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## Under the Mask: Creative Dis/Possessions of Borderlands Remembrance Practices

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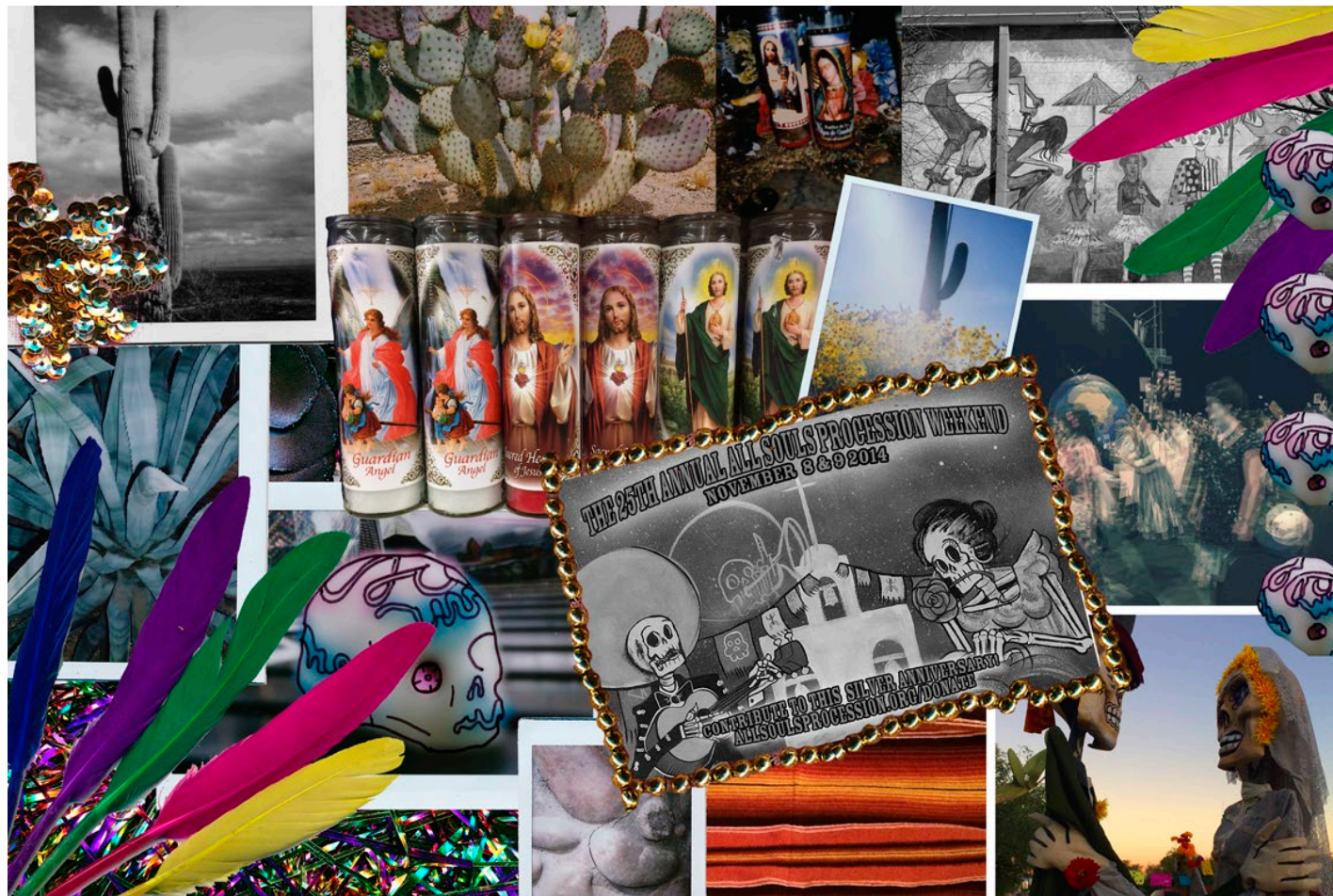
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# UNDER THE MASK: CREATIVE DIS/POSSESSIONS OF BORDERLANDS REMEMBRANCE PRACTICES

LIZZY BENTLEY, JOANNA SANCHEZ-AVILA



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# INTRODUCTION

Each November, on a warm desert night, thousands of people gather in the small downtown of Tucson, Arizona, for a ritualistic and participatory event known as the All Souls Procession. Hundreds of the participants create and carry memorials to the Procession, which is billed as "a celebration and mourning of the lives of our loved ones who have passed" (Many Mouths One Stomach, "About"). Participants craft for weeks—if not months—beforehand at local maker spaces, backyards, and dining room tables, all in preparation for this public display of memory. Some participants build transportable memorials connected to bicycles, cars, and backpacks. Others decoupage photographs of deceased loved ones to painted cardboard boxes. Collectives construct floats and a fiery metal urn for the ritual burning of participants' intimate memories, hand-written on scraps of paper. The procession is a chaotic, swirling mass of objects, colors, scents, and human bodies pushing against each other. And yet, a constant thematic thread weaving throughout the event is Mexican *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) traditions. Nearly all of the participants and onlookers are painted as *calaveras* (skulls), their stark white faces and black rimmed eyes floating through the dark streets. There is an abundance of orange-hued marigolds and *ofrendas* (altars) at every turn, and the earthy scent of burning sage wafts in and out of the crowds.

Chican@ rhetorician Gloria Anzaldúa explains that "borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, [...] where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). Anzaldúa describes this cultural contact as a process that is often marked and marred by the forces of racial inequality. The borderlands nature of the All Souls Procession, the ways in which Latin American culture is simultaneously drawn from and negated, pervades the event. And yet, it isn't adequately acknowledged. While the Procession has drawn criticism for the cultural appropriation embedded in many of its crafting practices, its stakeholders are hesitant to acknowledge a meaningful connection to *Día de los Muertos* as they frame the procession as an "authentic" multicultural event (Many Mouths, "About"). Our web-text takes the form of a multimedia scrapbook: a compilation of artifacts, sketches, snapshots, and video clips that reflect our layered memories—as well as the layered histories—of the 2014 All Souls Procession (ASP). In the pages that follow, we explore the rhetorical complexities of ASP craft practices as they are situated in public space and cultural memory.

# UNDOINGS



Figure 1. "Memories of the All Souls Procession" (Bentley Watercolor Sketch)

In the audio recordings below, Lizzy and Joanna express their respective intentions behind attending the All Souls Procession and critically reflect upon their memories of the event itself.

**The original audio file is archived as an additional file: <https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.4>**



## TRANSCRIPT OF LIZZY'S AUDIO

Lizzy:

I did not attend the All Souls Procession expecting to belong, or even expecting to be moved, really. I attended in part because I heard from various graduate students and locals that it was a very "Tucson" thing to do—a "heritage tourism" rite of passage—and because an acquaintance invited a bunch of friends over prior to the Procession. They explained that the event represented a mixture of cultures, so it could not be condemned for cultural appropriation, and encouraged us to paint our faces. I did so, and I immediately experienced a pang of regret that intensified throughout the evening. Something was amiss. I felt as though I was playing a deeply disrespectful game of dress—up with a culture that was not my own. I suppose this regret was a mixture of white and Jewish guilt. White guilt for callously appropriating the traditions of people of color and Jewish guilt for participating in another culture's memorial rituals, especially the flavor that usually makes me roll my eyes: a feel-good secularized Western spirituality tinged with just the right amount of Eastern and indigenous 'exotic' to differentiate it from the religious upbringings experienced by many of its participants. Namaste in overpriced yoga studios, "Follow Your Bliss" images on Pinterest, and all of that.

As I moved through downtown Tucson, pushed along by the flow of the procession, I was struck by the overwhelming whiteness of the event—which was heightened by (what I perceived to be) the artificial gesture towards otherness. At times, the event had major Burning Man vibes: blissed out people in psychedelic-meets-steam punk costumes, collecting notes to be burned in a giant memorial urn at the closing ceremony. At one point, a group of women in neo-Orientalist geisha-inspired garb and white face paint twirled past. Almost everyone present had their faces painted, and the majority had their faces painted as skulls with varied degrees of elaborateness. People openly stared and took pictures of participants' handmade costumes and altars.

Suddenly, a man leaned in and snapped a photo of my painted face. I was new to the All Souls Procession, new to Tucson. And yet, with my elaborately hand-painted face, I seemed to belong. My painted face gave me permission to be present and—it seemed—it gave others permission to occupy my space. I was a part of the spectacle.



Figure 2. "Costumes to DIY for!" (Sanchez-Avila Photograph)

**The original audio file is archived as an additional file: <https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.4>**

#### TRANSCRIPT OF JOANNA'S AUDIO

All Souls Procession in Tucson, Arizona, is an event that I heard a great deal about at various points in my transition to living here. It was advertised on Facebook as the fall event that should not be missed. Links were posted about the pre-Procession crafting workshops, online photo albums capturing moments from past years were shared, city magazines advertised thrift stores selling clothes to create "do-it-yourself costumes" to reach out to consumers' attempts at achieving the mostly calavera-inspired looks. Not only in social media was it talked about, but also amongst people who attend the local university, who suggested that All Souls was an event worth experiencing or exploring for aesthetic, social, and even critical reasons/insights. Having just left my long-term home in Los Angeles, California, for graduate school in Tucson, I was attracted to witnessing the All Souls Procession because it is considered as one of the cultural things to do in Tucson.

Wary of all the critiques and the anticipation surrounding the event, I still participated in it because I was attracted to the pre-gathering that would take place at a friend's house. Albeit, hesitant to paint my face in catrina style, or adorn my body

in any manner signifying the "typical/mainstream apparel" of Dia de Los Muertos, I found my invitation to the pre-gathering an invaluable opportunity to continuing meeting people to build community. The event itself was eye-opening...

# CRAFTING MEMORIES

## MEMORIES IN MOTION

The crafting of material objects and memories are irrevocably and intimately bound together. As memory studies scholar David Lowenthal explains, memories "are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions" (qtd. in Dickinson, Blair and Ott 29). Similar to handcrafted objects, memories are not uniformly made by industrial machines in factories. Instead, they are molded and hewn in ways that are often imperfect, idiosyncratic, and human, as they help us make sense of the worlds within and around us. For German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, memory-making and Handwerk—"hand work, or artisan labor"—were inextricable (Leslie 6). Benjamin understood "craft practices" such as weaving and pot-throwing to be modes of "processing and reconstituting experience" which mirror the process of making memories (6). A similar sort of craftiness is needed to sculpt matter that is material or incorporeal: a "wisdom based on praxis" that is generated through a combination of "thinking, seeing and handling" (6).

Benjamin's process-driven understanding of the relationship between craft and memory helps us appreciate craft's rhetorical quality as generated through movement (Adamson 4). Craft studies scholar Glenn Adamson demonstrates this movement-oriented approach by defining craft as that which "only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification" (4). By extension, craft's rhetorical power—its ability to persuade and shape both personal and collective memory and identifications—is bound up in its capacities as an active, creative process.

Movement is, after all, central to the ASP's craft practices. Most of the memorials are mobile—they are crafted with the intention of being transported in the Procession. We saw memorials built on wheels and bicycles and attached to backpack straps. We saw parade floats, elaborate costumes, and handheld signs. The meaning making of the crafting process did not end with the carving, gluing, or sewing of materials. Instead, the memorials continued to both accumulate and generate meaning as they were held, pushed, worn, and carried during the Procession. As a result, the Procession is not merely a repository for finished crafts but a dynamic extension of the crafting process.

As a means of understanding the [rhetoricity](#) of craft practice "in motion" at the Procession, we analyze its spatial-temporal dimensions: the relationships between space and time that ASP memorials replicate, generate, and rupture as they move

through the streets of Tucson (Adamson 4). At the Procession, craft functions as an imaginative rhetorical tool for blurring established boundaries and conventions: between material/spiritual, life/death, and public/private. In analyzing these spatial-temporal rhetorics, we also begin to identify the *Día de los Muertos* craft rhetorics enmeshed within the ASP.



Video 1. All Souls Procession 2014 Footage (Hairless cactus' YouTube)

The original video is archived as an additional file: <https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.4>



## MATERIAL/SPIRITUAL

The All Souls Procession intends to blur boundaries between material and spiritual realms through ritualistic engagement with memorial objects. This spiritual framing of the ASP's craft practices is present in its very title, the All Souls Procession, and is extended in descriptions of the event as a "ritualistic procession" and a "sanctuary" on the ASP website (Many Mouths, "About"). The ASP is, certainly, a ritual of sorts: those in the procession move with purpose, clasping their memorials as they make their way from the Procession's starting point to the closing ceremony. Ritual performances such as the ASP are often characterized as generating a space within and apart from ordinary space-time (Huizinga). The ASP transforms—and reanimates—the space of downtown Tucson: there is no car traffic, and most of the shops are closed on the main strip. The spectators crowding the sidewalks, many of whom are dressed in costume for the occasion and painted with *calavera* (skull) faces, are largely transfixed by the Procession, craning their heads to stare at memorials and snapping pictures.



Figure 3. *Calavera* Bride and Groom Puppets (Sanchez-Avila Photograph)

Arguably, the memorials at the heart of this procession are not “dead” or static objects—they are rhetorical agents that play an active role in facilitating this otherworldly connection. Chicana@ rhetorician Gloria Anzaldúa is helpful in understanding the spiritually and rhetorically dynamic role of objects animated through ritual performance: “When invoked in rite, the object/event is ‘present’; that is, ‘enacted,’ it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it. It is metaphysical in that it ‘spins its energies between gods and humans’ and its task is to move the gods” (88). This spiritually dynamic understanding of material craft challenges both Western positivist epistemologies (where empirical evidence makes things knowable and “true”) and the way that artistic practice is often appreciated and consumed in Western culture. In dominant Western culture, value is often indicated through disuse, as Native American masks and Jackson Pollock paintings alike are placed in museums behind glass and velvet ropes (Anzaldúa 87-88). In contrast, the ASP—and the indigenous practices it is patterned off of—refuse to “split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life” (88). The ASP memorials, many of which are crafted from everyday materials, transform memorialization into a spiritual process.

#### LIFE/DEATH

This otherworldly form of memorialization transgresses the temporal and corporeal boundaries between life and death. The altars, floats, and performance pieces in the procession memorialize those who have passed by simultaneously celebrating life while mourning death. The boundaries between life and death are complicated further through the “walking dead” who participate in the Procession. The ASP is packed with live bodies in motion, their faces and clothing hand-painted with skulls and skeletons. As the living perform death, the inverse occurs, too: large photographs of the dead, plastered onto signs, bob up and down in the crowd next to the faces of the living. The participation of both the dead and the living troubles the boundaries between animate and seemingly inanimate forms.

#### PRIVATE/PUBLIC

ASP’s community-generated craft practice has the power to create space for marginalized histories that might not otherwise be publicly remembered. Often, the memorials that are permanently sanctioned in public spaces—through bronze statues in public gardens or oil paintings in city museums—reaffirm dominant historical narratives and attempt to mold public memory in ways that are imperialist, masculine, and heteronormative. Many of the memorials in the ASP share histories that might otherwise be perceived as too intimate, too trivial, or too dangerous to be honored in public. ASP’s mobile, ephemeral craft practice, where theoretically anyone can bring and display a memorial for the evening, facilitates access to and visibility within public space. This transmission of memory has the “potential to unsettle common sense, challenge the commonplace, and move communities to invest in their own sense of civic and collective agency” (Giroux 23). In other words, ASP’s memorialization practice is a form of activism—or really, [craftivism](#)—with the potential to generate social change at the local level. Both of us have powerful memories of handcrafted social justice memorials

from the All Souls Procession. At the concluding ceremony, Joanna saw a group of 10 people push through the crowds holding large posters covered in photographs of the [43 missing university students from Iguala, Mexico](#). Earlier in the evening, Lizzy watched a group stride through the Procession carrying a large hand-painted banner memorializing migrant deaths. Those who made and marched with these signs called upon those present to bear witness to borderlands atrocities that were—and are—being silenced by governments and largely ignored in institutionalized spaces. At an event celebrating “the universal experience of Death,” these activists’ handiwork lent visibility to social issues haunting public imaginaries and to people whose stories are silenced both in life and in death (Many Mouths, “About”). These moments uncover community craft practices’ rhetorical capacity to “challenge the nation-state’s role as the preeminent source of communal identifications” by disrupting collective memory at the local level (Gabbes and Schindler 247).

And yet, experiencing these radical moments of awakening at All Souls reminds us of the forgetfulness—even the selective amnesia—at the core of its practices. Why does the most explicit acknowledgement of Latina/o culture and identity occur at the peripheries of the All Souls Procession? Why is Latina/o identity and experience more openly acknowledged in moments of victimhood and loss, not in and through the cultural practices that inform the event? We must ask: at a predominantly white event full of calaveras (skulls), ofrendas (altars), and marigolds, whose publicity flyers bear Mexican imagery, is this enough?



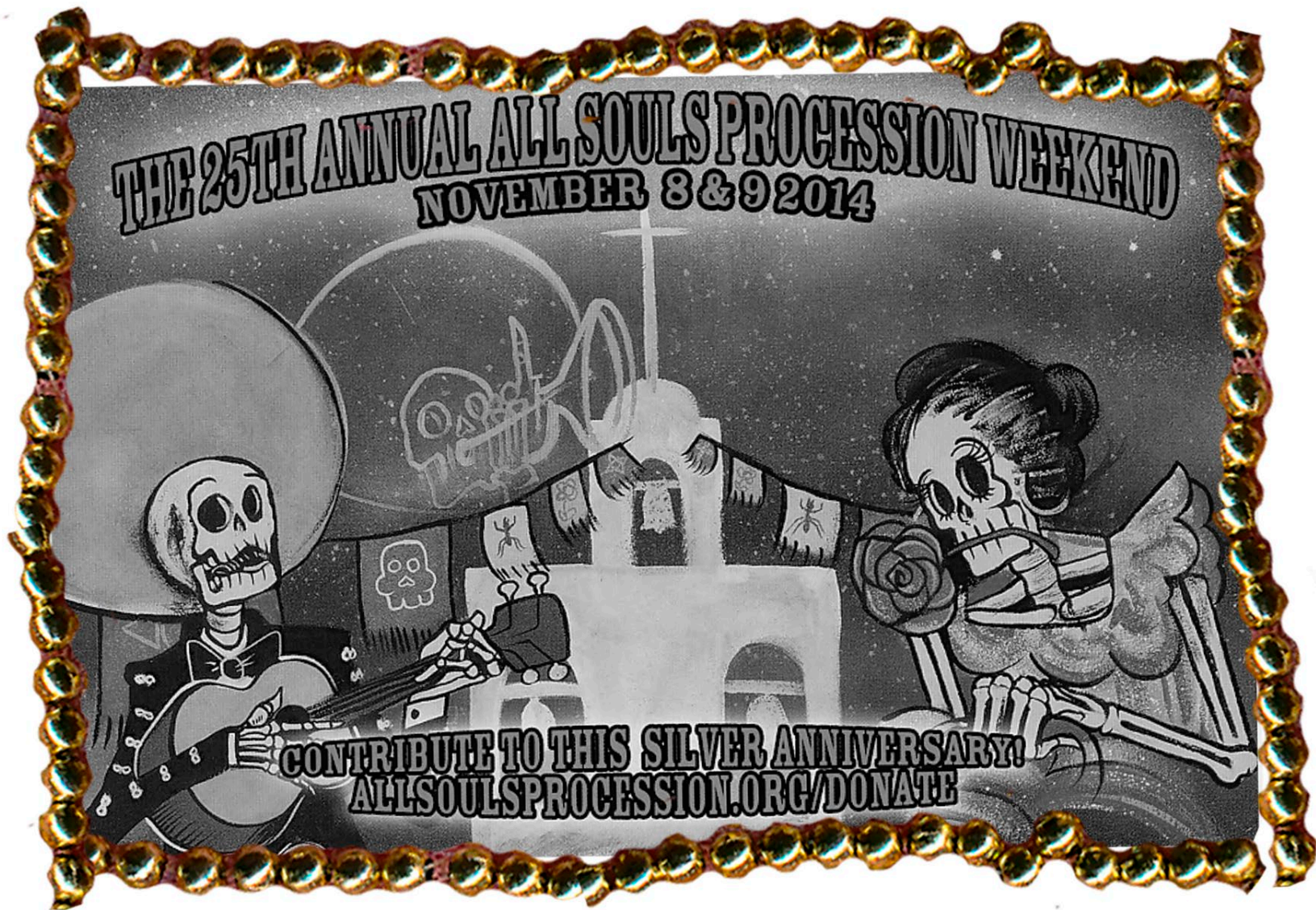


Figure 4. "Framed Black and White 2014 All Souls Procession Postcard Flyer" (Bentley and Sanchez-Avila Embellished Flyer)

# UNRAVELING HISTORIES I

To better understand both the imprint and erasure of *Día de los Muertos* craft practices at the All Souls Procession, we began to unravel the histories informing both *Día de los Muertos* and the All Souls Procession. While numerous non-Western cultures are integrated into the Procession's craft and rituals (including African and Japanese practices) we chose to focus on *Día de los Muertos* traditions because of the predominance of associated imagery at the event, as well as ASP's presence in the U.S./Mexico borderlands. The histories of *Día de los Muertos* and ASP reveal that both practices were rhetorically crafted through the transcultural exchange of objects, rituals, and spiritualities brought by colonialism and globalization. While the history of *Día de los Muertos* reveals creative resistance to colonial domination, All Souls Procession's history reveals a simultaneous appropriation and erasure of Latina/o cultural influence.

## DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

*Día de los Muertos* is an annual holiday that happens in November throughout Latin America but is closely associated with Mexico in the United States. *Día de los Muertos* was crafted by indigenous peoples to subversively retain indigenous cultural memory after the Spanish conquest—and in turn—to creatively resist total domination and cultural erasure. It is just one example of Latina/o cultural practice that carries the imprint of the Spanish conquest, as it combines Catholic and indigenous traditions. This cultural hybridity has a rich rhetorical history: ritual objects, textiles, and performances facilitated the transmission of indigenous cultural memory alongside the Catholic and colonial influences that threatened their erasure. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor explains, "Pre-Conquest performances and images continued to be transmitted through multiple syncretic and transcultured forms such as music, dance, the use of color, the ritualized markings of place... that later came to be called *altares* [altars] but that dated back to pre-Conquest times" (46). In other words, craft served—and continues to serve—as a rhetorical vehicle for retaining marginalized cultural memory and spirituality.



Figure 5. "Illuminado: Dia de los Muertos" (Adela C. Licona, "Introducing")

#### OFRENDAS AS THIRD SPACE

This creative intervention continues in contemporary celebrations of *Dia de los Muertos* and can be understood as a "third-space" practice. Chican@ public scholar and rhetorician Adela C. Licona defines third-space as "an interstitial space of intersection and overlap, ambiguity and contradiction, that materializes a subversion to either/or ways of being and reproducing knowledge" (*Zines in Third Space* 11). In other words, third-spaces are spaces of in-betweenness that

challenge material and metaphorical borders. When conceived of as a creative practice, third-space “offers an opportunity to reflect on [and creatively intervene against] the ways in which discourses have been used to erase, obscure, or exclude” (13). *Día de los Muertos* memorial practices, particularly the *ofrendas* (altars), engender a “third-space” where participants can creatively perform and transmit cultural memory (13).

The creation, organization, and building of *ofrendas* is a creative-rhetorical practice that is central to *Día de los Muertos* and highly visible at the ASP. Through subversive cultural hybrids, the altars rhetorically perform resistance to dominant Western ideologies and Catholic beliefs on spirituality and remembrance. The processes of creating and celebrating with/around the *ofrendas* generate a third-space where the spirit world and the material world come together and are held together by memories (Licona “Introducing”). Memories are materialized through both the building of the altar and the objects that are placed on its surface, many of which bear traces of colonialism, indigenous spiritual practices, and Catholicism. The composition of objects on the altar produces a “meeting of the embodied and the disembodied, the visible and the invisible, the formal and the conceptual” (Pérez 14). These objects are often both commercially purchased, like *velas* (candles) with Catholic saint imagery, and deeply personal, such as the intimate belongings of loved ones. Here, the loved one’s “memory is not sanitized” (“Introducing”). Instead, they are openly remembered and celebrated as they were with all their vices, a move that resists Western cultural and religious binaries between good and bad, secular and sacred (“Introducing”). Objects that some would consider trivial or even shameful—such as alcohol, cigarettes, lighters, and candies—might be displayed on the altar. Other objects that are traditionally included on altars are *cempasuchitl* (marigolds), *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), incense, or sage. By crafting realistic memories of the loved one’s living self, their complexities are not erased or forgotten.

Contemporary Chicana/o artists continue to revisit and rework the altar tradition through public art installations as a means of political activism, honoring the memories of those whose lives are marginalized in dominant contexts (Pérez 91). These public altars offer opportunities for community connection and engagement. Through familiarizing oneself with the layered history of *Día de los Muertos* and the altar tradition, one sees how transcultural craft practice can carve out rhetorical space for cultural transmission, reclamation, and resistance.



# UNRAVELING HISTORIES II

## ALL SOULS PROCESSION

*"We were making it up as we went along, and we're still making it up as we go along and it's really powerful that way."* - Susan Tiss, ASP photographer, "All Souls Procession History" video

To understand the history of the All Souls Procession, we turned to the [About](#) and [FAQ](#) sections of their official website, created by ASP's non-profit organizer Many Mouths One Stomach. While we understand that the intentions of all ASP participants are not bound up with the official language of Many Mouths One Stomach (MMOS), it offers a helpful way of identifying structural concerns rather than condemning isolated individuals. In MMOS' self-representation, we noticed a peculiar relationship with the Day of the Dead: its creators simultaneously draw upon and push away from Day of the Dead traditions. The History page states that the Procession began "in 1990 with a ritualistic performance piece created by local artist Susan Johnson, who was grieving the passing of her father." It acknowledges that she was first "inspired by Mexico's Dia de los Muertos holiday." And yet, these origins are erased on the FAQ page:

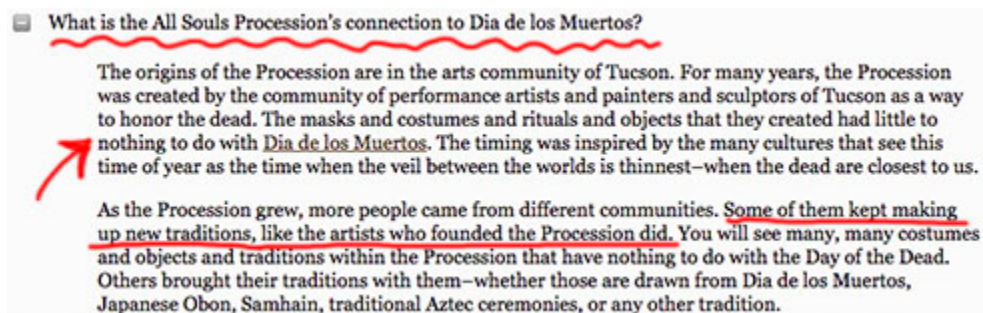


Figure 6. Marked-Up Many Mouths FAQ Question with Answer Screenshot (Bentley Diagram)

To us, this disavowal of a connection to *Dia de los Muertos*—along with the claims about “making up traditions” while being “inspired by many cultures”—seemed like an act of columbusing. Urban Dictionary defines [columbusing](#) as “the art of discovering something that isn’t new,” or “when white people claim they have invented/discovered something that has been around for years, decades, even centuries.” This act of columbusing culminates in the All Souls organizers’ proclamation that the Procession fulfills a “universal” need for “Festal Culture,” a term that they invented to describe “the public need to mourn, reflect, and celebrate the universal experience of Death, through their ancestors, loved ones, and the living.” As they make claims of universalism and multiculturalism, there is an erasure of cultural differences and

histories. We understand these historical erasures to be directly connected to the cultural erasures that we noticed at the event itself. Moreover, this cumbusing of creative traditions can be understood as an extension of the spatial politics of the U.S/Mexico borderlands, a region that is particularly fraught with imperialist expansion, division, and dispossession.



Figure 7. "They rip off our culture then ignore our struggle." (HFOSTT Tumblr)

In the video below, Joanna critically reflects on how ASP's cultural appropriation of craft has political and geographical implications for the people who are rich in cultural capital but might lack economic capital. She emphasizes how it is problematic for non-Latinos to take and use such traditions and rituals to commercialize, commoditize, and use them for their own self-medication to heal or to face repressed emotions regarding death.



Video 2. All Souls Procession 2014 Critical Personal Response. (Sanchez-Avila, Joanna)

**The original video is archived as an additional file: <https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.4>**

# REWORKING SOCIAL REALITIES

The All Souls Procession provides a powerful space to celebrate and memorialize lives through craft. As newcomers to Tucson, both of us were drawn to the event because of the creative community space it generates. However, both of us also grew cognizant of certain "red flags" during our individual experiences of the event and the reflection period that followed. We do not intend to police the borders between who should or shouldn't participate. We also respect the experiences of people who gain meaning and community from the Procession. However, we believe that it is crucial to consider the *both/and* repercussions of multicultural projects such as the All Souls Procession. As anthropologist Michael Keith explains, "both the creativity of processes of hybridization... and the enduring scars of racism and pernicious intolerance can be seen as simultaneously realized rather than juxtaposed" (Keith 269). In other words, rich cultural exchange can—and does—occur alongside violent cultural erasure.

Building upon our experiences, we pose a call to historicize and contextualize the Procession's practices. By historicize, we mean a careful consideration of historical narratives and their relationship to the present. *From where and whom did these practices originate? What value do these practices still hold to living cultures?* By contextualize, we mean to carefully consider craft practices' relationships with and connections to people, land, and politics. *If you participate in the Procession, how does your own personal and cultural background relate to the ASP's craft practices? What are the political implications of the ASP's situatedness in downtown Tucson, and in the U.S./Mexico borderlands?* Asking these types of questions brings us to issues larger than one isolated event. Locally, for example, the erasure of marginalized cultures and histories is institutionalized in the statewide ban on ethnic studies. This legislation is a sobering reminder that history holds power. Moreover, this line of critical inquiry can easily be extended to creative-cultural practices beyond the All Souls Procession, as the tensions between cultural appropriation and creative exchange are pervasive across local, national, and international contexts.

We believe that our call performs a politics of hope. In the words of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, "placing hope" in transformation "is not simply about the future; it is also about recognizing the persistence of the past in the present" (187). A critical and self-aware engagement with history is a crucial step towards reworking social realities.



## Hauntings

Strategically working towards belonging  
I use my hands to build, create, destroy, re-create, hold on to a sense of myself to build with others.  
The lines of my palm, like roadmaps, remind me of the present, the past, the future.  
The histories that shape who I am through which I can be in communion with others.  
The sound of feet shuffling through land that continually changes,  
The space adapting to its inhabitants' hybridity.  
-Joanna

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