

Dear White People/Queridos Gringos: You Want Our Culture But You Don't Want Us – Stop Colonizing The Day Of The Dead

<http://bit.ly/1ukuf6l>

Posted: October 31, 2014 | Author: [Aya de Leon](#) |



Dear White People (or should I say Queridos Gringos/Gabachos),

Let me begin by saying it is completely natural that you would find yourself attracted to The Day of The Dead. This indigenous holiday from Mexico celebrates the loving connection between the living and our departed loved ones that is so deeply missing in Western culture. Who wouldn't feel moved by intricately and lovingly built altars, beautifully painted skull faces, waterfalls of marigold flowers, fragrant sweet breads and delicious meals for those whom we miss sharing our earthly lives. I understand. Many cultures from around the world celebrate these things, and many of them at this time of year. As a woman whose Latin@ heritage is Puerto Rican, I have grown up in California, seeing this ritual all my life and feeling the ancestral kinship to this reverent, prayerful honoring of the departed.

Let me continue by saying that it is completely natural that you would want to participate in celebrating The Day of The Dead. You, like all human beings, have lineage, ancestors, departed family members. You have skulls under the skin of your own faces, bones beneath your flesh. Like all mortals, you seek ways to understand death, to befriend it, and celebrate it in the context of celebrating life and love.

I understand.

And in the tradition of indigenous peoples, Chican@ and Mexican-American communities have not told you not to come, not to join, not to celebrate your dead alongside them. In the tradition of indigenous peoples and of ceremony, you, in your own grief and missing your loved ones have not been turned away. You arrived at the Dia De Los Muertos ceremony shipwrecked, a refugee from a culture that suppresses grief, hides death, banishes it, celebrates it only in the most morbid ways—horror movies, violent television—death is dehumanized, without loving connection, without ceremony. You arrived at El Dia De Los Muertos like a Pilgrim, starving, unequal to survival in the land of grief, and the indigenous ceremonies fed you and took you in and revived you and made a place for you at the table.

And what have you done?

Like the Pilgrims, you have begun to take over, to gentrify and colonize this holiday for yourselves. I was shocked this year to find Day of the Dead events in my native Oakland Bay Area not only that were not organized by Chican@s or Mexican@s or Latin@s, but events with zero Latin@ artists participating, involved, consulted, paid, recognized, acknowledged, prayed with.

Certain announcements of some of this year's celebrations conjured visions of hipsters drinking special holiday microbrews and listening to live music by white bands and eating white food in calavera facepaint and broken trails of marigolds. Don't bother to build an altar because your celebration is an altar of death, a ceremony of killing culture by appropriation. Do you really not know how to sit at the table? To say thank you? To be a gracious guest?

This year, as midterm elections near and "immigration reform" gets bandied about on the lips of politicians, urban young white voters will wear skull faces and watch puppets with dancing skeleton bones, and party and drink and celebrate. But those same revelers will not think for a single second of deaths of Latin@s trying to cross a militarized border to escape from the deaths caused by NAFTA and CAFTA and US foreign policy and drug policies and dirty wars in Mexico and Central America. Amidst the celebration, there will be no thought for **femicide in Juarez**, for **murdered and missing Indigenous women in North America**. As they drink and dance in white-organized and dominated Dia De Los Muertos celebrations without a thought for us, except perhaps the cleaning or custodial staff that will clean up after them, we Latin@s learn

what we learned in 1492 about the invaders: you want the golden treasures of our culture, but you don't want us. Since then, white people have shown that they don't value indigenous life, but are fascinated by indigenous spirituality.

Not all white people feel this way. Thank you to those of you who speak up against this. Thank you to all who boycott these events, support Latin@/Chican@/Mexican@-led events, hire our community's artists, and hold the tradition with reverence. For those of you who haven't been doing so, it's not too late to start. Challenge white people who attempt to appropriate. Boycott their events and be noisy about it. There's nothing wrong with wanting to participate in this deeply human holiday, there's something wrong with wanting to colonize.

And the urge to colonization is born when your own land and resources have been taken over by the greedy and your cultures have been bankrupted. Halloween has a rich history as **an indigenousEuropean holiday** that celebrated many of the same themes as Day of the Dead, but you have let it be taken over by Wal-Mart. Now it's about plastic decorations and cheap polyester costumes and young women having permission to wear sexy clothes without being slut-shamed and kids bingeing on candy. November first finds piles of plastic and synthetic junk headed to the landfill to litter the earth. You have abandoned Halloween, left it laying in the street like a trampled fright wig from the dollar store. Take back your holiday. Take back your own indigenous culture. Fight to reclaim your own spirituality.

Please. Stop colonizing ours.