

RUNNING HEAD: *CALAVERAS, CALACAS, AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION*

*Calaveras, Calacas, and Cultural Production: The Queer Politics of Brown Belonging at U.S.
Día de Los Muertos Celebrations*

Megan Elizabeth Morrissey
University of North Texas

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It was a warm blustery day when we wandered through the crowds at our hometown's Día de Los Muertos celebration. Drawn to the celebration after exploring the festival's website, I learned that since it was first celebrated in our city in 2011, this Día de Los Muertos festival has drawn increasingly large crowds and garnered more and more local support. Photographs from years past highlight onlookers snacking on churros, drinking Mexican hot chocolate, and enjoying the spectacle. Indeed, the visual and textual construction of this event evidences and immerses visitors in a cultural production that celebrates, commodifies, and creates opportunities for belonging. Events such as this Día de Los Muertos festival represent a queer juxtaposition that plays at the intersection of normative U.S. discourses about death, citizenship, and the public/private divide. Our small city's Día de Los Muertos Festival is one among hundreds that are now celebrated across the United States and is dwarfed by the scale of some of the nation's largest events with which this essay will engage. Regardless of size or scale, however, U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations have become commonplace in the United States and are complex sites of meaning production and negotiation. As I explore, the websites that construct and organize a city's celebrations produce a temporally and spatially constrained space where visitors are immersed in a queer cultural experience that is both familiar and strange, local and international, inclusive and exclusive. It is through these incongruities and the ways they are queerly negotiated within Día de Los Muertos festivals that I argue an opportunity for contingent brown belonging is opened.

Día de Los Muertos is a holiday that is traditionally celebrated at the beginning of November and is strongly associated with Latinx culture. Meant to honor the dead and invite

them back home for an evening of lively celebration, Día de Los Muertos combines indigenous Aztec and Catholic rituals. This hybrid holiday has developed over the years to incorporate a variety of cultural elements and is oriented toward celebrating the lives of the deceased rather than mourning their passing, queering the traditionally somber experience of grief that so often characterizes U.S. public discourse about death. To honor the lives of those who have passed, families will often playfully commemorate the holiday by constructing *ofrendas* (or altars) in their memory. These commemorative constructions typically include candles, flowers, loved one's favorite food items, pan de muerto,¹ and photographs of the deceased. Intimate and personal, these *ofrendas* are a focal point of the holiday and characterize and organize the traditional temporal/spatial experience of the celebration. Indeed, it is the queer incorporation of these *ofrendas* into U.S. celebrations that I focus on in this analysis, exploring how this traditional element of remembrance and celebration becomes a nodal point of incongruity that builds new relational bridges between white U.S. belonging and brown Latinx inclusion.

Celebrated in big cities and small towns across the United States and Mexico, Día de Los Muertos has morphed through the years to become something that is contemporarily recognized as cool and hip (Dobrin, 2017). The cultural capital that the holiday garners comes from its recent presence in U.S. popular culture, including scenes from a Día de Los Muertos parade that appeared in a James Bond film in 2015 (Dobrin, 2017), and most recently, in the form of Disney Pixar's film, *Coco*, that centered the holiday within the story's plot line. Some of the United States' largest Día de Los Muertos events include those in Los Angeles, San Antonio, Chicago, and Fort Lauderdale, which have elicited attention from national news outlets for their size and spectacle. It is to these celebrations that I turn my critical attention. While each city's event is

¹ This is a sweet bread that is traditionally made to celebrate Día de Los Muertos

organized in slightly different ways I have chosen to focus on what they share in common—the *ofrenda*—unpacking the significance of this cultural emblem and examining the cultural work that its *queering* can produce. Specifically, I explore how the *ofrenda* is integrated into the festivities, visually, textually, and conceptually by examining the websites that were constructed for the 2017 Día de Los Muertos celebrations in these four major cities.²

As embodied cultural and artistic performances, Día de Los Muertos festivities can be “central articulators of the people and of community” (Calafell & Delgado, 2004, p. 2), as such understanding *if* and *how* they construct spaces of inclusion and belonging is important for recognizing the cultural work they perform. As I argue, U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations depend on incongruous constructions to enact a comic frame that queers U.S. understandings and relationships to/with Latinx culture, ultimately producing contingent spaces of belonging for brown bodies. Just as murals (La-Ware, 1998), and discourses (Flores, 1996) can craft homelands, so too can the queer celebrations build bridges to constitute new possibilities for inclusion. To construct this argument I will begin with a discussion of Burke’s (1984) perspective by incongruity and the comic frame and then examine how these concepts can be extended by and with queer theory. I will then move on to a more detailed discussion about how U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations queer the *ofrenda*’s traditional audience, form, and purpose to comically reconstitute U.S. cultural insiders’ relationships to Latinx people, and Latinx people’s inclusion into U.S. national spaces.

Theoretical Framework

² I selected these four locations because they each appeared on three separate nationally circulated lists of “Best Día de Los Muertos celebrations, including *Thrillist*, *USA Today*, and *Latina*, and they were geographically dispersed.

Within U.S. culture there is a reinvigorated discussion about the need to secure the nation's borders and to punish those who have come to the United States illegally – a national attitude that contributes to Latinx people being read as “out of place” in U.S. spaces (Chávez, 2014; Cisneros, 2012; Flores, 2003). Cisneros (2012) explained, “Latina/os are presumed to have suspicious legal status regardless of their true standing, and something is ‘off’ about Latina/os’ affect (their race, language, cultural associations, etc.), even when they do ‘belong’ in a strictly legal or limited sense” (p. 141). With the United States’ recent election of Donald Trump, a brand of discourse, characterized by explicit xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and nationalism has been re-centered in the public sphere. This has meant that public discussion about building a border wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, the refusal of refugees seeking asylum in the country, and a spectacularized commitment to “Make America Great” have explicitly governed the administration’s policy decisions, trickling down into the vernacular conversations and interactions in which a culture of fear and hate is cultivated.

The normative discourse of U.S. citizenship and belonging that circulates in the United States reinforces the notion that U.S. national identity and citizenship depend upon the simultaneous construction of an *other*, against which to clearly articulate the qualities and characteristics desirable in U.S. cultural insiders. Within these discourses, the ideal U.S. citizen is produced as white and heterosexual, against an *other* that is brown and queer (Calafell, 2012; Carter, 2007; Eguchi, 2015; Flores, 2003; Puar & Rai, 2002). Such rhetoric materializes what Burke has called a tragic frame that oversimplifies how we think about and consider the complexity of social relationships. Goltz (2007) explained:

Through the negative and the ‘is not’, the tragic frame operates by establishing conceptions of good and evil. The hierarchy permits the elevation of a group to be

deemed better, right, and moral, resulting in the inevitable lesser, wrong, and immoral other. (p. 2)

This oversimplification produces binary relationships and understandings that create barriers instead of bridges between cultural groups. Contemporary U.S. public discourse buzzes with anxiety about the need to keep Americans safe from Latinx people illegally crossing our border and/or over-extending U.S. resources. Consequently these stories of Latinx criminality infuse U.S. consciousness with the expectation that white, U.S. citizens are “better, right, and moral,” while Latinxs are as “lesser, wrong, and immoral.” As Burke noted, there is no emancipatory power in the tragic frame, rather the steady reinforcement of flawed cultural logics, that here, do the work of reinvigorating racist and nationalist notions of white, U.S. superiority. Latinxs who are regularly constructed as outside of the parameters of U.S. citizenship and belonging are used as scapegoats to reinforce the authority and persuasive force of dominant U.S. culture.

The overly simplistic rendering of white/good—brown/bad demonstrates a tragic framework that characterizes much U.S. discourse about citizenship and belonging, but is not duplicated in U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations where a comic frame instead materializes. From its earliest roots, this holiday has blended life and death in queer ways, juxtaposing joy, happiness, and celebration alongside what is often framed in the United States as grief, sadness, and mourning. This incongruous pairing of life and death is most clearly materialized in the production of the *ofrenda*, which is conceptualized as the point of spiritual crossing and communication between deceased loved ones and their living family members who invite them back. Treating the *ofrenda* as a metonym of Día de Los Muertos’ larger and more complex cultural commitments, I argue that this negotiation of life and death lays the foundation for the comic corrective to queer U.S. attitudes toward and relationships with the Latinx community.

Burke (1937) explains that using a comic corrective can remedy the tragic cycle in which humans construct binary logics of perfection and imperfection (Ruekert, 1994; Goltz, 2007). According to Carlson (1988), Burke promoted his comic corrective to dismantle “the tragic cycle of human victimage to promote peaceful social change” (p. 310). As such, there is opportunity for the negative construction of Latinx people to be revised in and through discourses that utilize a comic frame. Just as the *ofrenda* is imagined to build a bridge between the living and the dead, the integration of the *ofrenda* into U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations builds bridges between U.S. insiders and Latinx outsiders by both honoring and queering it’s original audience, form, and purpose. By replacing the *either/or* of the tragic frame with *both/and*, the *ofrenda* becomes a site of spiritual, symbolic, and material crossing that honors the original intentions of the holiday, while in the context of each city’s celebration, also morphing into something more culturally familiar to U.S. Americans—a public display, a mediated message, and a cause for competition.

U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebration’s incorporation of the *ofrenda* remoralize the relationship between white U.S. insiders and brown Latinx outsiders through three orders of perspective by incongruity. According to Burke (1937) these orders include 1) *methodology of the pun* (in which a constant juxtaposition of incongruous words produce a new/emergent meaning), 2) *De-linking* (which pries the incongruous terms away from their assumed contexts), and 3) *Casuistic stretching* (which produces opportunities for incongruous terms to re-link or overlap with other ideas (Young, 2010). This transformative reconstitution (Goltz, 2007) revises what was once a binary opposition (insider/outsider) so that the opposition no longer exists and so that new relational possibilities (participant/audience member) are opened up. Indeed, the incongruity that produces these opportunities has been theorized as a rhetorical method and/or

practice of queering (Goltz, 2007) that further extends the radical potential of Burke's perspective by incongruity.

Where queer theory is limited insofar as its use and application is perhaps too abstract and/or deconstructionist for its *telos* to be clearly imagined, perspective by incongruity provides a way for critics to consider queering as a verb that has generative potential (Goltz, 2007). Goltz (2007) argues that through "shifting the focus from *queer spaces* to *queering spaces*, queer becomes a bridge to the unknown rather than a predetermined destination" (p. 10). Chen (2012) further asserts that the verb form of *queer* retains more radical potential as a result of its dynamism than its noun form, which has too often been applied as a static identity category to which individuals subordinate themselves. To theorize the relationship between queer theory and perspective by incongruity then means marking a crossing, such that the latter becomes "an act of undetermined generative potential that transforms meaning through relational dialectic" (Goltz, 2007, p. 10). If we allow ourselves to see some of the nation's largest Día de Los Muertos celebrations as performances that queer space (insofar as such events temporarily recreate social relationships and attitudes about Latinx people and culture), we can theorize how incongruity and the comic corrective operates therein to create something new and different that exists beyond the scope of normative U.S. discourses and logics.

Placing perspective by incongruity in conversation with queer theory produces two contributions, which this chapter expands upon. First, Goltz (2007) suggests:

The queer concept is grounded, not in definition, but through an ongoing process that does not function to limit, solidify, or restrict its potentiality. The queer objective is reframed from the potential of tragic anti-normative positioning to the ongoing process of tactical interventions, bridges extending outwards from tragic frames. (p. 11)

Indeed, the tragic and oppositional positioning of white U.S. citizens and brown Latinx foreigners that characterize normative U.S. discourses of citizenship and belonging are extended in U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations' integration of the *ofrenda*, which incongruously realigns life/death, public/private, and insider/outsider positions.

Resisting the binary logic that would isolate Latinx cultural practice from U.S. mainstream culture, U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations blend elements of each culture to make something new – something that resists easy categorization. This second contribution that pairing queer theory and perspective by incongruity results in demonstrates how “queerness becomes a project of reconstitution and transformation, which locates queer objectives at the very sites queers have struggled to negotiate” (Goltz, 2007p. 11). Not all Día de Los Muertos celebrations offer this potentiality, nor can we look to these cultural events as a way to definitively include otherwise marginalized populations. In spite of this, as we turn our critical attention to these four celebrations and the way they center the *ofrenda*, what we begin to see are how these altars function as rhetorical productions, doing cultural work that reconstitutes and transforms white U.S. celebrants as *participants* in this cultural celebration (not simply cultural consumers), revising cultural conceptions of who is an *insider* and who is an *outsider*.

Analysis

Within normative U.S. discourses, citizenship is framed as something of value that people must demonstrate they deserve through public performances of their own contribution to the nation. Morrissey (2015) explained, “Within the United States, (in)valuability plays an important function, marking some identities as being worth more than others, and generating and maintaining criteria for that worth along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality (p. 130). Through these dominant cultural logics, non-white, non-heterosexual bodies are seen as

depleting the nation's resources and not giving anything substantive in return for the protections and benefits of their citizenship status. These logics materialize the tragic framework from which familiar narratives of black welfare cheats pillaging the system, brown illegal immigrants attacking white law-biding citizens, and Middle-Eastern terrorists who threaten U.S. values, institutions, and citizens derive. Morrissey (2015) further explains, "For raced individuals to be understood as abiding post-racial citizens of the nation—indeed for them to be included within its folds—they must make careful arguments about their value to the nation" (p. 129). A close analysis of the websites developed to direct celebrants and otherwise curious onlookers to these festivals reveals the extensive negotiation of this cost-benefit dialectic, along with corresponding consideration to public/private cultural performances that value people and bodies and their contribution to the nation in hierarchical ways.

The practice and performance of culture that is cast within the tragic framework as isolating Latinx individuals from U.S. belonging because it makes them *different*, is within Día de Los Muertos festivals, positively recognized, celebrated, and financially supported. In all four festivals I examined, major U.S. corporations had provided enough money to produce the event that their name and logo were displayed on primary homepages for the events. Included among them were national brands like Corona, Jose Cuervo, Southwest Airlines, The American Red Cross, Starbucks, and Disney Pixar's film, *Coco*. These celebrations are some of the biggest in the nation, the scale of which is certainly enabled by these large and culturally familiar corporate sponsors that lend credibility and grow the audience (and potential impact) that such celebrations may have. Thus, in a queerly incongruous turn, U.S. corporate sponsorship of these celebrations transforms what was once an intimate community ritual into something of a much larger scale, dismantling the expectation that brown bodies must practice and perform their culture privately

(or elsewhere), and that their cultural difference is a burden. In this way, the tragic binaries of public/private, cost/benefit, and insider/outsider are comically reconstituted, in/through U.S. celebrations of the holiday that revise the altar's audience, form, and purpose so that white U.S. Americans encounter and experience brown Latinx culture in more participatory ways.

The *Ofrenda*

Constructing an *ofrenda* to honor the lives of deceased loved ones is a primary part of Día de Los Muertos celebrations. Altars, traditionally constructed in people's homes or in cemeteries to show the family's dead their way home, are intricate and detailed displays that include a variety of Aztec and Latinx cultural influences. Among these are a large photograph of the deceased loved one that serves as a centerpiece of the altar. This is generally accompanied by water or fruit punch, *pan de muerto*, salt, some of the deceased favorite knickknacks or foods, marigolds, *papel picado*, candles and sugar skulls (also called *calaveras*) (Menendez, 2009). Each of these elements carry with them historical and cultural meanings that are intended to create a sentiment of familiarity and celebration for a deceased loved one's return. The marigolds reflect the "fleeting nature of life and their aroma helps lure the spirits back. The particular colors of *papel picado* can reflect death, grief, mourning, celebration and hope; and the *calaveras* add a lighthearted touch to render death less frightening and sad" (Menendez, 2009). Many (if not all) of these traditional elements find their way into contemporary *ofrendas* and are integrated as a primary part of U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations.

Within U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations, the function that the altar plays *publicizes* cultural difference and situates such performances within the neoliberal framework that assigns value to these enactments precisely based on that cultural difference. The neoliberal national investments that organize U.S. culture require a public performance of one's value to the nation

and a private (and subsequently depoliticized) practice of cultural difference (Jones & Mukherjee, 2010). In this way, the very thing that tragic discourses of U.S. citizenship use to mark the boundaries of belonging and marginalization (the public performance and display of cultural difference), here become the tactical intervention (Goltz, 2007) that incongruously reconstitutes U.S. inclusion via a queering of public/private, insider/outsider, cost/benefit binaries. These incongruities are played out in unique ways across each celebration. Fort Lauderdale's and Los Angeles Olvera Street's celebrations provide a *public* space for otherwise *private* altars to be displayed, queering the intended audience and challenging cultural conceptions of what should be shared, how it should be shared, and with whom it should be shared. Chicago and San Antonio's celebration reinterpret the form of the altar, taking it from a homemade construction of personal artifacts to an artistic production of manipulated mediums, compelling visitors to see the *ofrenda* as a cultural object to be admired rather than an spectacularized cultural displays. Finally, San Antonio's celebration renegotiates the altar's purpose, transforming it from an invitational and commemorative gateway for the deceased to return, to a contest submission, blurring the purpose and motivation of the *ofrenda*. This change in an altar's placement (private space to public space), medium (homemade to artistic exhibition), and purpose (remembrance to competition), incongruously produce new relational possibilities that depend upon the juxtaposition, prying apart, and re-linking of the *ofrenda* in U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations.

Comically Reconstituting Audience

Fort Lauderdale's and Los Angeles Olvera Street's Día de Los Muertos festivals provide an opportunity for any local groups or community members to publically display an *ofrenda* that they construct in honor of a deceased loved one. Ft. Lauderdale's festival website explains,

“Community members, artists and schoolchildren all present personal memories of those whom they have lost in striking visual presentations,” (Florida Day of the Dead, para. 2) noting that should someone wish to participate they simply must email festival planners with a request. Although Olvera Street’s festival does not provide information on how to participate, it advertises that community altars will be on display for all nine days of their celebration and features several photos of previous celebration’s altars. The images that are catalogued on both of these sites present images of *ofrendas* that appear personal—displaying items and artifacts of a loved one’s life that might not be as personally significant to festival visitors as they would be to family members who knew the deceased.

Both celebrations incongruously position the traditionally intimate altar (intimate insofar as it is intended for display within the domestic space of the house or at a loved one’s gravesite, and for an audience of family members and friends), within the U.S. public sphere. In this way, U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations figuratively and materially relocate Latinx people within a neoliberal matrix that values their cultural contribution. Characterizing their festivities as “destination” (San Antonio) or “signature” (Ft. Lauderdale) events, these celebrations capitalize on tourists and visitors who travel to these cities for their Día de Los Muertos events, producing spatially and temporally bound social microcosms in which the tragic frame that isolates and marginalizes cultural difference is queered. These festivals’ juxtaposition of public and private bridge the divide between these two polarities, instead offering a new middle ground in and through which Latinx bodies are recognized as appropriately “culture bearing” (Jones & Mukherjee, 2010) and where Latinx people are empowered to practice, perform and share their culture with U.S. citizens. Specifically, this queering of public and private occurs when death

and its private U.S. experiences of grief and sadness are flipped and made public through the construction and display of *ofrendas* at these “destination” Día de Los Muertos festivals.

Comically Reconstituting “Form”

Like the other Día de Los Muertos celebrations discussed in this essay, Chicago’s Día de Los Muertos festival invites community members and groups to construct and present their own *ofrendas* at the festival. Although this is the case, 2017 festival organizers also extended the opportunity for people to upload a picture of a loved one that they wanted to remember so that guest artist Fernando Sic (Rimiyoho) could use them in his creation of a live animation he projected on the Museum’s exterior. These larger than life images represent a digitization of *ofrenda*’s traditional form. Rimiyoho’s live animation cycled through the uploaded photos one at a time, creating a large-scale, and multi-soul remembrance that comically reconstitutes the medium of the traditional *ofrenda* while maintaining its traditional purpose, to honor, celebrate, and welcome the dead. Although a traditional *ofrenda* is small enough to fit into person’s home or upon a loved one’s gravesite and is visible only to those with access to those private spaces, Chicago’s celebration takes the intention of the altar (to celebrate the life of a deceased loved one and to guide them home) and instead re-interprets it—mediating it, rendering it larger, and expanding the potential audience for each remembrance. The way that Chicago’s event juxtaposes traditional elements of the *ofrenda* with new mediated technology de-links Latinx bodies from the tragic framework that characterizes Latinx culture as burdensome (read overly culture-bearing, primitive, and isolated) to instead reconstitute it as culturally complex, sophisticated, and well-integrated. Specifically, the change in medium makes the altar more ephemeral—more *symbolic*—and potentially less threatening to U.S. audiences whose affective response to the presence of Latinx material bodies is suspicion and rejection. Thus, the response

to the symbolic construction and celebration of brown bodies that occurs through mediated channels that abstract Latinx people and culture, making them less of a threat. Specifically, the space of Chicago's celebration encourages appreciation and respect for the artistic rendering of the re-made, digitized altar (and by extension, Latinx culture) producing a temporal and spatial moment in which Latinx people are included via the artist's public installation of a traditionally private, culture bearing performance.

San Antonio's festival similarly featured an artist's rendering of an *ofrenda* as part of the city's celebration. The city commissioned a floating altar by artist Ana Fernandez that was designed to travel down the city's central river, flanked by the famous "river walk," and that honored San Antonio's "Chili Queens" who used to sell their chili con carne along the river. The festival's website details the artist's statement, contextualizing the floating altar within a regional history that signals the significance of the River Walk to the city and that marks the contribution of these women. In particular, the Chili Queens were eventually banished from downtown due to health concerns related to open-air dining. The artist explains:

When I was approached to submit an idea for a floating altar, the chili queens came to mind. Besides being of personal significance to me, this floating altar also serves to mark the culinary and cultural achievements made by these women and once again honor their legacy in the City of San Antonio. (New in 2017: Floating altar created by Ana Fernandez, para. 3)

Responding to the cultural and spatial surround that will accommodate her floating altar, Fernandez constructs an *ofrenda* that is politically, culturally, and socially significant and whose presence on the river queers the history and the present iteration of the space. In this way, Fernandez, like Rimiyoho, participates in a revision of the *ofrenda's* traditional form that

comically reconstitutes the altar, as well as the space and place in which it circulates, affecting the kind of cultural work it can do. Placing the altar on top of a barge that will travel along the city's primary attraction, the River Walk, positions the life and the historical influence of these previously marginalized women within the heart of the city and makes the altar something that people take note of because of its *difference*, not in spite of it. In other words, although the Chili Queens were noticed (and systematically removed from the city's central landscape), presumably for their brownness, cultural difference, and non-mainstream economy, they are here noticed and appreciated because of the *ofrenda's* unnatural presence along the river. In this way, the altar's mobility along and through a space that once banished the women whose lives are here remembered, not only celebrates their life, but politicizes their legacy, materially and symbolically re-centering them within the city's cultural history and queering the historical legacy and contemporary landscape of the city.

Comically Reconstituting "Purpose"

The revisions to the traditional *ofrenda's* audience and form are two central elements that comically reconstitute normative U.S. discourses about citizenship and belonging, blurring the boundaries between insider and outsider. Unlike the events in Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles and Chicago, however, San Antonio's Día de Los Muertos celebration features an "Altar Competition." This is noteworthy because it takes the *ofrenda* and queers its purpose, making it something that can be evaluated. Competition is a central tenet of neoliberalism insofar as it produces a hierarchical system in which those citizens who are most flexible and least culture bearing can rise to "the top" and experience success (measured by financial stability and social inclusion) (Hasinoff, 2008; Jones & Mukherjee, 2010), thus, to queer the altar's original purpose of remembrance by also making it about competition positions Latinx people within a super-

structural framework that makes them more familiar to abiding, white, U.S. citizens. Whether a community group, high school, or individual, anyone who wants to construct an altar and compete in San Antonio's competition is able. A photo collection of each 2017 entrant is available on the Muertos Fest website, enabling physical and virtual visitors to cast their votes for their favorite. One of the altars, earning 424 votes, the most of any submission, was an entry by Jourdanton High School in memory of two students, Madison and Tanner McCleary who had passed away. The altar includes a large photo of the siblings framed with tissue-paper marigolds, and accompanied by a traditional three tiered altar with photos, sugar skulls, candles, and school uniforms. This high school's altar competed with 27 other entries, some produced by other groups, but others produced by individual families, such as the Rodriguez Family, whose altar "Nuestra Madre y Hermana" featured many of the same traditional elements but was designed to celebrate the life of the entrant's mother.

Incentivizing participation in the altar competition with a cash reward (\$2000, \$1000, or \$500) potentially changes the motivation that people may have for participating. Thus, constructing an *ofrenda* becomes about both the traditional elements of the holiday (celebrating the life of a deceased loved one), and about meeting neoliberal expectations that celebrate competition. This "both/and" logic organizes the construction of San Antonio's altars to feature *both* traditional *and* neoliberal messages. This queering of the *ofrenda*'s purpose builds a bridge that legitimizes Latinx cultural inclusion by comically reconstituting "success" as inherently including a public performance of cultural difference. More complexly, the competitive twist that frames the altars' purpose at Muertos Fest, affects how audiences (website visitors and festival attendees) read participant's intention, coming to see participants in and through the familiar

U.S. framework of competition – a lens that blurs the binary distinction of us/them and complicates the relationship between white and brown.

Conclusion

Enabling people to observe themselves while participating in the world (Burke, 1959) the comic frame promotes a heightened consciousness about situations and individuals' involvement in them. U.S. Día de Los Muertos events enmesh visitors in a queerly incongruous and temporary space that requires they engage with the very culture-bearing practices that are described as limiting many Latinx individuals' assimilation into the nation. Indeed, in its best sense, the comic perspective “allows people to cultivate a great sense of compassion toward oneself and others while also revealing possible alternative paths for the future” (Lowery, Renegar, Goehring, 2014, p. 60). These U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations do not provide a utopian futurity or even guarantee more meaningful inclusion for the Latinx community, but perhaps the incongruity that these festivals produce queers the over-simplistic frameworks in U.S. discourse that mark white bodies as *good* and *legal* and brown bodies as *bad* and *illegal*. Through this queering, U.S. Día de Los Muertos celebrations build a bridge between these binaries that opens up temporally and spatially constrained possibilities for brown belonging that have the potential to reframe how white U.S. community members reframe their (and the nation's) relationship to Latinx people. This happens when elements of the celebration “remoralize” brown bodies as *participants* in U.S. culture and the economy rather than *beneficiaries* of its symbolic and material capital.

Identifying the incongruous elements of these four Día de Los Muertos celebrations conceptualizes the queer potential of such events to open up spaces for inclusion between citizen and immigrant. As Goltz (2007) critiqued of queer theory's tendency for abstraction:

As a communication scholar, one of the most fundamental principals we teach in public speaking courses is the power of concrete language to work in the minds of the audience. The abstract lacks a mental image. We can't see its potential for what 'might be' lacks physical properties and is less effective as a rhetorical strategy. (p. 10)

The four Día de Los Muertos celebrations discussed in this essay *do* provide a mental image—indeed a material practice in which people can participate—in which both/and replaces either/or. This queering “becomes a bridge to the unknown rather than a predetermined destination.” (Goltz, 2007, p. 10). In this way, the incongruities evidenced in these events demonstrate a crossing between U.S. cultural discourses of citizenship and belonging and Latinx marginalization that transforms the meaning of both. Thus, through this analysis we can theorize the potential and limitations of highly visible and increasingly popular cultural celebrations for increasing cultural competence and inclusion, as well as demonstrate how queerness the practice of queering might be imagined.

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