REVIEW


Ruben A. Arellano
Dallas College – Mountain View Campus, Dallas, USA

Arguably, the celebration of life and death known as Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) has become one of the most recognizable non-Anglo holidays in the United States of America and is quickly gaining popularity around the world. In the second edition of the book Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon, Regina Marchi (professor of media studies at Rutgers University) explains that the holiday’s rise in popularity is largely due to media representation. She notes that Hollywood blockbusters, such as the Book of Life (2014) and Coco (2017), as well as the James Bond film Spectre (2015), have brought a greater awareness to the celebration. Interestingly enough, my first exposure to Dia de los Muertos thirty years ago was through a scene in the classic Chicano film Bound by Honor (1993), also known as Blood In Blood Out.

The book is divided into eight topical chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, notes, references, an index, a glossary, and a methodological appendix. It presents several interesting arguments, but the book’s crucial point is to explore “the political, social, and economic dynamics of Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States” for the purpose of “illustrating the complicated intersections of cultural identity, political economy, media, consumer culture, and globalization” (p. 5). In chapter 1, Marchi provides a necessary corrective on the ethnic scope of the holiday, especially as it relates broadly to Indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica and South America, and dispels the notion that this is a uniquely Mexican tradition. Chapter 2 takes a closer look at how the holiday developed in Mexico as a hybridization of Indigenous and European traditions and challenges some aspects believed to be of Aztec origin. This sets the stage for chapter 3, where Marchi’s study offers a novel interpretation, namely that the holiday’s current form “would not exist if not for the Chicano movement” (p. 7). This argument is perhaps the strongest one in the book and will be discussed further below. By employing the use of various analytical frameworks, for example, “invented tradition” and “imagined community,” Marchi adeptly elucidates the complicated history of the holiday over the last fifty years.

In chapter 4, the reader learns how the holiday morphed from its folkloric roots of honoring and remembering dead loves ones into a means of conveying pan-ethnic solidarity in a foreign and often hostile land, the Unites States. As chapter 5 points out, that cultural shift was made possible by the innovations that Chicana/o/x artists and activists introduced through their efforts to convey sociocultural and political messages in public places. This change turned the strictly spiritual tradition into a secular one that, nonetheless, retained its authenticity in the process. The remaining chapters, 6, 7, and 8, explore the role that media played in popularizing the holiday, the increased exposure of the celebration among non-Indigenous populations, and the eventual commodification of the once private spiritual tradition.

KEYWORDS
Day of the Dead
Arte contestatario
Chicano Studies
Cultural Festivities
There are a few points that merit expanding upon, especially the fact that holiday owes its contemporary popularity and resurgence to the work of Chicana/o/x activists in the 1970s. For context, the Chicano movement arose in the mid-1960s and lasted roughly through the 1970s. It was defined by three main objectives: better economic opportunities, more substantial political representation, and adequate educational opportunities. The Chicano movement, or “El movimiento,” also encouraged the affirmation of indigeneity among Chicanos, and by embracing the Day of the Dead—a distinctly Indigenous tradition—artists were doing exactly that. Therein lies one of the shortcomings I found in Marchi’s work: she does not fully explore how indigeneity motivated Chicanos to pursue and embrace things like the Dia de los Muertos.

Because Marchi is primarily looking at the subject through a media studies lens, she does not engage the current literature that calls into question the usage of outdated terms, such as “Mestizo,” to describe populations disconnected from their Indigenous roots. That term in particular is used excessively throughout the book and implies clear distinctions between populations that might have more in common than they appear, as the following quote succinctly captures: “Day of the Dead celebrations and other Mexican cultural activities . . . of working-class Mestizo and Indigenous Mexicans . . . reflected Chicanos’ own struggles for equality in the United States” (p. 45). A more nuanced discussion of these seemingly disparate groups would have benefited the reader by explaining the cultural and ethnic overlap among them. Nonetheless, this omission does not detract from appreciating her noteworthy excavation in other areas, such as that of “arte contestatario”—art designed to challenge mainstream racist tropes—and the fantastic work of artists like Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Tere Romo, Rene Yáñez, and Yolanda Garfias Woo.

Through the work of such artists, Marchi explores how Chicana/o/x artists countered historically negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans in the usually negative mass media environment of the United States with artistic expressions contesting political racialization through collectivist spiritual efforts. This was a period in which people of color in the US were reclaiming their cultural roots, such as language, clothing, art, music, rituals, and other ancestral traditions that had been lost to enslavement, colonization, reservation systems, and assimilation. For communities unaccustomed to seeing positive images in the media landscape, the significance of publicly honoring collective experiences and cultural traditions was transformative and empowering.

Historically, US news coverage depicted ethnic Mexicans and nonwhite Central and South Americans as lazy, less intelligent, less moral, and prone to crime. This pattern of negative representation existed in magazine, television advertising, and Hollywood films. Ethnic Mexicans were stereotyped as bandidos, gang bangers, Latin Lovers, dangerous temptresses, or dim-witted buffoons, and newspaper coverage reinforced the negative stereotypes found in the “social disadvantage” framework, which depicted certain neighborhoods as cesspools of crime. The residents of those barrios were shown as lacking basic education and employment skills, and were often presented as illegitimate non-citizens. Arte contestatario worked to counteract those harmful stereotypes.

Another great point brought out by Marchi is how, before the 1970s, most religious commemorations of dead loved ones followed the Catholic All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day
on November 1 and 2, respectively. Families attended mass, placed flowers by the graves of departed loved ones, and prepared meals for family gatherings. Indigenous traditions such as “pan de muerto” (bread of the dead) and elaborate altars were relatively unknown in the US until Chicanos introduced them as they reconnected with their cultural roots. Additionally, Chicanos looked to their communities for inspiration as well and incorporated lowrider cars and Danza Azteca into their events and neighborhood parades. These and many innovations emerged as pieces of the larger contestation puzzle intended to revitalize positive cultural messaging.

To demonstrate this, Marchi details how Chicanos used the Day of the Dead to focus on social ills affecting local communities and how they connected to national and global events. The very act of remembrance was coupled with biting criticism of the dominant power structures through the creation of altar installations intended to raise public awareness of sociopolitical causes. Activities such as these expanded a tradition originally meant for memorializing relatives into one that incorporated people outside of one’s own family group. Thus, from the very beginning, Chicano altar installations have commemorated political concerns that are current at any given moment. These have included the plight of farm workers poisoned by pesticides, migrants who die crossing the US-Mexico border, urban youth victimized by gangs and drugs, factory workers killed in industrial accidents, and victims of US-funded wars, such as those in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Vietnam, and more recently, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In terms of methods and research, Marchi’s reliance on interviews and active participation is both the book’s strength and its weakness. The inclusion of a few primary and secondary historical sources would have added some of the missing nuance to the narrative. For instance, a more thorough exploration of Aztec celebrations of the dead, such as the Hueymiccaihuitl, and how they fit into contemporary celebrations would have provided some necessary historical perspective. The book is topically organized and the chapters (some of which have been previously published as articles) can be used as standalone readings. This might explain why there are several instances of repetition from one chapter to the next. There is use of technical jargon throughout the text, but it is not excessive, does not overwhelm the reader, and the streamlined definitions will satisfy the lay person, if not the specialist.

In all, the book is a one-of-a-kind study about a holiday that has had wide-ranging appeal and continues to grow each year. As Marchi rightly notes, since the publication of her first edition in 2009, the holiday has springboarded to surprising heights and gained exponential exposure, so it is only appropriate that her second edition came out during the fiftieth anniversary of the very first Dia de los Muertos events in the US, which took place back in 1972. It is the opinion of this historian that the book is a valuable addition to scholarship relating to religion, politics, ethnic studies, and festival culture.
AUTHOR BIO

Ruben A. Arellano is an Indigenous Chicano and member of the Miakan-Garza Band of Coahuiltecan Indians of Texas. He is a founding member of Kalpulli Tonalpilli (an Indigenous Chicano community) and serves as repatriation officer for the Indigenous Cultures Institute. His community service includes serving as vice president of the Dallas Mexican American Historical League and as a founder and director of the Mexican American Museum of Texas. He holds a PhD in history from Southern Methodist University and is a faculty member at Dallas College–Mountain View Campus. His scholarship explores the history of Mexican Americans in Dallas, examines notions of indigeneity in the Chicana/o/x community, and expounds the history of the Coahuiltecan people.

OPEN ACCESS

© 2023 by the author. Licensee H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. This review is an open access review distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

HOW TO CITE


The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.