

Death of The Mission and the Robbing of Mexican Culture

By: Lisa Marie Alatorre, December 2013

Dia de los Muertos is a cultural and spiritual holiday and celebration of Mexican and Latino people. Every year, on November 2nd, families and loved ones gather in cemeteries full of ancestors and homes of people who have passed onto the other side. This annual celebration unites the living and the dead, for a celebration of family, togetherness, and history. Story telling, food, colorfully decorated sugar cookies and skulls, flowers, music, dancing on graves, celebrating our ancestors, and being mesmerized by the fiery glow of thousands of candles all make this holiday one of the most well known cultural aspects of the Mexican people.

For Mexican and Latino people in the Americas, the celebration of Dia de los Muertos has many layers of loss attached to it. From thousands of tragedies suffered by border crossers annually, to the criminalization and incarceration of those who successfully cross, to the continued loss of land, identity, and appropriation of culture – the celebration of Dia de los Muertos, especially in San Francisco, can also serve as a stark mirror and reminder of the ways capitalism and white supremacy work hand in hand.

At the Coalition on Homelessness, we have organized with thousands of immigrant families who have braved the northward crossing to find economic stability and support for their families back home. While homelessness captures the lives of many different kinds of people, there is an undoubted impact on the lives and lives lost of immigrants who are unable to find the economic opportunities they left their homes in search of. There is also a considerable impact poverty and homelessness has on brown and black families who are from San Francisco and surrounding areas. With the highest declining African-American population of any city in the U.S. (less than 6%) and the continued displacement and gentrification of Mexican and Latino communities, the number of these folks who find themselves experiencing homelessness is only increasing.

One way to ensure an underclass of brown bodies exist to meet the cleaning and caretaking needs in any city with the level of concentrated wealth that San Francisco has is to eliminate any sense of cultural identity and connectedness that underclass may have. In this way, these communities are forced to assimilate and accept the societal standards and expectations offered to them. But just as early European colonizers did with Indigenous practices, and slavemasters did with African practices, American families and young adults do actually like some parts of the lesser culture so they steal it and turn it into their own practice and celebration. This is called “cultural appropriation.”

Mexican and Latino people in San Francisco and throughout North America are resilient and resisting this erasure of culture everyday. There are political fights happening for land sovereignty, Indigenous folks fighting for an end to racist branding in Washington D.C., and empowered immigrant young people demanding equal rights to education and basic needs. Locally, poor and homeless immigrant families fight for their rights to housing and education for their children. This year for Dia de los Muertos, many Mexican and Latino families gathered during the day at the Coalition on Homelessness for food, story-telling, sugar cookie and skull decorating, and organizing. Organizing was an important component of this gathering because the struggles and crisis being experienced by these families are only growing in gravity.

These struggles are widespread, and San Francisco's own Mission district provides a current case study of gentrification and forced poverty amongst a once thriving Latino community. While Mexican and

Latino families found affirming places to gather with their loved ones and close community this year, there was a sea of white people in “day of the dead” face walking up and down the streets of the Mission neighborhoods – reminiscent of the horrifying practice of white people wearing “black face” to mimic and perform blackness. Anti-gentrification organizers held a procession to counter the message of cultural appropriation and instead shared messages of the “death” of the Mission, including a certain body toll in addition to the effective robbery and appropriation of culture that is gradually taking over. In a tragic turn of events this year, Mexican families gathered on Dia de los Muertos at the home of a recently passed elder well known and respected in the community which turned violent and escalated when the police arrived on the scene. The structural connections between the struggle for cultural autonomy, matched by the violence of poverty and criminalization, is palpable in this situation. Had the city-funded Dia de los Muertos been an affirming and culturally appropriate gathering space for Mexican and Latino San Franciscans, this tragedy may have been prevented. Many studies show that a major violence prevention measure is culturally appropriate and affirming programs and activities for minority young people.

As long as gentrification and criminalization continue, so will the cycles of violence, poverty, and homelessness. As long as rich, white communities feel entitled to steal and “adopt” cultural aspects of the very communities they oppress, colonization and trauma will continue to plague brown and black communities. A necessary component of liberation includes self-determination and cultural practice and connection. When events like Dia de los Muertos are co-opted by the growing white elite, it's another nail in the coffin of survival for poor families in San Francisco. Stop robbing mexican culture and slowly killing the mission!