

Mexican-American Cultural & Artistic Identity

One of the persistent issues in the United States of America has been the integration and acceptance of Mexican-Americans and their culture into the cultural identity of *America*. Mexican-Americans have a distinct cultural identity in the USA. Their communities, artistic symbols, and fight for equality are all unique to their experience of being *American*.

Some refer to American born Mexicans as *Chicanos*-a term used to differentiate them from their peers from Mexico, which they cannot entirely relate to, and their peers in America, who they also differ from. I personally believe the term Chicano has an ugly connotation to it, perhaps because it originated as a slur used against Mexican-Americans. However, for the purpose of this paper I will use both terms.

In 1848, the Mexican-American War ended but Chicanos still had to fight for equal rights in the United States. This resulted in the commencement of The Chicano Movement. Civil Rights Activist Cesar Chavez worked hard in the 1950s and 60s for the rights of Chicano farmworkers by organizing labor unions. Reies Lopez Tijerina was another activist who “led the push to reclaim land confiscated by anglo settlers in violation of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo” (Carillo). The United States has a long history of taking land that does not belong to it. Native Americans and Mexicans lost much of their land due to colonization. So this fight by Tijerina was necessary and significant.

Many American city names derive from Spanish origin, such as San Diego, El Cajon, San Antonio.. etc. Numerous cities and areas once belonging to Mexican people have become gentrified. For instance, the city of Los Angeles has become a popular place. The city is well-known and comes to many people’s minds when they think of the United States. It is known for its glamorous neighborhoods and celebrity culture. However, when I think of Los Angeles, I associate it with the run-down area in which my great grandmother still lives.

Lincoln Heights is full of historical landmarks and is notoriously poor. It is the lowly area where most minorities live in Los Angeles. The area can be dangerous, and I never quite felt safe there when I would visit as a child. However, I think that the gentrified areas of the city overcompensate. The wealthy people of Los Angeles often forget who the city once belonged to. In that forgetting, history is lost on many residents. Both groups feel a sense of entitlement to the city's identity. There is a distinct class, racial, and cultural divide in the city.

Olvera Street in Los Angeles was once home to many Mexicans until the 1930s when a wealthy woman with high social status turned it into a tourist area (Hayoun, 2017). This happens often with ethnic communities. If the wealthy, higher class Americans do not like the look or traditions of these communities, they try to forcefully change it. This unfortunately results in communities being stripped of their cultural heritage and many people losing their sense of home. "In the *barrios* of Los Angeles, Chicano youth founded the Brown Berets in 1967... The organization was dedicated to combatting police brutality and racism but some chapters also demanded education, job, and housing equality" (University of Washington). However, a member of the Brown Berets gave an interview in September 2020 saying, "Our struggle is still the same as it was in the '60s" (NBC San Diego). Though Mexican-Americans have made progress and enacted change in the United States, it unfortunately has not fixed all of the racial and identity issues that plague the country. Many Chicanos are still unhappy with the place they hold in society as Mexican-Americans. Their integration has been difficult, especially considering that they have to demand equality, be mindful of the preservation of their culture, and work day jobs all at the same time. Still, they find the energy to empower the resistance.

In the 1960s, "the Chicano Art Movement, also termed as 'Chicano Renaissance,' used art as part of the struggle to achieve new and more credible human values" (University of Michigan). Mexican-Americans painted murals which represented their culture. These

murals served as a reminder to Americans that Mexican-Americans were still around, and proud of their culture, history, and traditions. It was politically significant in that it took a stance against racism. It reminded not only fellow Americans, but also Chicanos themselves, that they have just as much of a place in America as everybody else. “As artists began to actively participate in the efforts to redress the plight of Mexicans in the United States, there emerged a new iconography and symbolic language which not only articulated the movement, but became the core of a Chicano cultural renaissance” (chicanoart.org). With Mexican-American art in public spaces, it became harder for other Americans to ignore their presence. This use of art in the public sphere was a clever tactic used to aid in the preservation of a culture and its symbols.

Furthermore, Mexicans are predominantly Catholic due to the Spanish colonization of Mexico. Therefore, most Mexican-Americans identify as Catholics, which also considerably influences their art. “Our Lady of Guadalupe” is a significant icon for Mexicans and Chicanos. “To the present day, Our Lady of Guadalupe remains a powerful symbol of Mexican identity and faith, and her image is associated with everything from motherhood to feminism to social justice” (Reyes, 2016). Imagery of Our Lady can be seen often in Chicano households, whether on prayer candles, artwork, or other items. Furthermore, many Mexican activists used her image during their activism. The image remains sacred and is symbolic of protection and a reminder of cultural heritage.

Though America has not solved their issues regarding discrimination against those of Mexican descent, Americans often enjoy the cultural influences that come from Mexico. For instance, sugar skulls have a popular motif for many Americans. Sugar skulls are colorfully & artistically decorated skulls, associated with the Mexican holiday, *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead.

...As Brandes writes, the Spanish empire, for its part, was strongly influenced by Europe's seventeenth-century Baroque period, a time of skull and skeleton ornamentation. Spanish ritual practices on All Souls' Day included offering food at cemeteries in honor of the dead; one custom in Aztec commemorations of the deceased or of certain deities was making figures out of wood, covering them with *tzoalli*, or amaranth seed dough, then eating the resulting pastry. Eventually, these anthropomorphic dough figurines, combined with Spanish ritual practice, resulted in the Mexican custom of edible Day of the Dead figurines. (Compagnon, 2020)

Sugar skull motifs now extend beyond figurines. They can be found on many products at common stores, such as plates, clothing, utensils, etc. America has capitalized on the culture as it does with many other cultures. The symbolic meaning of the skulls has almost lost significance due to how commodified they are now. Still, for those committed to what they signify, the true meaning (the remembrance of lost loved ones) is preserved.

Many Americans celebrate Cinco de Mayo. The holiday was invented to remember the Mexican army's defeat of France at the Battle of Puebla. "While it is a relatively minor holiday in Mexico, in the United States, Cinco de Mayo has evolved into a commemoration of Mexican culture and heritage, particularly in areas with large Mexican-American populations." (History, 2009) It is now generally a holiday used by Americans as an excuse to get inebriated and party under colorful decor. However, "Chicano activists raised awareness of the holiday in the 1960s, in part because they identified with the victory of indigenous Mexicans...over European invaders during the battle of Puebla" (Wheeler, 2009). This holiday has also been capitalized upon by the United States, as almost any tradition or culture that enters America's radar appears eventually is.

Moreover, the problem with many immigrants facing mistreatment in the United States is that they come from countries where they escaped even worse conditions. Therefore, they often accept the oppressive aspects of integration because they feel that they have to and should be grateful just to be in the country. Even after the Chicano Movement, many Mexican-Americans still fall victim to this belief. Especially the ones who are newer to America and were not in the land areas now owned by America when they were still belonging to Mexico. However, there have been many advancements. I met a woman who told me the story of how when she was a small child in the 1960s in San Antonio, Texas, she encountered adults calling her racial slurs on the streets. Her father later rose to a high political position in the city.

Even the former president, Donald Trump, has said disparaging things about Mexicans during his campaign. For instance, in a 2015 speech, he said “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Trump, 2015). This speech villainized Mexicans and pointed to them as the reason for the United States’ problems. He got away with this and still won the election because when citizens are desperate for answers to the problems of their country, placing the blame on a scapegoat unfortunately often works.

Growing up, I personally never felt much discrimination because I don’t *look* Mexican. I grew up in Southern California and later, Texas. My mother is from Los Angeles, California, and is of Mexican descent. My father is from Michigan, of Italian and Polish descent. I was raised mostly with the cultural influence of my mother’s family. Though my mother and her family all speak Spanish, I was not allowed to learn it because my father grew up with the sentiment that many Americans have ingrained in them: *This is America, and in America, you speak English*. This idea has changed over the years thanks to the many

activists who fought for rights for all minorities. However, there are still a great number of people who are annoyed that people in the country speak another language.

Culturally, the USA is comprised of a vast array of ethnicities and traditions, art, and religion. However, it is still recovering from the years of assimilation where colonizers tried to strip it of its differences to form one cohesive American culture that mostly benefitted non-ethnic citizens. Through Mexican-American preservation of culture and social and political activism, many advancements have been made in forming a more tolerant society. Hopefully one day soon the country will exist as a place that is accepting of its people's differences. In the meantime, Chicano identity lives on through its traditions, art, and the passion of its people.

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