PORQUE AQUÍ NO TENEMOS MUERTOS:
DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF IN A NEW SPACE

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ABSTRACT

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There is an increasing popularity for celebrating *Día de los Muertos* - Day of the Dead in the United States of America. *Día de los Muertos* is a cultural and religious holiday that is most commonly associated with Mexican descendants and has been designated as a time to remember, honor, and visit with deceased loved ones. This paper explores the celebrations of Día de los Muertos in a Michigan city using conceptual tools of culture, migration, and identity. The intent is to comprehend why and how Mexican migrants to the Michigan area use this traditional activity to construct their social identity within the United States of America. The guiding research questions were: 1) How do Mexican migrants in mid-Michigan celebrate *Día de los Muertos*; and 2) What is the role of the celebration in developing a sense of Mexican ethnic identity for these migrants?

To address these questions, I conducted an exploratory qualitative research project that employed interview and observational data collected through participant observation and in-person interview. The research found that the majority of respondents who celebrate use *Día de los Muertos* as a way to remember deceased loved ones but more significantly, as part of their construction of new Mexican-centered identities and self within an Anglo-American social context that pressures them to adopt the new U.S. way of life.

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INTRODUCTION

There is increasing popularity of *Día de los Muertos* - Day of the Dead, a cultural and religious holiday that is most commonly associated with Mexico and is designated as a time to remember, honor, and visit with relatives and loved ones who are deceased. Mexican migrants use this and other traditional Mexican cultural activities to construct their identity as Mexican in the United States of America. Though migrants do not lose their sense of self while crossing physical, political, social and cultural boundaries, components of their sense of self are challenged in unforeseen ways. The new country and social order has its own values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior. This includes preconceived ideas and prejudices about immigrants and their country of origin (Cadge et al. 2010). The American social context, the immigrant's receiving community, does not readily affirm or support their regular behavior patterns. Therefore, the taken-for-granted external cultural validation of a person's sense of self and behaviors that reinforce their sense of personhood in their country of origin are no longer present in their new social context.

The current paper presents exploratory qualitative research with Mexican men and women who have migrated to the Mid-Michigan area to determine if they celebrate *Día de los Muertos,* and whether or not such activities do or do not enhance their sense of cultural identity. This paper brings literature on culture into conversation with literature on identity and migration through consideration of the following questions:

1) How do Mexican migrants in mid-Michigan celebrate *Día de los Muertos*?

2) What is the role of the celebration in developing a sense of Mexican/ethnic identity for the migrants?

To address the aforementioned questions, I use data from an empirical field research project of Mexico-born individuals who migrated to the mid-Michigan area to report the ways they do or do not use traditional Mexican cultural activities to assist in constructing their identity. My discussion includes a rationale for the research and clarification of the conceptual framework, followed by a description of the methods employed in data collection. During my discussion of methods I provide background information gained through pre-research on my research location, population, and a brief history of *Día de los Muertos* for further contextualization. The paper concludes with a presentation of the data and analysis, along with summary comments that include directions for future research.

RATIONALE

The current research contributes to sociological knowledge conceptually and empirically. This paper engages the concepts of migration, culture and identity for how these aid our understanding of how Mexican migrants create culture and construct their identity while living in conditions of migration. Conceptually most sociological research has discussed immigrant identity and adaptation through the lens of assimilation. Such an approach does not place the behavior of Mexican migrants at the center of investigation nor prioritize their intentions in undertaking such action. This paper addresses gaps in the sociological literature by specifically focusing on how the celebration of a holiday that is pervasive in Mexico may affirm an identity as Mexican within the social context of the United States of America. My focus here is to begin to understand how migrants use traditions from their country of origin to construct a sense of self in their new social context.

Recently, sociologists have demonstrated interest in the "new destinations" of immigrants (Benjamin-Alvarado, DeSipio, and Montoya 2009; Bernosky de Flores 2010; Cadge et al. 2008; Fischer 2010; Kandel and Parrado 2005; Lichter 2012; Lichter et al. 2010; Marrow 2005; Massey 2008; Pfeffer and Parra 2008; Sáenz 2012). These "new destinations" are located in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the United States away from the cities and communities that have traditionally received immigrants. Even with this new focus, sociological research on new migratory destinations has focused on the changing demographics of rural areas due to new in-migration and the incorporation of new immigrants into new destination communities. To this end, the economic impact of immigrants, health care and social service delivery gaps, educational needs, and racial ethnic relations between migrants and long-standing community

residents have been central concerns. However, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding cultural production of Mexican migrants in new destinations and its role in identity construction.

The present research focuses on the Mexican holiday of *Día de los Muertos* in the new destination locale of a Mid-Michigan city. I focus on the actions that Mexican migrants carry out and glean the significance of those activities in relation to their identity as Mexican in their Michigan community. Research on culture creation and identity construction in the new destinations of Mid-Michigan offers further insight into how Mexican and other racial/ethnic migrant groups adapt to their new social context (Hurtado, Gurin, and Peng 1994). Sociologists have been primarily concerned with the contexts of reception and immigrant incorporation in the Midwestern region of the United States (Lichter et al. 2010; Marrow 2005; Pfeffer and Parra 2008). Anthropologists and scholars in the cultural studies arena have been the primary researchers interested in the Day of the Dead social phenomena in Mexico and the United States of America (Brandes 1988, 1998a, 1998b, 2006; Cadaval 1985; Garcíagodoy 1998; Marchi 2009, 2013; Norget 2006). The current research seeks to address some of these sociological knowledge gaps about this social phenomenon as a creative cultural expression through qualitative field research on *Día de los Muertos* celebration practices among Mexican migrants in Mid-Michigan.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Human beings are biologically predisposed to group life. From birth humans interact with and among one another, their physical world, and do so by engaging the stock of knowledge of their respective social group about how and interact with their surrounding physical and social worlds (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Human groups create culture and develop "knowledge" through typified behavior, or those repeated patterns of behavior that characterizes the group (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Human self-organization happens when individuals formally and informally organize around a particular typified behavior. It is the interaction of social group members that reinforces and communicates their specific stock of knowledge. These human behavior patterns and knowledge govern the production and standards of culture, discussed next, that provide meaning and importance to the social structure as well as the values, beliefs, and practices embedded in it (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Williams 1981).

CULTURE - Culture consists of the "dynamic patterns of learned values, beliefs and behaviors (as behaviors are derived from values and beliefs) exhibited by a people who share a history (at least one hundred years) and geographic proximity (Dodson and Ross 1977)." Culture is concerned with the subjective meanings of human behavior and aligns humans' activity with what is symbolically important, the values and beliefs, to different social groups and the larger society. Through this relationship with the social order, human beings create internal organizations and/or social networks that arrange rewards and penalties based on "values" and integrate social institutions. As a system of meaning, it is through cultural activity that human beings communicate, reproduce, experience, explore and challenge the social order. Culture is therefore more than styles of art, language, or type of intellectual work, but

serves as strategies of action for human beings (Swidler 1986; Williams 1981). The action strategies, behavior patterns that shape and are shaped by values and beliefs, are developed to navigate a specific social order. Residence in a new society will cause the action strategies to be criticized and changed. Such migration will force changes in the culture of the migrants, as culture cannot be wholly reproduced in a new geographic location. This is true regardless of level of social status, access to resources, social conditions prior to and post migration as well as the lack of choice that characterizes some migratory experiences (Mintz and Price 1992). Therefore, migrants create new cultural practices for their new geographic and social locations based in the action strategies and knowledge from their cultures of origin.

IDENTITY - Aspects of a person's sense of self that are derived from knowledge of belonging to social categories or groups coupled with value and emotional significance attached to membership are Social Identities (Hurtado et al. 1994). Such identities are formed through three steps: social categorization, social comparison and psychological work. *Social Categorization* is the organization of people into groups based on social and/or physical characteristics (Hurtado et al. 1994). Contemporary theories of assimilation hold that not all immigrants are integrated into the American middle class, contrary to popular notions. The assimilation of migrants into the U.S. social order is effected by their ascribed membership in racialized, gendered and classed groups (Golash-Boza 2006; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2002; Portes and Zhou 1993; Stepick and Stepick 2010). The organization of individuals into differing social categories, especially when those categories possess differing power and privilege lead to the next step in social identity construction: *social comparison*

Social comparison is a tool by which human evaluate the established social categories in order to gain importance and status in relation to other groups within society (Hurtado et al. 1994). Traditional US assimilation theory maintained that immigrant groups would and should reject their "inferior and backward" ways of life and accept the "modern and good" life ways of the white Anglo Protestant, or at least Christian, majority in the United States of America (Alba 1999; Lee 1966; Park 1928). Regardless of cultural adaptation, immigrants are assimilated into different sectors of the receiving society; the middle class mainstream, the marginalized underclass, or the ethnic enclave which is characterized by deliberate preservation of identity with aims toward economic advancement (Portes and Zhou 1993). A person's phenotype, and social proximity to marginalized racial/ethnic groups, a influences their social position impacts how they are incorporated into U.S. society (Golash-Boza 2006). Additionally, experiences of discrimination, exclusion and socialization as a member of a marginalized group impact how immigrants view the receiving society (Golash-Boza 2006; Lopez 2003). Membership in an ethnic group is often ascribed and not the result of individual choice. Factors such as residential concentration, skin color, and language all contribute to establishing boundaries between ethnic groups in the larger society (Nagel 1994). However, external factors separating Mexicans and immigrants from the Anglo mainstream do not give a complete picture of how migrants construct their identity within the social context of a new society.

The third principle of social identity construction, *psychological work*, assumes that people actively work to construct a sense of self in a new social space and achieve a positive sense of distinctiveness after having been categorized as a marginalized group. The social categories most likely to become identities are those that are most visible, contested, and denigrated.

Social groups with power and privilege in society do not "need" a specific identity, and are therefore less obvious. Typically such groups are considered the norm or "normal (Hurtado et al. 1994)." Within such a social context oppressed people engage in psychological work, and validate their sense of themselves as they understand it, by reproducing cultural activities from their country of origin regardless of messages from the larger society. Such cultural activities cannot be reproduced in the form of an exact copy of what is practiced in the cultural and social context of origin. Restricted access to the same material, natural, social, and other resources prohibits creation of exact replications (Mintz and Price 1992).

It is through continued modified reproduction of cultural activities while in marginalized social conditions that migrants maintain or recreate a sense of self as culturally distinct from the hegemonic mainstream of the receiving society (Mintz and Price 1992). The reproduction of cultural behaviors from their country of origin and the construction of identity serves as a method of adaptation to life in the United States. Cultural patterns, such as cultural or religious holidays, traditional foods, politics and/or concepts, can be converted into symbols characterized by nostalgia for the culture of the immigrant generation's country of origin. These behaviors create a positive sense of being Mexican in a social context where members of the Mexican ethnic group are marginalized. This "symbolic ethnicity" requires the presence of a group, the passage of time, and may help explain the continuation of cultural communities. Thus, Even as groups adapt to and integrate with the social order of the United States, identification with a non-Anglo-American cultural heritage does not necessarily disappear (Gans 1979; Hurtado et al. 1994).

METHODS

PRE-RESEARCH - Consistent with the African Atlantic Research Team's orientation toward conducting qualitative field research, prior to any contact with a field site or participants I conducted "pre-research." This phase of the project "consists of in-depth reviews of historical and social conditions for people and situations of the research topics (Dodson 2012)." As a member of this research collective, I utilized the Team's orientation to inform my understandings about contemporary and past *Día De Los Muertos* celebrations in the United States and Mexico. I also utilized the method of pre-research to understand the history regarding Latinos/as, more specifically Mexicans, in twentieth century Michigan. I also became more familiar with previous theorizing and conceptualizations of the holiday which assisted my own interpretations of the significance of *Día De Los Muertos* to Mexicans in Mid-Michigan.

Additionally, pre-research made me aware of how my personal biography may effect my data collection (Berg 2009). I shared some commonalities with the research participants such as Spanish fluency, previous familiarity and experience with the holiday, and a cultural heritage. This did not guarantee entré or the building of rapport. However, my personal particularities may have facilitated these processes, but I still entered their community as a stranger conducting research. It was necessary to remain conscious of my position as a cultural insider, yet community outsider.

As a part of my pre-research I identified possible field sites, community leaders and "gatekeepers" through personal and social networks (Berg 2009). I completed a "pre-test" prior to data collection at Mid-Michigan church to meet with the contact person, discuss the project and determine if data collection was appropriate. At a Mid-Michigan elementary

school, I attended a Spanish language “parent night” to determine where public and/or private celebrations were taking place and potentially recruit respondents. Mid-Michigan church was selected as my primary field site. The church is a place where *Día De Los Muertos* is celebrated in a public fashion, has a majority Latino/a membership and a reputation of service to the Latino/a community in the area. Furthermore, church leadership, staff, and members were welcoming and willing to participate in the project.

NOTES ON TERMS - A variety of terms have been used to describe people of Mexican ancestry living within the current borders of the United States of America. Mexican American and Chicano/a have been used to describe U.S. citizens by birth that claim a Mexican cultural heritage and trace their roots to Mexico and/or to the geographic location known contemporarily as the U.S. southwest. Mexican American has also been used to identify Mexican nationals who have migrated to the U.S. and become naturalized U.S. citizens. Chicano/a carries a political connotation connected to the Mexican American struggle for civil rights during the 1960s and 1970s referred to as the Chicano/a Civil Rights Movement. The category of Mexican refers to Mexican nationals who are living in the United States of America post establishment of the current U.S. borders through their own international migration, regardless of cause. All of these labels for people of Mexican descent imply a shared ethnic heritage. Even though the U.S. government has declared “Hispanic” and “Latino” to be the official terms to identify people from the Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, I will rarely use them. Such terms are too general for my purposes here and their use would contribute to misleading homogenization of the cultural diversity that exists under the Latino umbrella.

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS - *Día de los Muertos* - Day of the Dead-, also referred to as Todos los Santos in other parts of the Spanish-speaking world, takes place on November first and second coinciding with the observation of All Saints and All Souls Days on the official Catholic Church calendar. The two days serve as a time to honor and remember relatives and loved ones who have died. While the commemoration of deceased loved ones carries feelings of sorrow, *Día de los Muertos* celebrations have qualities of happiness, filled with color, smiles, and life. Most commonly associated with Mexico, this veneration of deceased relatives is practiced in various ways. Celebrants around Mexico visit cemeteries and gravesites cleaning and decorating the headstones of their deceased. People also bring flowers, prepare large meals for the living and the dead, and hold candlelight vigils at gravesites. Some families build altars in their homes, cemeteries or other public locales to welcome the spirits of their family members who have died (Brandes 1988, 2006; Carmichael and Sayer 1992; Marchi 2009).

While some debate exists about the "true" origins of *Día de los Muertos*, it is widely accepted that the holiday is rooted in pre-Columbian rituals that venerate ancestors to coincide with indigenous peoples' understandings of life, death and agricultural cycles (Kelly 1974; Marchi 2009), along with Spanish folk Catholicism and traditions (Brandes 1997; Carmichael and Sayer 1992). Contemporary *Día de los Muertos* celebrations and imagery have been linked to the Mexican cultural renaissance and the development of a national identity that followed Mexico's 1910 revolution (Brandes 1998a). More comprehensive discussions regarding the origins and history of *Día de los Muertos* outside the United States is beyond the scope of this paper and have been engaged elsewhere (Brandes 1988, 1997, 2006; Carmichael and Sayer 1992; Garcíagodoy 1998; Kelly 1974; Marchi 2009; Norget 2006; Nutini 1988; Pescador 2013a).

Public *Día de los Muertos* celebrations and exhibitions as we see them today throughout the United States can be traced to the Chicano/a civil rights movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's (Marchi 2009; Romo 2000). A key component of the U.S. celebration is the *altar de muertos* (altar for the dead) or *ofrenda* (offering), which is a memorial space to remember those who have died. Altars may be constructed in a person's home or a public place. The traditional fashion of decorating an *altar de muertos* is with pictures and representations of the deceased, bright colors, candles, *calaveras de azucar* – ornately decorated sugar skulls, flowers, a crucifix and/or other religious artifacts. An important aspect of the altar space include renderings of *La Catrina* - the Mexican cultural representation of death who is always smiling, and engaged in some type of activity; particularly an activity that the deceased performed and/or enjoyed in life. Such displays consist of altar installations and celebrations in classrooms, community centers, museums, universities, and galleries (Marchi 2009).

While public *Día de los Muertos* celebrations honor and remember the deceased, they also offer Mexican migrants and their subsequent generations an opportunity to perform their ethnicity and reaffirm their sense of identity (Romo 2000). Throughout its history the holiday has been central to community and individual identity development. Additionally, Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States serve as a way to raise cultural awareness, build community, and express political as well as social commentary in an artistic fashion. Even with the freedom of artistic vision or "creative licensing," *Día de los Muertos* imagery and significance focus on the life and times of those who have died. Finally, Day of the Dead museum and art gallery exhibits, as well as classroom activities offer venues to share Mexican

religio-cultural customs and traditions with those who may not be familiar (Brandes 2006; Marchi 2009; Pescador 2013a).

Public celebration of *Día de los Muertos* in Michigan has been documented since the late 1980s. Laurie Kay Sommers' book *Fe, Fiesta y Cultura: Celebrations of Faith and Culture in Detroit's Colonia Mexicana* acknowledges the possibility of private in-home celebrations among Mexican migrants to Detroit since the early 1900s, but focuses her discussion on public celebrations. Her research found that early Mexican migrants in the Detroit "*Colonia* (neighborhood)" celebrated Day of the Dead in various ways that consisted of cemetery visits, small in-home altars and family based practices. The Chicano/a Movement, its artists and activists, influenced the way *Día de los Muertos* has been celebrated in Detroit. The year 1989 marked the first Day of the Dead Exhibition presented in a gallery. Since that first altar installation, *Día de los Muertos* celebrations have grown in popularity and been commissioned in neighborhood galleries and community centers as well as the Detroit Institute of Art (Sommers 1995).

LOCATION - In Michigan, Mexican cultural communities have been present since the early 1900s. Initially Mexican workers were attracted to the northern state by the promise of agriculture and manufacturing jobs. At the time Michigan's economy was based in industrial agriculture, automobile factories, foundries and industry supporting companies. Similar to most industry-based companies in the country at the time, those in Michigan used racially exclusionary and stratified hiring practices reserving the dirtiest, most difficult and dangerous jobs for Mexicans and other racial ethnic job seekers. Racially discriminatory housing practices

also limited the locales available for Mexican settlement and the growth of a Mexican cultural community in the state (Valdés 1989, 1991).

As Mexican communities grew, and were joined by other Latinos, the residents worked to establish community, civic, and religious organizations. Since the 1950's there have been churches in mid-Michigan that have served as community centers, places of religious observance, and advocates for the needs of long-standing and new Mexican and other Latino/a community members. The current research identified a church that supports the culturally distinct expressions of faith by Mexican and other Latinos. The significance of such a church should not be overlooked. Throughout much of the twentieth century the Catholic Church, on a national level, has been involved in Americanization efforts and tried to suppress "folk" religious celebrations like *Día de los Muertos* (Martinez, Ramirez, and Horner 2011; Pescador 2013b).

In mid-Michigan city I established three research sites where I conducted observations, participant observations and interviews. All were public venues that were referred to me by community members or leaders. The church and the school had services that focused on the particular needs of the local Latino community. The church had a predominantly Latino membership. In an interview with the pastor, he informed me that approximately 95 percent of the membership was Latino/a. The majority of the Latinos/as were of Mexican descent, followed by Puerto Rican and Cuban membership. Furthermore, the church was founded 50 years ago to serve the growing population of Latinos/as in the area. I conducted three site visits and one interview at the church. The school held a monthly Spanish language parent night for parents from local elementary schools. These meetings typically consisted of a

presentation or workshop on a designated topic of interest or area of need of the parents. All of the participants that I contacted at the school identified as Mexican. Finally, a museum in mid-Michigan hosted a *Día de los Muertos* altar exhibit. There was an opening ceremony to commemorate the day and welcome the public to view the exhibit. I learned about the event at the museum through public advertisements in the form of promotional materials. The school and church were identified as viable research sites based on their location, presence of and service to the local Latino community, as well as the presence of community members who were willing to participate in my research project on *Día de los Muertos*.

POPULATION - The total population of mid-Michigan City is under 200,000 residents. The racial ethnic make up of the city is 61.2 percent white, 23.7 percent Black or African American, 0.8 percent American Indian, and 12.5 percent Hispanic/Latino. The remainder of the population, according to the U.S. Census identified as some other race or more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). In other words, 87.5 percent of the city's population identified as something other than Latino or Hispanic. Of the Hispanic/Latino population, the majority identified as Mexican descent. People of Mexican descent consist of 76.6 percent of mid-Michigan City's Latino/a population. They also consist of almost 10 percent of the total population of mid-Michigan City. The next largest Latino population groups are Puerto Rican and Cuban, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

My research population consisted of a total of thirty participants. All research participants were associated with a particular research site. At the church there were a total of four participants; three of who were female and one was male. The school had a total of twenty-six participants; twenty-one were female and five were male. For the total research population

twenty-four participants were female and six respondents were male (see Table 1). The majority, twenty-nine, identified Mexico as their country of origin. One participant stated that the U.S. was his country of origin (See Table 1).

Table 1: Gender and Place of Birth by Research Site (N=30)

	Mexico-Born Male	Mexico-Born Female	US Born Male	US Born Female	Total
Church	0	3	1	0	4
School	5	21	0	0	26
Total	5	24	1	0	30

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION - My data collection consisted of scheduled short visits to the research sites over the course of about a month's time. The technique of participant observation was used during all aspects of the research. I made observations of the setting, altar space, participants, and the general atmosphere to gather further depth of understandings of the holiday and how it's celebrated. In such field experiences, my identity as a student from Michigan State University conducting research was overt. I was an active participant in the construction of altar de muertos spaces. Participation in the preparation for the holiday consisted of interaction and conversation with members of the research community, volunteering time at the research site to assist with building the altar de muertos, tactile interaction with materials used to construct the altar de muertos space, and contribution to its aesthetic decoration.

Data was recorded using field notes and photographs. I carried a small (5x8 inch) notebook or pocket sized "memo book," and made quick notes, designed to jog my memory for the writing of complete field notes after leaving the research site, when perceived to be

appropriate. Every attempt was made to write field notes immediately after exiting the research site using either computer word processing software or field notebook and a handwriting instrument. This was not always possible, but field notes were written no more than five days after the specific site visit had taken place. I did not use video or audio recording equipment during observations or participant observations. Field notes from observations, participant observations and interviews served to create a narrative to describe and initially interpret their significance for the research project. Visuals in the form of photographs provided more in-depth understandings of the public celebration. I obtained overt permission prior to photographing public spaces and the altar de muertos. Such photographs consisted of the altar and space where the celebration took place. All photographs were stored in a digital format according to their date, time, location, and coincided with field notes from the site visit.

INTERVIEWS - Group and individual interviews were conducted in various formats including; directed, undirected, informal, semi-formal, and formal. To guide the formal directed interviews, I used a question protocol focusing on the celebration of *Día de Los Muertos*, understandings of the holiday, its significance to practitioners, and the influence of life in the United States on celebration. Such a formal structure was used when appropriate or convenient. However, in directed formal interviews the conversation did not always follow the established order of the protocol. A semi-formal group interview was conducted to identify possible research participants who either participated in a public *Día de los Muertos* celebration or observed the holiday in their homes. This interview was arranged with a community leader to be part of a previously scheduled parent meeting at a local elementary school. While this interview had a formal structure, it did not follow the question protocol established for

individual directed formal interviews. The goals were to establish contact with possible respondents for an individual interview, and collect introductory data regarding *Día de los Muertos* in Mid-Michigan. Also, during the participant observations I engaged participants in an undirected informal fashion. Participant observation interviews did not have a structured sequence of questions, but focused on celebration of *Día de Los Muertos*, the respondents' reasons for participating, as well as the holiday's significance to their lives. All respondents remained anonymous and/or were given pseudonyms. Any information regarding participant identity, as well as all data collected was kept confidential and guarded in a secure file cabinet and/or on a password protected computer.

ANALYSIS - Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach, in congruence with the extended case method. I sought to uncover common themes in the observed data and used those themes to test current theory or develop new theory (Burawoy 1998). I anticipated finding evidence of both public and private *Día de Los Muertos* celebrations. The data showed trends of cultural expression, as well as aesthetics associated with traditional and contemporary *Día de los Muertos* practices. These analyses should lead to some initial insights on how the performance of cultural activities creates feelings of connectedness to a cultural heritage.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS IN MID-MICHIGAN - Through the course of my research I found evidence of *Día de los Muertos* celebrations in Mid-Michigan through the building of private and public *altar de muertos*. Francisca, a Mid-Michigan community member affiliated with the school, shared that when she lived in Mexico her family visited the cemeteries where her relatives were buried. "We always went, my mom, my dad, my brother, and an aunt. We always went together . . . to visit everybody. We brought them [the deceased relatives] flowers, we cleaned their headstones, and we stayed to chat for a little bit, but not too long because they were all in different cemeteries, and you have to visit everybody (Francisca 2011)." For Francisca and her family in Mexico it was important to visit the cemetery. Nevertheless, at her home in Mid-Michigan, Francisca celebrated *Día de Los Muertos* by building an altar in her living room.

> I put up an altar de muertos and we decorate it with photos and things that represent our relatives and friends who have passed away. We cook the foods that they liked to eat. We get together . . . in the living room and we eat the foods that they liked, share stories, and what else? We put candles and that's it. In general, it's just a get together around the altar (Francisca 2011).

Even though Francisca couldn't go visit her relatives in the cemetery she still celebrated *Día de Los Muertos* by constructing an altar de muertos in her home. In her case, building the altar is another way to celebrate the holiday. It may also serve as an alternative for a person's inability to visit the cemetery where their relatives are buried. Outside of my interview with Francisca, I was not able to find much evidence of private or in-home celebrations. I attribute the lack of evidence regarding "in-home" or private celebrations to my lack of familiarity with the Mexican community here in the Mid-Michigan area.

A lack of familiarity with the research location did not prohibit the identification of a public *Día de los Muertos* celebration that takes place at a church. The pastor, church staff, volunteers and members have been observing the holiday as a part of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day for more than eight years by building an *altar de muertos* in the lobby of Mid-Michigan Church. The altar is constructed with three levels representing life, death, and heaven and is decorated in the traditional fashion with bright colors, candles, *calaveras de azucar*, flowers, a crucifix, and representations of *La Catrina* (For visual representations of the altar and church please see photo 1 and photo 2).

Figure 1: Photo 1

The building of the altar de muertos is done in conjunction with church services in observation of All Saints' and All Souls Days'. Pastor Charles from the Church explains how the holiday is observed at the church:

> For both of the masses [on Nov. 1st and Nov. 2nd] we invite people to bring pictures of their loved ones and candles and then process in with the entrance procession placing them before the altar (in the main church). The candles are lit before they process up and they're up during the opening, it's just a beautiful sense of the meaning of the day. Each candle represents loved ones. This year we had people put their names (of the deceased) on the candles if they wanted to, and the pictures of course, so we had this sort of very alive representation of the living memory that people had brought. Before and after the celebration they are welcome to put those pictures on the altar here in the entrance area and we keep them there most of the month of November to continue that spirit through the month (Charles 2011).

The Michigan Church celebration remembers and honors those who have passed following the church calendar, but does so with an expression in line with church members' cultural heritage. In our conversation Pastor Charles clarifies the processes that are employed to celebrate *Día de los Muertos*. Members volunteer to build the altar, during the masses attendants bring photos of deceased loved ones and light candles in memory of those loved ones; remembering loved ones who have died is implied as the focus of the two days.

Figure 2: Photo 2

Rosario, a Mid-Michigan Church member, when asked about *Día de Los Muertos* at the church, also draws a connection between what she remembers being done in Mexico with what is currently practiced at the church.

> México is a country with many rich traditions. *Día de los Muertos* has always been there. I don't know how or when it started, but it has been there for a long time. In my state [in México] we didn't put up much of an *altar*, maybe some flowers and pictures of our relatives. What we mainly did was go to the cemetery, bring food and flowers and spend the day there with our relatives . . . Here at the church we set up an altar and the members bring pictures of their family members. We put our *pan de muerto,* candles and flowers. We ask them not to bring things [that belonged to the deceased or were something they enjoyed while alive] because there is not enough space (Rosario 2011).

Similar to Francisca, Rosario acknowledges that what was done in her community of origin is different from what is typically done at the Church; Rosario recognizes that both methods fit within the spirit of the holiday and the ways that it is celebrated. In Mexico, Rosario and Francisca are more accustomed to visiting the cemetery to be in the company of her deceased relatives. While the building of an altar may be part of the celebration in some places, it is not present in others. For Rosario, it seems that attending church on November first and second, and the altar de muertos in the lobby fills the role of visiting the cemetery. Mid-Michigan Church is her place to go on *Día de los Muertos* to remember the life and honor the legacy of family members who have passed away.

Moreover, in Michigan I found evidence of a public *Día de los Muertos* celebration at a church that serves a predominantly Latino membership, and a celebration that takes place in someone's home. The meaning or purpose of the holiday, celebrating the life and legacy of deceased relatives and loved ones, remains the same but the action has changed. Instead of going to the cemetery as Rosario and Francisca are accustomed to in Mexico, the building of an

altar de muertos and/or attendance of a special church service that incorporates aspects of *Día de los Muertos* serves as a way to continue a cultural and religious practice. The situation of living in the United States makes it impossible, or at least very difficult, for them to travel to the cemeteries where their relatives are buried. As a result these respondents modified their cultural practices to meet their needs in Mid-Michigan.

OBSTACLES TO CELEBRATION - Life in the United States is different than life in Mexico. Even though there are similar demands like going to work and daily chores, a person is in constant contact with behavioral and material culture that affirms a Mexican identity. In Mexico, a person would need to make a conscious decision and effort to not celebrate *Día de los Muertos*. In the United States the opposite is the case. Pastor Charles clarifies that in a U.S. context holidays such as *Día de los Muertos* are not structured into daily life. Mexicans in Mid-Michigan need to make a conscious effort to celebrate the holiday, as well as celebrate it in a fashion that does not conflict with life in the United States and Mid-Michigan.

> People . . . come here and work doesn't stop when you have these big celebrations or big feast days. If they got a job and have to be at work, they have to be at work. Unless they get to take special time for something like that, but that's one step more, one hurdle more to go through, or just the fact that people find that they have all these choices now . . . The whole shift when you come from one culture and enter into another culture, it totally disrupts your world in so many ways. To make that transition and shift, you don't just take for granted all these things that you're going to celebrate and suddenly you have to consciously choose to do it or to not do it. Sometimes you're just tired and maybe sometimes you're just wrestling to make this new beginning and survive, so stuff can tend to, sort of fall by the wayside in the midst of all that (Charles 2011).

The process of migration and re-establishing one's self in a new society is inherently challenging. Cultural activities that may have seemed to happen "naturally" in the country of origin are not structured into daily life of the host society and now require a conscious effort

and may conflict with the demands of life in the United States. There may also be social pressure to discontinue cultural activities. This is in addition to the fear or anxiety of living in another country and culture (Sommers 1995). A goal that Pastor Charles has for the church is to offer people a sense of familiarity or place in a new context. Participation in a public celebration offers the opportunity to build a sense of connection to, or facilitate integration with, the local Mexican descendant community. However, the celebration of *Día de los Muertos* is carried out in a manner that does not necessarily conflict with daily life in the United States of America.

Francisca shares some of her experiences and believes that it is easier to "lose" traditions if there is limited contact with a Mexican cultural community.

> It's easy to get wrapped up in the everyday things, and you know, life happens and you can get lost in going to work, coming home and making dinner, picking up the bedroom, washing dishes and all that. Then it's the same the next day; then it's the weekend and you have to wash clothes and things like that. So, it's very easy to lose yourself in that . . . In Mexico it's easier to remember that you're Mexican . . . here it's more difficult to be in contact with all that, obviously because it's very easy to 'Americanize,' I think. For me, it is easy to lose these traditions simply by living here. You forget . . . just from being far way, and more so if you don't have much contact [with Mexico or a Mexican community] (Francisca 2011).

It is not easy for Mexican migrants to "maintain" their cultural practices given the different context where Mexican immigrants find themselves. Life in the United States is different, the language, the customs, the culture, and daily life are different and presents its own set of challenges to celebrating cultural holidays like *Día de Los Muertos*.

A particular challenge is that some aspects of Day of the Dead celebrations cannot be reproduced in the new social context of Michigan. In my group interview with the School Parents I learned that for some Mexican migrants, no longer being able to visit the cemetery

was an insurmountable obstacle to the celebration of *Día de los Muertos*. My field notes provide an account of our conversation:

> At the event, Martha introduced me at the very beginning and again just before my "presentation." I said hello, reintroduced myself, told them I was a doctoral student at Michigan State University, and that I was conducting a research project on *Día de Los Muertos* here in Lansing. I told them about my experience at the grocery store with the pan de muerto, discussed confidentiality, asked if I could ask them some questions about *Día de los Muertos*, and told them I had a sign-up if they were interested in participating in an interview. I asked the parents where they were from; all indicated they were from Mexico. I then asked if they celebrated *Día de Los Muertos* here in Lansing. All parents present responded verbally or non-verbally that they did not celebrate the holiday here in Lansing. Martha interjected questions surrounding specific things that people might do in observation of the holiday, to each question the parents answered negatively. I followed up by asking "Is there any particular reason why you do not celebrate *Día de Los Muertos*?" One father responded in a matter of fact way, "Porque aqui no tenemos muertos - Because we don't have any dead here." His answer was confirmed by the majority of other parents who were present either with words or gestures. One of the mothers added that the principle piece of the holiday was going to the cemetery, emphasizing that if there were no 'muertos - dead' or you couldn't go to 'los muertos' then there was not a reason to celebrate *Día de Los Muertos*.
>
> - Fieldnotes from 10/25/2011

The School Parents clearly stated that they do not celebrate *Día de los Muertos* in Mid-Michigan. Especially significant in the responses of non-celebration is the reasoning behind why *Día de los Muertos* is not celebrated. The School Parents don't have any dead here in Mid-Michigan. The way that the School Parents understood celebration of *Día de los Muertos* is by going to the cemetery. It is in the cemetery, where the remains of deceased relatives are located, where the holiday transpires. This is consistent with findings from other research on Day of the Dead in Mexico (Brandes 1988; Garcíagodoy 1998; Marchi 2009; Norget 2006). The School Parents and I did not discuss what activities took place in the hometown cemeteries in Mexico during *Día de los Muertos*. Their orientation to the activities involved in the celebration

could be evidence of regional particularities. That possibility aside, the School Parents made it clear that it was the visit to the "muertos" (deceased family members) that was important. Not being able to visit your muertos was reason enough to not celebrate.

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN A NEW PLACE - *Día de los Muertos* in the United States serves the need to remember and venerate deceased family members and loved ones. Celebrants do so by building altars in their homes, volunteering to build one at their church, and attending/participating in a special mass with processes specific for the celebration of *Día de los Muertos*. For the participants in this study *Día de los Muertos* festivities offer an opportunity to commemorate family members who have died. The continued practice of Day of the Dead also facilitates a sense of connection with a cultural heritage and homeland. Participation in a public gathering with other celebrants can also enhance integration to a new community. Francisca, in response to my questions about why she continues to celebrate *Día de los Muertos* and what makes the celebration important to her, discusses her need/desire to feel connected to her cultural heritage.

> For me, the fact that I am far from home, obviously sometimes you feel very far from your customs, your traditions, your culture, and I think it's easy, with all that happens in everyday life, to separate from or forget who you are. For me being Mexican forms, well it's everything for me, I'm Mexican, that's who I am. So the fact of doing this, I think it helps me not to forget, but be more connected with who I am and with my culture (Francisca 2011).

Being far away from home and the culture in which she grew up in addition to navigating everyday life in the United States, Francisca feels disconnected from being Mexican and herself. *Día de los Muertos* offers her a way to "maintain" a sense of her identity as a Mexican. It is a particular day and activity that connects her with deceased family members and reinforces a connection with her cultural heritage and identity. Celebration of the holiday is part of her

psychological work that reinforces her positive sense of self as a part of the social category, ethnic group, of Mexican.

In addition to the connection with a cultural heritage and a sense of self, *Día de Los Muertos* celebrations are viewed as a way to foster a connection with a new community here in Mid-Michigan by way of familiar traditions.

> Some people here are fairly newly arrived; you have first generation, second, third and fourth generation. I think that the ones that are closer to Mexico [they themselves or their parents migrated], especially the ones who came from Mexico and maybe grew up in Mexico and came here, came here at some point, really have that experience there [of celebrating DDLM], so [we're] trying to help them . . . make connections, trying to help them have these touchstones with what they're familiar with, and sharing it with everybody else (Charles 2011).

Here Pastor Charles acknowledges that while *Día de los Muertos* at the church is intended to commemorate deceased relatives in line with traditional cultural and religious practices, the formal public celebration provides an opportunity for people to connect with a co-ethnic community and participate in psychological work that reinforces their sense of self. Contact with a community that also celebrates cultural holidays can facilitate celebration, a sense of connection to a cultural heritage, and integration with a new community.

SUMMARY COMMENTS

The present research found that *Día de los Muertos* celebrations are present in Mid-Michigan. The empirical evidence suggests public and domestic celebrations of the holiday are taking place in Mid-Michigan City. This paper presented evidence of such celebrations that took place at a local church and in a respondent's home in a mid-size Michigan city. Respondents also indicated that they did not participate in public celebrations nor celebrate Day of the Dead privately. Their lack of activity regarding *Día de los Muertos* celebration by the School Parents does not necessarily indicate a loss of ethnic identity. The celebration of *Día de los Muertos* is not a litmus test for who has reproduced cultural activities to affirm an ethnic identity and who has not. Instead, *Día de los Muertos* serves as but one of many ways that Mexican migrants may engage in psychological work to affirm their identity as Mexican in the United States of America. My interview with School Parents was conducted entirely in Spanish. Language is a strong marker for ethnic and social identity (Hurtado et al. 1994; Nagel 1994). Additionally, there exist many factors that may influence celebration or non-celebration of a particular holiday or reproducing culture in a specific manner. Certainly time in country, connection with a local Mexican community that celebrate, access to resources, and experiences of marginalization are social factors that could have an effect on how ethnic groups reproduce culture in new social spaces and contexts. Future research could explore the salience of these factors on the celebration of *Día de los Muertos*.

For the respondents who did celebrate *Día de los Muertos*, the holiday served multiple purposes. First and foremost the holiday was a time to honor and remember deceased family members and loved ones. Their participation in Day of the Dead celebration activities;

attending church service, building an altar, and/or preparing special meals also affirms their identity as Mexican as well as a connection to a cultural heritage and homeland. These participants' celebration of *Día de los Muertos* demonstrates one way that cultural practices are reproduced in new social contexts. Continued research here would consist of extended case study at the church and with church members to gain deeper understandings of the significance of *Día de los Muertos* to participants' lives.

The in-home and public celebrations offer an opportunity for respondents to express religious faith and cultural values in a way that does not necessarily conflict with life in the United States and connects practitioners with a cultural heritage that reaffirms their identity. *Día de los Muertos*, for participants in this study, maintains its original significance of paying respect to and remembering deceased relatives while also serving as a symbol of Mexican cultural heritage that affirms an ethnic identity as Mexican. The behaviors associated with Day of the Dead and the celebration as a whole could also support social identity's assertion that people engage in "psychological work" to affirm a positive sense of self when in a situation of social comparison. *Día de los Muertos* celebrations could also offer those who identify as Mexican a safe space to perform their ethnicity. As alluded to in the earlier discussion of social identity theory, in the social context of United States of America, Mexicans are racialized and marginalized within U.S. racial hierarchy. Day of the Dead as a site of psychological work appears to proactively challenge the internalization of a racialized and marginalized identity. The holiday serves the function of remembering deceased relatives and takes on secondary function of connecting people with their cultural heritage reaffirming a positive identity.

Celebration of *Día de los Muertos* is a theoretically salient social phenomenon to the study of cultural reproduction and identity construction among Mexicans, and potentially other Latinos/as, living in the social context of the United States of America. Future research should engage the relationship between migrant cultural reproduction and gender. The vast majority of people involved in the study and *Día de los Muertos* activities were women. This was not an anticipated finding. Future research should engage the question; what role does gender play in cultural reproduction? New work in this area should definitely investigate the impact of such a relationship to identity construction of Mexican migrants. Such questions could be further expanded beyond the immigrant generation to include the larger U.S. Chicano/Latino community. The study of *Día de los Muertos* in the United States of America is an area where much research and many rich discussions can be had.

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