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## La Celebración Inclusiva

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La Celebración Inclusiva

by

Meghan Murphy

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### La Celebración Inclusiva

Located in the heart of Boyle Heights, the celebration of *Día de los Muertos* is dedicated to the ancestry of the majority of the neighborhood's population. In short, the location of the celebration is not accidental. The celebration, hosted by Self Help Graphics and Art, utilizes the tactics of the New Museum<sup>1</sup> in order to provide its participants with the most authentic and affective experience possible. Through its culturally inclusive, interactive, and dialogic approach, *Día de los Muertos*, as hosted by Self Help Graphics and Art, initiates a positive affective response within the attendees and renders the qualities of the New Museum. This essay critically examines the procession of participants, the interactive volunteers and *ofrenda*, and the booths hosted by community members within the *Día de los Muertos* celebration.

The procession initiates the celebration and enables people from all cultural backgrounds to participate. Filled with face-painted participants, the festive march is led by two massive *calacas* and a *calavera*, which represent the celebration of the dead. By including all races, the procession strategically utilizes "autoethnography" (Boylorn 2008, 414) and encourages those from differing cultural backgrounds to experience the Mexican tradition. Through its use of autoethnography, the procession "does not attempt to speak on behalf of others but instead makes the researcher the research subject" (Boylorn 2008, 414). Rather than observing the celebration as an outsider, the attendee is placed in the shoes of the celebrator. The inclusivity of the march reorients the "gaze" (Boylorn 2008, 414) of the visitor, thus promoting an unbiased and positive affective response. Through its utilization of autoethnography and inclusivity, the procession of *Día de los Muertos* successfully represents the features of a New Museum.

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<sup>1</sup> A New Museum utilizes an unbiased and transparent approach when representing a cultural practice or history. It does not serve a political agenda; rather, it portrays the subject in an unhindered and accurate light.

The festival also enlightens its visitors through its interactive sources such as its volunteers and authentic ofrenda. Hosted by a volunteer from Self Help Graphics and Art, the ofrenda beholds the memories of deceased loved ones within the Boyle Heights community. The volunteer, who celebrates Día de los Muertos every year, equips the celebration with a “first-voice” source (Yoo 1996, 685). He explains that a visitor is welcome to commemorate his or her own loved one and place items of memory upon the ofrenda. In fact, all attendees of the celebration are allowed to participate because “Día de los Muertos does not replicate patterns of exclusion” (Medina and Cadena 2002, 87). Through the use of interactive “text,” the festival of Día de los Muertos enables people to not only act as observers of the celebration, but as contributors as well (Weiser 2009, 29). The ofrenda and the volunteers prompt the visitor to “reflect upon and remember the past from the point of view of the present” (Tchen 1992, 292) and celebrate the life and death of loved ones. The sources also transform the festivity into a “community of memory” (Yoo 1996, 684). Through this “community of memory,” personal memories become collective history and vital aspects of the Día de los Muertos celebration. The interactive, New Museum qualities of Día de los Muertos in Boyle Heights provide the visitors with the ability to contribute to the commemoration and history.

The dialogic, community-based booths within the site engage the visitor and promote the discovery of the accurate cultural values behind the participants of Día de los Muertos. The booths allow the local artists and restaurants of Boyle Heights to contribute to the experience of the celebrators, while gathering profit to support their businesses and the community. Dialogue between the visitor and vendor also encourages the proper representation of common misconceptions regarding Mexican culture and the significance of Día de los Muertos. Due to a culturally diverse community within the site, the booths “serve as a tool for a dialogue among

parties who normally would not be communicating with one another” (Tchen 1992, 311). The specialty shops also enable the artists to express themselves, their spirituality, and their heritage to the community. This cultural expression through art “renews and enlarges the collective historical memory and identity of the group” (Medina and Cadena 2002, 89). The presence of art and creativity is crucial to the celebration, and provides a sense of “identity” within the community. Those of non-Mexican cultural descent are able to better understand the history behind the Mexican celebration through art appreciation. Through the dialogic, community-based booths, the celebration hosted by Self Help Graphics and Art renders the attributes of a New Museum.

With a Mexican-American population of over 80% in Boyle Heights, it is crucial for Día de los Muertos to provide the community with an unbiased, proper representation of its heritage and annual celebration (Urban Mapping, Inc.). Often times, the cultural values behind Día de los Muertos can be misrepresented and misunderstood by those of non-Mexican descent. However, Self Help Graphics and the community successfully depict the history behind Día de los Muertos while uniting the Mexican-Americans of Boyle Heights. By abolishing misconceptions through inclusivity, interactivity, and dialogue, the celebration not only unites Mexican-Americans, but the visitors of differing cultural backgrounds as well. Through the utilization of the New Museum approaches, Día de los Muertos serves as a site of cultural education and appreciation within the neighborhood.

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