanos addressed through art and activism during the 1960s and 1970s was the Vietnam War. Compared to their relative population in the United States, Black and "Hispanic" Americans disproportionately made up those who were drafted and killed in the war.[36] In 1967, the University of California, Los Angeles released a study on

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[33] "Police and Educator Malpractice," September 4, 1967, *La Raza*, University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll18/id/20.
[34] Davis and Wiener, 383.
[35] Davis and Wiener, 3838-384, 393.
[36] While the official number of 'Hispanic' casualties in Vietnam is around 349 according to the National Archives, the actual number is believed to be higher. This could be due to some entering the military as 'White' rather than 'Hispanic.' The percentages in this section come from Acuña's analysis of reports published in Los Angeles during the height of the war and may not reflect a more current statistic. Additionally, these numbers do not reflect those that served in Vietnam and died after their return home due to complications from injuries, exposure to chemicals like agent orange, or PTSD.

Mexican Americans in the war, revealing that despite comprising 11.8 percent of the Southwest's population, they accounted for 19.4 percent of the region's casualties in the war.[37] Dr. Ralph C. Guzman, the author of the study, cited three main reasons for the high casualty rate: first, Mexican Americans joined the military at higher rates in order to gain social status and financial assistance for their families; second, many believed that military service would provide strong proof of their 'American-ness'; and third, the low number of Mexican Americans in college meant they could not be excused from military service.[38] For Los Angeles County, Representative George Brown reported that Mexican Americans accounted for 17.6 percent of the war casualties, despite being 9 percent of the county's population.[39] By 1968, the number of Mexican American casualties from Los Angeles County rose to 21 percent.[40] At this time, local newspapers in East Los Angeles like the *Eastside Sun* and the *Belvedere Citizen* began publishing regular articles about the casualties, highlighting the deaths of community members and residents. Perhaps one of the most devastating wounds left by the war were the youths that had been drafted and killed.[41] Rosalio Muñoz's "Chale Con La Draft" accused the United States of creating the social, political, and economic conditions that gave Chicano youth no other alternative than the military, thus creating a system that easily identified them for the draft.[42] He wrote, "If we continue to allow our young people to die, our future leaders, our hopes for the future will be smashed and we will never get off our knees."[43]

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[37] Acuña, 156.
[38] Chavez, 63.
[39] Acuña, 156.
[40] Acuña, 171.
[41] Acuña, 156.
[42] Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Fun with Death and Dismemberment: Irony, Farce, and Nationalist Memorialization," in *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 40.
[43] Rosalio Muñoz, "Chale Con La Draft!", December 1969, *La Raza*, University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll18/id/120/rec/26.

The Chicano Moratorium was one of the most important events of El Moviemento, as it highlighted not only Chicano organization against the war, but also the police repression. August 29, 1970 is often described as a day of contrasts: of Chicano joy and unity during the march on Whittier Boulevard and of the horror when the police descended upon the peaceful gathering in Laguna Park. The death of Ruben Salazar left a deep wound in the Chicano community; the actions of the Los Angeles Police Department and the sheriff's deputy that resulted in Salazar's death confirmed what Chicanos already knew about their lives in Los Angeles. In the city of Angels, they were always so close to death. Equally important is the transformation of Salazar in death: he became a hero for Chicanos, a martyr who died for El Movimiento, and a symbol for those continuing the struggle for liberation from oppression.[44] Salazar played a large role in the politicization of Chicanos and Mexican Americans through his work at the *Los Angeles Times* and as the news director of the KMEX television station in Los Angeles, which enabled the movement's cause to reach a larger audience because the station have Chicano activists airtime.[45] Losing such an important voice and presence in such a sudden and violent manner, at the hands of an oppressing force no less, was a blow to the community. "The Chicano Moratorium marked a seismic moment in the fight against the Vietnam War, the struggle against police brutality, and in the Chicano civil rights movement."[46] The events on August 29th rippled throughout the Chicano artistic community, influencing a wave of artistic expressions that formed the foundation of a visual language that sought to properly express the Chicano experience in Los Angeles and the borderlands.

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[44] Escobar, 1504.
[45] Escobar, 1504.
[46] Carolina Miranda, "How the Chicano Moratorium Shapes a Generation of Art in L.A," *Los Angeles Times*, accessed March 17, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/projects/chicano-moratorium/chicano-moratorium-catalytic-moment-la-art/

Skeletons Wielding Paintbrushes

Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles was informed by the political ethos of the Chicano Movement, but was ultimately birthed by the movement's artists. Chicano artists distinguished themselves from the previous generation by forging a new identity that integrated their ethnic and cultural heritage with their political struggle. The artistic movement emerged as a way where Chicanos could discuss the issues that dominated their lives, provide community space for those who needed it, and instill a sense of cultural pride. In doing so, they created a visual vocabulary that enabled the community to publicly address and honor the wounds left behind by violence and death. The murals and avant-garde performance art left their mark on the foundations of Chicano visual culture and informed the public nature of Día de los Muertos as an artistic and cultural expression of grief and resilience.

The Chicano Art Movement was an artistic branch of the larger, political Chicano Movement and sought to establish an aesthetic unique to the culture, identity, and experiences of Mexican Americans in the United States. While not all Chicano art is political, resistance and resilience were core themes of the artistic movement. Artists and barrio residents challenged Anglo-American structures of power and values by reclaiming public space, creating artworks that affirmed Mexican and Chicano culture while highlighting the inequality and oppression they faced in their neighborhoods. Villa writes, "Barrio residents have consciously and unconsciously enacted resistive tactics or defensive mechanisms to secure and preserve the integrity of their culture place-identity within and against the often hostile space regulation of dominant urbanism."[47] Murals painted on the walls of housing projects in East Los Angeles served to

[47] Villa, 5.

empower and educate the community, utilizing imagery to instill cultural pride and address problems that affected Chicanos as a whole. Artists utilized imagery from Mesoamerican and Mexican art history -- the Aztecs, the Maya, José Guadalupe Posada, and the muralism of Los Tres Grandes (Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco) -- to create large public images that affirmed the historical roots of Chicano culture while also providing a kind of visual education to the barrio. Utilizing cultural, political, and historical iconography, artists created an aesthetic that challenged the conditions of oppression they faced in their neighborhoods, schools, and cities they lived in.[48] Artists often referenced Mexico's indigenous past prior to the Spanish invasion, reclaiming and reappropriating concepts and iconography from these cultures and applying them to the Chicano identity.[49] In doing so, Movimiento artists examined and addressed the wounds left behind by European colonization and American imperialism, most notably the acquisition of Mexican territory after the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. Organizations like Mechicano Art Center and Plaza de la Raza enabled the creation of art, education programs, and organized cultural events that legitimized Chicano and Latinx art, directly contesting the city's art institutions like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) whose collections focused mostly on the European canon of art. In 1972, a LACMA curator claimed that Chicanos made graffiti, not art. In response, the performance art collective Asco (the Spanish word for 'nausea') spray-painted their names on the entrance to the museum and photographed the aftermath with

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[48] Regina Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 37.

[49] It should also be noted that in doing so, some Chicano nationalists asserted a mythologized version of Mexico's ancient civilizations. Aztlán, the name of the mythological homeland of the Aztecs, was used to reference the entire American Southwest -- the region acquired by the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. However, the American indigenous peoples that have always called this region home did not -- and still do not -- call it 'Aztlán'. I utilize the term 'Aztlán' the way that some Chicano artists and writers have used it to refer to the bond they have with the Southwest borderlands. It is the Chicano version of hiraeth, the longing for a home that no longer exists.

artist and member Patssi Valdez leaning on the ledge above the names, reminding the institution of the power of the Chicano's presence.[50]

Public memorialization became an important method of challenging private mourning practices valued by Anglo-American culture. Murals painted on the outside walls of stores and homes memorialized deaths within the community be they locals, important figures like Ruben Salazar, or cultural icons. The Estrada Courts and Ramona Gardens housing projects in East Los Angeles presented a unique environment for these works of public art. While there are plenty of murals in these neighborhoods with skeletal and death iconography, Chicano artists found other ways to honor previous generations and loved ones. Judithe Hernández's *Homenaje a Las Mujeres de Aztlán*, painted in Ramona Gardens in 1977, embodies the latter concept. Dedicated to Mexicanas and Chicanas of the past and present, the mural depicts a large woman (*la mujer*) holding the stone head of the goddess Coyolxauhqui, *soldaderas*, indigenous mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and activists alongside the United Farm Workers's Flag. Painted, bold text in English and Spanish surrounds the central figure: "Since the days of ancient history of Mexico our women have always fought for the good of their family, their country, and their people -- this mural is dedicated to all of them … THE DAUGHTERS, THE MOTHERS, AND THE GRANDMOTHERS OF AZTLAN."[51] The mural honors women as the bedrock of Mexican and Chicano history, utilizing iconography on a large scale that memorializes and honors the dead through cultural empowerment.

In some cases, commemoration murals would be painted for those who had gang affiliations, as is the case with Daniel Martinez's *In Memory of a Homeboy* in Estrada Courts.

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[50] Chon Noriega,"Your Art Disgusts Me: Early Asco, 1971-1975," *East of Borneo*, accessed April 7, 2021, https://eastofborneo.org/articles/your-art-disgusts-me-early-asco-1971-75/

[51] *Homenaje a Las Mujeres de Aztlán*, Judithe Hernández, paint on masonry (mural), 1977, Ramona Gardens housing project, Los Angeles, California, Uncatalogued archives of Judithe Hernández.

Gangs, or clicas, were part of the Chicano reality and living in the barrio meant exposure to the socio-economic conditions that contributed to their presence. "The clicas were (and still are) an alternative public institutional structure within the already marginalized social spaces of *mexicano* culture in Los Angeles."[52] Gang related murals memorialized deaths of members from violence and, as Holly Barnet-Sanchez notes, acknowledged the "ever-present threat of violence in the housing project, articulating a dialect between gang-members and non-gang members, between safety and danger."[53] Painted in 1973, *In Memory of a Homeboy* is dedicated to a young man, a gang member, who died due to a drive-by-shooting: a pair of hands emerge from tree trunks and hold the letters of the Varrio Nuevo Estrada (VNE) gang and an eagle holds a banner in Old English script that reads "Que Rifan Todas las Cliqas del Barrio Nuevo Estrada, Que Viva."[54] Barnet-Sanchez also notes that the mural utilizes imagery and lettering reclaimed from Catholicism to not only honor the loss of a life, but also affirm ties to their neighborhoods and to their family.[55]

Día de los Muertos en El-Ay

Instrumental to Día de los Muertos's presence in the city of Los Angeles is Self Help Graphics and Art, the print studio in Boyle Heights that facilitated the growth of Chicano art through printmaking. Founded by Sister Karen Boccalero, Carlos Bueno, Antonio Ibañez, and Frank Hernández, the studio provided a space that encouraged the production of Chicano art by enabling artists to learn and master different forms of printmaking like serigraphy, etching,

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[52] Villa, 63.
[53] Holly Barnet-Sanchez and Tim Drescher, *Give Me Life: Iconography and Identity in East L.A. Murals* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), 124.
[54] Daniel Martinez and Fitzgerald Whitney, *In Memory of a Homeboy*, November 21, 1973, photograph, Frank del Olmo Collection, Latina(o) Cultural Heritage Archives, California State University Northridge; Barnet-Sanchez, 125; translation: "Long May the Clicas of the VNE Rule, Long May They Live," Barnet-Sanchez, 127.
[55] Barnet-Sanchez, 127.

linocuts, woodcuts, and monoprinting.[56] Self Help Graphics emerged as a response to the marginalization of Chicanos from galleries and museums while championing a popular, political, and easy-to-learn medium of art. Furthermore, as Karen Mary Davalos writes, "[Self Help Graphics] was a direct response to the institutionalized inequalities in education, health care, housing, and employment as well as police brutality in East Los Angeles."[57] While some artists were familiar with Día de los Muertos, such as Ofelia Esparza who learned about the holiday from her mother, many were unfamiliar with it.[58] Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez, both of whom were from Mexico, shared their experiences and memories of the holiday with the other artists. At the same time, Sister Karen's exposure to Día de los Muertos was through a film by Ray and Charles Eames made in 1957, which she also shared with the artists when organizing the first celebration.[59] The first public celebration of Día de los Muertos occurred in 1973 with a procession that went from Evergreen Cemetery to the original Self Help Graphics building on Brooklyn Avenue (now known as Cesar Chavez Avenue). This was not the first Día de los Muertos celebration at Self Help Graphics; the first was a more private ceremony in the back of the building in 1972.[60] While the public procession element derived some inspiration from the 1957 Eames film, it was directly inspired by the Chicano Moratorium's march. In taking over the

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[56] Serigraphy, also known as silkscreen printing, involves transferring a stencil onto a screen substrate and pulling paint through the mesh onto a sheet of paper or other material. Silkscreen printing is also used to create graphics on t-shirts. Etching, or intaglio printing, is a print that involves literally etching ink onto a surface which is then transferred onto paper. Linocuts and woodcuts involve carving an image onto a block of linoleum or wood that is then inked and pressed onto paper like a stamp. Monoprinting is a unique form of printing where an image is produced only once by painting directly onto a screen or block that is then directly transferred onto paper.

[57] Karen Mary Davalos, "How the Black Panther Party and Its Ten Point Program Influenced the Chicano Movement and Self Help Graphics and Art," *Self Help Graphics and Art*, published July 25, 2020, https://www.selfhelpgraphics.com/blog/how-the-black-panther-party-influenced-the-chicano-movement.

[58] *Artbound*, "Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead," directed by Dignicraft, published May 29, 2019, on KCET, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/dia-de-los-muertos-day-of-the-dead.

[59] Karen Mary Davalos, "Innovation Through Tradition: The Aesthetic of Día de los Muertos," in *Día de los Muertos: A Cultural Legacy, Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Mary Thomas (Pasadena: Typecraft Press, 2017), 23; *Artbound*, "Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead."

[60] *Artbound*, "Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead."

street, the procession enabled anyone in the area to join them and became one of the most visual affirmations of Chicano culture and asserted its resilience despite the constant threat of assimilation.[61] Furthermore, artists and the people of East Los Angeles utilized public urban space as a medium through which the performance aspects of Día de los Muertos connected personal, social, and political issues.[62]

As early as 1974, other Chicano artists were beginning to analyze Día de los Muertos within the context of symbols that defined Chicano culture. Judithe Hernández made these symbols the topic of her Master of Fine Arts thesis. In writing about *la calavera* (the skull) and *el esqueleto* (the skeleton), Hernández placed these symbols within the history of Mexican political graphics such as Posada's work, the writings of Octavio Paz, and Catholicism, the dominant religious legacy of Spanish colonization. She writes, "The Calavera has religious meaning as well; on the Day of the Dead, children are given candy skulls as a reminder that Christianity teaches that death is the reward of life. The Chicano-Mexicano believes that life and death are transitions to be made and not to be feared."[63] Like many artists and writers of the time, Hernández connected the sugar skull to Catholicism because it was the religious practice most Chicanos were familiar with. At the same time, she also connects the calavera with Chicanismo and the Mesoamerican cosmology of life and death's duality as a transition, as an eternal dance. While the Chicano familiarity with death may be quintessentially expressed through the calavera, it also enabled an expression of resilience. One photograph of a Día de los Muertos celebration in 1977 shows a young woman with black-and-white skeletal makeup with the phrase 'Mi Vida

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[61] Miranda, 2020.
[62] Davalos, 26.
[63] Judithe Hernández, "The Cultural Symbols Which Influence Chicano Art," (master's thesis, Otis College of Art and Design, 1974), 4.

Loca' painted on her forehead.[64] Her skeletal visage not only references Posada's original prints, but enables her to become a vessel that mocks, critiques, and highlights the fluidity of the life and death binary that Chicanos navigated in their everyday lives. The phrase 'Mi Vida Loca' is a declaration of pride in surviving life's obstacles and challenges.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and this new Día de los Muertos in Los Angeles during the early years was a strained one. Priests that participated in the celebration were punished and many Chicanos in the 1970s became disillusioned by Catholicism as an institution. Many photographs of early Día de los Muertos celebrations in the 1970s document masses held at Evergreen Cemetery where priests dressed in a style of vestment resembling *zarapes* occupied the same space as *danzantes*, dancers dressed in Aztec ceremonial finery. Until 1979, fathers Juan Romero and Gary Riebe-Estrella presided over the Catholic rituals that were performed at the celebration, until the archdiocese no longer approved of their participation due to Evergreen being a secular cemetery.[65] Throughout the 1960s, Archbishop James Francis McIntyre crusaded against progressive politics, social justice, and the modernization reforms of the Second Vatican Council. He ruthlessly targeted the nuns at Immaculate Heart College and Sister Corita Kent, known for her radical serigraph prints that criticized the Vietnam War and advocated for social justice.[66] Despite the efforts of progressive Catholics, many Chicanos felt estranged from the Catholic Church by the 1970s due to McIntyre's campaigns that promoted Catholic education as a tool for assimilating Mexican Americans into Anglo-American culture

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[64] *Day of the Dead '77*, Self Help Graphics and Art, 1977, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Special Research Collections, Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb809nb5p1/.
[65] Medina, 207.
[66] Sister Corita Kent and the nuns at Immaculate Heart College had an enormous impact on artists and activists in Los Angeles, especially on the history of printmaking in the city and Self Help Graphics. Sister Karen Boccalero was an alum of the college and was probably exposed to the 1957 Eames film about Día de los Muertos by Sister Corita, according to scholar J.V. Decemvirale.

and society.[67] An article in the December 1969 issue of *La Raza* expressed this frustration: "What sense does it make to go to mass on Sunday and reach out for spiritual help, and instead get sermons about the wickedness of your cause?"[68] Artists who felt similarly reclaimed iconography tied to Mexican Catholicism like the Virgen de Guadalupe and the flaming heart. "The archdiocesan action and a growing integration of indigenous beliefs and practices in the lives of the artists created a separation between the Catholic Church and the art-centered ritual celebration."[69] In a flyer from 1976, artists from Self Help Graphics demonstrated this separation by detailing the indigenous history of the holiday, focusing on the altar-making practices and the symbols associated with death and mourning. "At the Self Help Graphics entrance, paraders and all other participants will receive a marigold flower, ancient symbol of death to the Mexican Indian, and will be asked to take it to the gallery and lay it on a symbolic grave representing all of our dead ones of the past year."[70] Like Hernandez, these artists recognized that Catholicism still held meaning to Chicanos, as many of the saints and iconography had become part of the culture, but transformed the practice to focus more on the lived experiences and history of Chicanos, enabling them to mourn the dead on their own terms.

In 1977, the Día de los Muertos procession was led by a 1957 Chevy truck decorated by long-time Self Help Graphics artist Leo Limon. On the front of the car was an aerosol painted calavera with 'Los Angeles' on its forehead. A silver cross made of tinfoil rested upon the windshield and on the roof of the car, a large depiction of the Virgen de Guadalupe with

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[67] Steidl, 34; Medina and Cadena, 93.
[68] "The Church and La Raza," December 1969, *La Raza*, University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll18/id/112/rec/26.
[69] Medina, 207.
[70] *Untitled Flyer*, unknown artist, 1976, found in [thus far in March 2021 uncatalogued] archives at Self Help Graphics and Art in Los Angeles, on February 16, 2021 by Ariel Xochitl Hernández.

shimmering foil and the flowers at her feet.[71] By the 1970s, pachucos and lowriders were part of the canon of Chicano culture and history. The 1978 celebration of Día de los Muertos included people dressed in pachuco style clothing and painted, skeletal faces, holding up signs for the Luis Valdez play *Zoot Suit*.[72] The pachuco subculture emerged in the 1940s as an act of resistance and cultural affirmation of young Mexican Americans; thirty years later, Chicanos kept the fashion alive and wore it to honor these ancestors. Similarly, the car was an expression of freedom in American culture, but was transformed in the hands of Chicanos, becoming mobile altars that moved beyond the boundaries placed upon their neighborhoods. Sandoval writes, "A car represented a middle-class American dream that was now available to working-class people; it also created a means for Chicano and Black lowriders to physically transgress the boundaries of racially segregated neighborhoods in Los Angeles."[73] Though the procession drew its inspiration from the Chicano Moratorium, it also engaged with the discourses around mobility and public space. Artists used large-scale papier-mâché calaveras to encourage community participation. These skeletons walked the streets of East Los Angeles, towering over all the living, enticing people to come out of their homes and shops to bear witness.[74] One such procession in 1976 included a large papier-mâché calavera with a mustache popular amongst cholos and the phrase

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[71] *Day of the Dead '77 Celebration.*, Self Help Graphics and Art, 1977, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Special Research Collections, Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb0p300421/.

[72] *Day of the Dead '78 Celebration with Zoot Suit Group*, 1978, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Special Research Collections, Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb5r29p1b8/.

[73] Denise M. Sandoval,"The Politics of Low And Slow/Bajito y Suavecito: Black and Chicano Lowriders in Los Angeles, from the 1960s through the 1970s," in *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*, ed. Josh Kun and Laura Pulido (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 185.

[74] *Day of the Dead 1976*, Self Help Graphics and Art, 1976, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Special Research Collections, Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb9199p516/.

"I used to be real bad" painted on its forehead.[75] Large calaveras reclaimed public space while also commenting on elements of Chicano life, on the violence that claimed loved ones, and on the societal conditions that drove their family or friends to join gangs. Even though the use of archetypes, they honored the gang kids, the cholos, and the cholas as part of an extended family in the community. That same year, Asco contributed to this very public performance of death in the barrio by arriving at the procession dressed as a giant pill, syringe, and pocketknife accompanied by a line of children in skull makeup holding chains next to them.[76] In embodying the drug abuse and violence, the group highlights serious issues affecting the Chicano community at the moment and their impact on future generations.

Frank del Olmo's 1978 article "Mexican 'Day of the Dead': Variation on Halloween Stays Alive", published around five years after the first public celebration, captures the atmosphere of East Los Angeles during the Día de los Muertos season, showing that it was becoming an annual event that people prepared for and looked forward to. Olmo writes, "Just a couple of miles from El Flor de Mexico, Chicano high school and college students, aided by community artists, are putting the finishing touches on the colorful objects they will display this year in the annual Day of the Dead commemoration on the East Side."[77] Prior to Olmo's article, Día de los Muertos in the *Los Angeles Times* was mostly in the section that posted when and where seasonal community events were taking place. After Olmo's piece, the holiday began to be featured in the newspaper, but usually in the arts sections where writers mostly focused on the

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[75] *Day of the Dead '76 Procession*, Self Help Graphics and Art, 1976, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Special Research Collections, Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb9f59p34d/.

[76] Photograph of Asco at Día de los Muertos, 1976, photograph, found in [thus far in March 2021 uncatalogued] archives at Self Help Graphics and Art in Los Angeles, on February 16, 2021 by Ariel Xochitl Hernández.

[77] Frank del Olmo, "Mexican 'Day of the Dead': Variation on Halloween Stays Alive," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1978. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

aesthetics of the holiday and performances by artists. Karen Parker Kuttner's article "A Mother Finds Solace in 'Day of Dead'," published in 1981, demonstrates how the holiday grew to include non-Chicanos as an alternative way of mourning that was more personal and community oriented. The story of Johann Hasan mourning her son through building an altar, which she learned through the Self Help Graphics workshops, demonstrates how this holiday was meeting the needs of non-Chicanos: "She studied the Day of the Dead ritual and incorporated it into her life, she said, using it as a way to express her grief and accept her son's death."[78] However, the article focuses mostly on Hassan and no one representing Self Help Graphics was interviewed nor any scholar who could contribute to discussing the history of the holiday.

Día de los Muertos continued to evolve in the 1980s, taking on more avant-garde expressions of Chicano culture. The calavera evolved as well, with participants adding color and makeup popular during this decade.[79] At the same time, the Reagan Administration cut funding to the National Endowment for the Arts, which had supported Día de los Muertos celebrations at Self Help Graphics, by 30 percent.[80] As a result, arts organizations had to compete with other groups in order to receive what little federal funding was allotted to the arts after the cuts. Internally, these organizations had to make drastic changes to their staffing and the programs they offered. Historian Mike Davis describes the impact this backlash against the arts had throughout the city: "Such vital generators of community self-definition as the Watts Tower Arts Center, the Inner City Cultural Center, and the Bilingual Foundation for the Arts [had] to make

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[78] Karen Parker Kuttner, "Grief of Son Allayed by Latino Ritual: A Mother Finds Solace in 'Day of the Dead'," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1981. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.
[79] *Day of the Dead '81*, Self Help Graphics and Art, 1976, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Special Research Collections, Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb2290044r/.
[80] Barbara Isenberg, "Arts Activists: Quest for Funds," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1982. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

drastic cutbacks in order to survive the 'age of arts affluence.'"[81] Self Help Graphics was no different, having been forced to cut back on staff and devote most of their time and energy on creating budgets to meet ever changing funding proposals. In 1982, Sister Karen said the instability took its toll on the creative process, forcing artists to worry about their livelihoods and their ability to create art, "Where you have limited resources to begin with, as we do on the east side, you have a harder time getting more resources."[82] Major art institutions were encouraged to acquire "corporate multicultural" collections of art that favored mostly white artists not born in the United States, thus ignoring the art made by Black American and Chicanos.[83] Additionally, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the new wave of migration from Central America in the wake of U.S. intervention that destabilized the region, and the hyper-militarization of marginalized communities due to the War on Drugs reinstated an atmosphere of death in the city. While these new crises threatened the very existence of the arts organizations and cultural centers that facilitated cultural and political empowerment, Día de los Muertos survived alongside the people and communities that practiced it. Its resilience is a testament to its ability to provide people an outlet to mourn their loved ones and the spirits of the city together as a community rather than alone.

Conclusion

Día de los Muertos emerged at the height of the Chicano Movement as a response to the social and economic conditions that historically contributed to the deaths of Chicanos. In Los Angeles, the artists and organizers at Self Help Graphics and Art in Boyle Heights introduced the holiday through workshops and a public celebration that engaged the community with an

[81] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1990), 78.
[82] Isenberg, "Arts Activists: Quest for Funds."
[83] Davis, *City of Quartz*, 81.

alternative form of mourning that affirmed their cultural and personal histories. Día de los Muertos allowed Chicanos to grieve not just for immediate loved ones, but all the loss they have endured as a collective people. The Chicano Movement sought to address the injustices that Chicanos faced in their everyday lives: housing instability, police violence, and education inequality. The Vietnam War targets young Mexican American men for the draft, sending them halfway across the world to die at rates disproportionate to their population in the country. In addition to the death of Reuben Salazar during the Chicano Moratorium, the Chicano community in East Los Angeles endured heavy collective trauma. Día de los Muertos emerged as a celebration, one that affirmed the lived experiences of Chicanos in East Los Angeles and enabled them to mock, critique, and discuss the structural mechanisms that created the conditions of their death. It is a holiday that sits at the intersection of art, history, life, and death in Los Angeles.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 Pandemic presents challenges to those studying Día de los Muertos, but more importantly to those who practice it. The long isolation from loved ones, being unable to attend funerals for those who have died, or living in communities with high infection rates and endless ambulance sirens has created a new kind of collective trauma. The pandemic has deeply impacted the way people mourn and grieve. At Self Help Graphics, this sentiment is articulated best by a statement made in 2020 by the organization's executive director, Betty Avila: “There’s been so much loss. A loss of life, a loss of economic stability, health, and [a] racial justice movement sparked by the murders of multiple Black people. We’re still so deep in it, that we’ll continue to be processing this for the *next* Día de los Muertos. We’re still going to be unpacking this loss.”[84]

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[84] Daniel Hernández, “COVID-19 has made this the saddest Day of the Dead in Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Times*, published November 1, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-11-01/day-of-the-dead-dia-de-muertos-los-angeles-pandemic.

In the United States, the failures of the federal government to respond to the pandemic has renewed interest in Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. The racial disparity of those who have died, those more likely to get sick, who can work from home, who is an essential worker, who has access to healthcare, and who can receive vaccinations first have been brought to the forefront of the collective consciousness. While nationwide vaccination campaigns and initiatives have slowed down the spread of the most severe cases, the virus has left a devastating death toll in its wake.[85] Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Pacific Islander people have the highest death rates in the country. According to the American Public Media Research Lab, their analysis of data in March 2021 revealed that 89,071 Latinos in the United States died from COVID-19, constituting around 18.1 percent of all deaths known by race.[86] The numbers for Black and Indigenous Americans are equally devastating; approximately 5,477 Indigenous Americans (a number widely believed to be higher given the way states process deaths of Indigenous people as an 'Other' category) and approximately 73,236 Black Americans have died of COVID-19.[87] In an interview for the *Associated Press*, artist Rosanna Esparza said, "Because of the quarantine and the COVID, there's this heightened awareness of the losses that are occurring not just in our city but around the globe … I just feel like there's a heightened awareness and more of a sense of reverence for life."[88]

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[85] As of writing this paper, the COVID-19 Pandemic is still ongoing, and the official death toll has yet to be released. Groups like American Public Media (APM) and the COVID Tracking Project took it upon themselves to comb through the data for information about COVID-19's impact on race in the United States. As of March 2021, federal data on the deaths and infections have become more widely available and are constantly updated. For now, I rely on the data analysis from APM in order to discuss the virus's toll on marginalized groups.

[86] APM Research Lab Staff, "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S." *APM Research Lab*, published March 5, 2021. https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race.

[87] APM Research Lab Staff, "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S."

[88] Terry Tang, "For many Latinos, virus deaths loom over Day of the Dead." *Associated Press News*, published October 30, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-pandemics-virus-outbreak-arizona-phoenix-9f81052b1e342a80ef5b1e84e6a2887b.

At the end of his book, Mbembe writes that in order to become human, one must embark on a journey of transfiguration, the process of transforming oneself into a more beautiful and spiritual state of being. He writes, “The project of transfiguration demands that the subject consciously embrace the broken up part of its own life; that it compels itself to take detours and sometimes improbable connections; that it operates in the interstices if it cares about giving a common expression to things that we commonly dissociate.”[89] I would say that Chicanos in Los Angeles do this through Día de los Muertos, in transforming themselves into beautiful calaveras, in embracing the duality of life and death. Migrations and transformations are part of Día de los Muertos: the *ofrenda*, filled with every day and even mundane items that meant so much to the deceased, calls them back to the world of the living. These altars, no matter their manifestation, contain a *petate* (a straw mat for sleeping) and a glass of water or the favorite drink of the deceased. As these spirits rest from their long journey, they are surrounded by offerings and by people that honor them with the altar built by family members or by the community. In this form of migration, they are transformed and made beautiful, loved by those who knew them and younger generations who have yet to know them. The holiday enables Chicanos to shoulder the massive historical memory of colonization that continues to live within them, around them, and all throughout this hemisphere. It also allows them to celebrate the resilience of their lives and their culture despite the horrors and transcend a living death.

Presente.

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[89] Mbembe, 187.

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