



FIESTA AND CITIZENSHIP

By Edgar Reynald Vásquez

Fiesta is about citizenship. Since its inception, city boosters have used the annual festival to not only provide a steady stream of tourist revenue to the city of San Antonio, but to demarcate who has access to full citizenship rights and who does not. The creation of the *Order of the Alamo*, the *Battle of the Flowers*, the *Texas Cavaliers*, and the *Coronation of the Fiesta Queen and Entourage* have developed lavish pageantry to celebrate who has privilege and wealth in our city. Public ceremonies celebrate the social and economic disparities that have kept so many of our people down. And yet, most of our people participate in this annual ceremony year after year, attending the very rituals that mock them and celebrate their marginalization. To make matters worse, they pay an entrance fee to these events, most of which occur in public spaces, perpetuating the cycle of disparity as the working class lavishes the rich with their hard-earned money.



A decorated carriage in the Battle of Flowers Parade, circa 1895-1900. Battle of Flowers Parade, circa 1895-1900. Source: Battle of Flowers Association.



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display; a caricature meant to create a line of division

But why do so many participate in this annual ritual of the haves and have nots? Because we're told that *Fiesta* is celebrating us and our culture. People don bright colors and flower crowns as they listen to our music and eat our food. But dig deeper. We aren't being celebrated. A mockery of our culture is put on full

in which we are the 'other.' After all, *Fiesta* is meant to commemorate the *Battle of the Flowers*, a mock battle in front of the Alamo. The loss of our heritage is being celebrated. We are being put in our place as court jesters in the white man's victory celebration. In a city in which Mexican Americans are the majority, our citizenship is predicated on the participation of our own marginalization. Despite the mass participation, however, there have always been voices of dissent.

Community members and Chicana leaders have sought to challenge the pervasiveness of this ritual through the process of *concientización*. Challenges to the annual tradition began in earnest during the 1970s during the *Chicana/o Movement*. Since 1987, the *Esperanza Peace and Justice Center* has continued to challenge the tradition through the process of *concientización*, helping the community realize the inherent violence and subjugation entrenched in rituals celebrating victors over the vanquished. Through counterprogramming, street and art performance, people have expressed their dissent through various, creative outlets. These efforts prove that the process of *concientización* can go further than self-actualization. They seek to awaken the community to the collective memory of pain and violence that has been marketed and capitalized by *Fiesta*. Through counterprogramming and art, community members can continue to inform their families, friends, and neighbors to not participate in their own subjugation and define citizenship on their own terms.

BIO: *Edgar grew up in the Chicagoland area surrounded by a community of Mexican immigrants. He has worked on several independent films that have screened at various film festivals. His work in public history at St. Mary's University in San Antonio led to a fellowship at the Smithsonian's Latino Museum Studies Program. He is currently at SMU's Moody School of Graduate and Advanced Studies.*