

The Battle of *Cinco de Mayo*: Memory, Myth, and Museum Practices in Mexico

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Abstract

On 5 May 1862, heavily outnumbered Mexican troops succeeded in defeating the invading French army at the Battle of Puebla. The battle did little to change the war's outcome, but became a powerful symbol of Mexican national unity that helped to make sense of the violence of the previous decades. Celebrations to commemorate the *Cinco de Mayo* began almost as soon as the battle had ended, and have since evolved in Puebla to become one of the city's pre-eminent expressions of civic identity. This article explores the evolution of the battle's commemorations over a five-year period, during which the city invested in multiple new museums and tourist infrastructure connected to the iconic events. The article focuses on two key heritage precincts, containing six museums that were central to attempts to transform the historic city centre. The article explores how historic suffering was used to frame a narrative of civic inclusion. In so doing, it signals the role of state-level governments in curating a nationally significant memory. It also suggests a need for caution as government co-opts multiple stories to augment its own authority.

Key words: Battlefield Sites; Puebla; Commemorative Practices; Heritage Politics

Introduction

On 5 May 1862, a crucial battle took place in the central Mexican city of Puebla. Conservatives and Liberals had been engaged in a decades-long conflict to control the government of Mexico, and the battle was a surprise victory for the progressive Liberal administration of the republic. The heavily outnumbered Republican troops succeeded in defeating an invading French imperial army, who sought to install a sympathetic Conservative government that might support French commercial and strategic interests. The Liberal Republican victory had not been expected, and challenged assumptions of European military pre-eminence worldwide. Instead, the victory asserted a patriotic, progressive and democratic Mexican nation in arms. While the victory was only one battle in a war that would last for a further five years, it became a symbol of the Mexican people's patriotic resistance to foreign intervention and colonialism.

The commemoration of the battle is now known internationally as the *Cinco de Mayo* or 'Fifth of May' in recognition of the day the victory occurred. The celebrations are particularly well-known in the United States of America, where they are commonly confused with the Mexican Day of Independence. Mexicans and those of Mexican heritage use the *Cinco de Mayo* celebrations as a proud affirmation of the resilience of Mexican culture and people in the face of adversity. The battle's anniversary is similarly considered by many to be a public holiday in Mexico, despite it not being officially sanctioned as such by the federal government. Although widely recognised worldwide, the focus for celebrations remains in the Mexican city of Puebla. The city has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987 in recognition of its well-preserved colonial centre and churches. More recently, the administration of the State of Puebla has sought to develop the city's potential for tourism through high-profile and strategic investment in museums and heritage sites throughout the historic centre.

This article explores changing museum practices as part of their extensive redevelopment in the city of Puebla. The changes were part of a coordinated campaign by the state governor

in the 2010s to increase tourism that would drive economic and social development. The politicisation of local museums saw a shift from the battle's depiction as having been a nationally significant event led by powerful generals, to the inclusion of more diverse voices to generate a sense of civic pride. While such narration presented a more inclusive understanding of historical events, the sites' development became politicised through their association with the local governor's ambition, distancing significant sectors of the community from their heritage. The research focuses on six museums that are clustered in two heritage precincts within the city; one precinct is at the site of the forts that coordinated the city's defence, and another is located in nineteenth century buildings in the colonial centre of the city. The article explores the evolution of these museums from the sesquicentennial commemorations in 2012 to the end of Governor Rafael Moreno Valle's term in 2017. It points to the important role of state-level institutions in curating national memories, and the potential for disparate voices in spaces associated with military and civic heritage to be co-opted by political ambitions.

Approaching the Battle of Cinco de Mayo

There is an established body of work that connects battlefield sites, heritage, and society's attitude to conflict (see for its formative work, Winter 2014). The importance of battlefield sites for formulating particular configurations of national identity is well-known (Lake and Reynolds 2010). Where such sites are imbued with symbolic identities of national becoming, they become crucial to national iconographies and provide didactic encounters with the past with which later generations can relate. As such, battlefields provide a window in which to frame and contest formulations of nationalism in the present (Daugbjerg 2009: 432). The co-location of museums with battlefields provides a more direct means to narrate and constitute the nation into being for visitors. Such museums are part of the spectacle that drives tourism, but also have the potential for tourists to reflect on their connection with historical actors and on the contemporary resonance of the historical events.

While battlefield museums may celebrate decisive victories, they can also memorialize the disaster of war and loss of life. There have been a series of scholarly engagements regarding the importance of battlefields as sites for reflection on death, including whether or not visitors are cognizant of suffering and the so-called 'dark' aspects of such heritage sites (Miles 2014). Such places invite reflection on who might constitute a heroic figure in the conflict, and whether that persona might extend from the fighting soldiers and volunteers to suffering civilians inadvertently trapped in the conflict. Pörzgen (2016), in her analysis of museums of the siege of St Petersburg, notes that displays implicitly suggest that 'everyone can be a hero. But [equally that] not everyone is up to the task' (414). At such moments, visitors are invited to reflect on whether they would have the requisite courage to fight (or indeed simply survive) in the face of violence and fear. Attempts to frame the suffering of war as heroic serve to bind the community together, as visitors seek meaning in the individual tales of pain and loss. Pörzgen (2016) argues that such narrations of collective suffering in war implicitly imbue the commemorations with loyalty to the state, as the supreme expression of community. In celebrating the state's role as the ultimate protector of the people in this manner, the museums may limit the capacity for dissenting opinion and alternative constructs of identity. Yet, how people relate to the state in war (and the significance of that historical co-constitution of citizenry and state in the contemporary moment) remains a space in which alternative voices can be invoked through heritage.

Battlefields are situated markers of human suffering and death that are experienced in the present. Historical human presence can be signalled through the lost objects of the dead that persist into the present, or the dead can be more firmly located in the past through a narrative focus on their final moments of agentic struggle in life. In both formulations, encounters with human suffering can provide powerful moments of reflection for visitors. This need not involve visitors primarily engaging with the sites as locations of 'dark tourism' (Miles 2014). Museums provide for rituals and practices to connect the visitors with the dead, but also to understand the significance of the place and event for their own 'rights and duties as citizens' in the contemporary moment (Bennett 2008: 263).

The question of visitors' moral obligation to those who died to defend the nation, and the act of visiting the site of their death, is a contentious one in scholarship. A number of

scholars assert that tourism associated with death should be treated differently to other forms of tourism simply 'because of the otherness of death' (Wielde Heidelberg 2015: 76). Such assumptions assert that death is something that 'can be sequestered from the living and done in private setting, which removes it from everyday life' (77). For many cultures, and Mexico's in particular, such an approach to death is not common. Rather than be sequestered, the dead regularly make ethical and practical demands on the living. The suffering of disappeared political activists has been at the centre of mobilizations for change in contemporary Mexico for decades for example (Aguayo 2015). Far less research has been conducted on the politics of death in museums. Museums' cultivation of grief, and adulation of certain groups of the dead, are a core part of their mission and engagement with visitors. As Denton (2014) argues, '[r]emembering the dead, in particular those thought to have distinguished themselves morally or politically, creates continuity between the past and the present and helps to forge a sense of cultural identity. Societies designate certain dead figures for emulation, transforming them into martyrs as a way of highlighting moral, cultural, and political values deemed integral to the present.' (95) The politics of museums' role in mythologizing the forgotten dead is fraught with difficulty, however.

Governments and institutions in Mexico have activity sought to mythologize particular groups as heroic victims and martyrs for decades. Since the 1930s, the state has sought to carefully construct a narrative of national becoming that binds political elites with the disenfranchised and poor (Benjamin 2000; Knight 2015). Museums have also been central to the government's attempt to bolster its authority since the 1960s and throughout the period of one party rule that lasted until 2000 (Velásquez Marroni 2017: 340). Despite the government's efforts to formulate what Velásquez Marroni terms an authorized 'historical culture' of national becoming, there have long been challenges to this narrative from outside the political centre. In part, this is facilitated by the powerful and independent National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH). Other heritage sites, ranging from university collections, community museums, pop-up memorials and popular protests have sought to nurture a range of counter-memories that contest official histories of Mexico. It would be a mistake to assert the existence of a single 'historical culture' that could be supported by a government. Similarly, the 'authorised heritage discourses' (Smith 2006) of key heritage sites have shifted as the country moved from one party rule to the hope for a democratic future. Crucially in a federal constitution such as Mexico's, state governments' role must be incorporated so that heritage discourse throughout civil society can be more fully understood.

The State of Puebla elected Governor Moreno Valle in 2011 after more than 80 years of one-party rule in the state. A member of the conservative National Action Party (or *Partido Acción Nacional*, more commonly known by its acronym 'PAN'), he inherited a state that was relatively wealthy and with low levels of crime. Moreno Valle instigated a signature program of investment in the city's museums to increase tourism, and thereby employment, throughout the state. This involved new investment in buildings, such as the radical redesign of long-standing large art museums such as the Amparo Museum (*Museo Amparo*). Through the consolidation of existing disparate institutions and by attracting external investors, Moreno Valle also supported the creation of new museums that leveraged the city's UNESCO heritage status, such as the International Museum of the Baroque (*El Museo Internacional del Barroco*). As with other regional governments throughout the world, Moreno Valle's attempts at strategic cultural representation outside the constraints of institutions such as the INAH provided the state government with prestige, and opportunities for patronage of diverse stakeholders (Anico and Peralta 2007). The initiatives were not without controversy, however. Many local *poblanos*¹ were angered by the governor's vision, which they felt imperilled cherished smaller museums and community-curated heritage sites that had existed for decades.

The research for this article was conducted during five extended visits to Puebla from 2012 to 2017. Each visit lasted several months, and involved detailed analysis of evolving museum exhibitions. In addition to photographs and field notes, various ephemera and publicity materials were used to evaluate how the narration of history in the city evolved over time. While locations associated with the *Cinco de Mayo* had been a longstanding part of the city's landscape, Moreno Valle's strategy placed them at the centre of the city's reinvigorated touristic experience. Telling a story of Republican patriotism against imperial aggression and corruption,

the battle provides an insight into how state-level governments seek to shift and appropriate museum narratives relating to critical moments in Mexico's national history. It also reveals how attempts to develop more inclusive narratives can be appropriated for political purposes by key local stakeholders. The result is that battlefield narratives of human suffering co-opt voices from the periphery in order to champion narratives of political success and economic progress.

'The Force of Destiny' in Mexican Nationalism

5 May 2012 marked the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Puebla, and the event was commemorated by an enormous celebration in the city of Puebla. Ten thousand people took part in a re-enactment of the battle, and the pride of the Mexican armed forces paraded alongside hundreds of local children. Televised live throughout the country, the celebrations were attended by the Mexican president Felipe Calderón and other prominent politicians and celebrities. Highly anticipated within the city of Puebla, and despite the rain on the day, the events were a popular success. President Calderón had hoped that the celebration of the battle would assert Mexican nationalism in 'a true national festival... a celebration which extends beyond our borders. Because, day by day, the pride to be Mexican [exists] precisely because of our predecessors on that singular day; today is... a symbol of identity and pride in *hispanidad*.' He concluded that he hoped to 'turn this celebration into one of the strongest pillars of national identity'.²

Aside from the parade's reinscription of the battle's occurrence through the heart of the city, the celebration was politically significant for the presence of both the President of the Republic of Mexico and the Governor of the State of Puebla. Calderón was only the second president from an opposition party (PAN) to be elected since the early 1920s. The Governor of Puebla, Moreno Valle, was similarly the first PAN candidate to be elected governor of the state. Together they appeared to promise a new era in democratically elected and transparent government, after more than eighty years of one party rule. Calderón drew an analogy between Mexico at the time of the battle and the contemporary moment. Then, he said, it had appeared 'a country disorganised, divided and incapable of a viable future as a nation',³ yet had proved detractors wrong in going on to thrive under a new generation of politicians. As Calderón had stated in announcing the parade, '[a] century and a half from the Battle of Puebla, Mexicans must learn to study our history to construct a better future. A country that has a vibrant and pluralistic democracy'.⁴

The president's words were particularly compelling, coming at the end of his presidency, five years after he launched the now infamous War on Drugs. Calderón sought to connect the historical defence of the nation at Puebla with his contemporary so-called war, asking the army 'to watch over [Mexico's] sovereignty, so that never again will any power try to snatch from us that which is ours, as the French army tried unsuccessfully in 1862'.⁵ The centring of attention on the armed forces made sense in a contemporary context dominated by hope that the army's deployment against cartels would be successful, and would reaffirm an agentive state that refused to be cowed by criminals. Notwithstanding Calderón's hope, the parade marked a shift in how the *Cinco de Mayo* would be commemorated in the city, with the constructs of the armed forces, sacrifice and civic inclusion changing decisively over the coming five years.

At the time of the 2012 celebrations, heritage connected with the battle was focussed at two key sites; the historical forts precinct, and the Zaragoza Museum and Library (*Museo y Biblioteca Zaragoza*) in the city centre. The two forts, named Fort Loreto and Fort Guadalupe, dominated the wooded hill that rises over the historic city centre. Each fort contained a separate museum dedicated to the battle. Loreto was the centre for the larger and longstanding museum focussed on the *Cinco de Mayo*. A former chapel, the site had been the main point of defence against the French forces (Salazar Exaire et al 2007). It had officially been founded as a 'war museum' to preserve the memory of foreign interventions in Mexican history in the 1970s, and had gradually evolved to focus solely on the battle of the *Cinco de Mayo*. Visitors entered the museum by crossing a military parade ground from the early nineteenth century, before entering the former chapel and viewing a large display that was dominated by a religious image of Our Lady of Loreto. The museum contained a mixture of narrative boards and traditional exhibits, ranging from reproduced military uniforms to replica weapons and original diaries.

The exhibition used these voices to construct a grand historical narrative of a nation at war in the days preceding the battle.



Figure 1: Fort Loreto, 2012. Image: Author.

The historic precinct of the forts was complemented by a second heritage site in the heart of the colonial city centre, also dedicated to the memory of the *Cinco de Mayo*. The Zaragoza Museum and Library contained the 'museum of the army', and focused on General Ignacio Zaragoza who had led the armies in defence of the city. Military personnel ensured that visitors provided their personal details on entry to the museum and armed guards stood at either side of the entrance, clearly delineating the exhibitions as military space. The museum itself was located in colonnaded rooms that looked onto a well-maintained garden, around which military personnel chatted while playing chess and cards. In a series of rooms, the museum told a linear chronological narrative of the years leading to the battle through the prism of Zaragoza's life. Glimpses into his youth gave hints of his genius, while facsimiles of letters displayed his resolve and foresight in the days of the battle. Historical flags and reproduction uniforms ensured that the space emphasized national pride in a military institution that was led by heroic men.

A number of themes were consistently presented at the centre of exhibitions in both the forts and the military museum. Pre-eminent among these was the unquestionable and predetermined nature of Mexican nationalism. The patriotic resistance that Mexicans showed against the French was divinely ordained and manifested by the army's valour. The close connection between battle and Catholic God was reinforced by the forts' location on the site of a former chapel. One such typical display in the forts precinct noted that 'war and religion were the beacons that guided the development of human society' (*Arquitectura Militar en Nueva España*). Without Mexicans' faith (and Zaragoza's exemplary religiosity), it was implied that God would not have intervened to save the general's life during the battle. The final climactic room in the Loreto Fort was thus dedicated to telling the story of Our Lord of the Bullet, explaining how a French bullet intended for Zaragoza instead became lodged in a nearby statue of Christ

through divine intervention. The focus was on Zaragoza as a providential man of destiny, a foil for the evil Emperor Maximilian and the French, and as the embodiment of a nation.

In both museums, the battle was framed as the struggle of a great leader whose capacity to overcome difficulty was the story of a national becoming. The difficult history of divisions between Mexican liberals and conservatives was masked through a focus on the army as



the ongoing representative and custodian of Mexican nationalism and the state. Rather than dangerously bickering politicians, this was a 'citizen army' led by providence. Hampered by a rushed military campaign, the battle was fought by 'mostly inexperienced young recruits, enlisted given the imminence of the attack' and assisted by hundreds of government officials taking up positions on the city's many church roofs (*La Batalla de Acultzingo*). Yet, the exhibitions gave no agency to these soldiers or civilians. It was the state that was suffering through the French presence, and the army's leaders who were tasked to protect it.

The army general as a man of destiny and national saviour is not an unusual trope in Mexican museums and historical narrative. The *caudillo*⁶ tradition of strong male political leadership can be traced through a succession of major events, in which a man's decision was portrayed as crucial for the nation's evolution. Zaragoza's unexpected death from typhoid fever days after the battle

Figure 2: The Zaragoza Museum and Library, 2014. Image: Author.

made him a martyr for the nation reborn. In the words of a display in the Zaragoza Library, 'we shall sacrifice on his coffin, converted today into the altar of the homeland, our quarrels, our divisions, our hatred, whatever may be impure in the heart of each individual, to duly prepare ourselves for the people's most sacred work: the preservation of its sovereignty' (*Significado de la Batalla del 5 de Mayo*). The death of countless other soldiers during the battle was silenced in favour of Zaragoza's heroic sacrifice through his untimely death. By virtue of his victory in the battle, 'the people of Mexico became aware of their collective social spirit, it is when they understood that they formed a nation, that they did not need to rely on foreign models that were far from her unique needs and her conscience, and that in her history this was the respect for which she searched' (*Significado de la Batalla del 5 de Mayo*). Without the army's heroic and masculine resistance on the 5 May 1862, there could have been no modern Mexico.

Notwithstanding the nation-building rhetoric, the exhibitions also reflected the context of the city in which they were located. Puebla was (and is) a conservative metropolis, with a history of supporting conservative causes against liberal governments (MacLachlan and Beezley

2010; Contreras Cruz 2008). The focus on the army as being representative of the people, and the location of the narrative at a national level, avoided these difficult historical realities. As demonstrated with the examples above, the museums portrayed the battle as a central moment of national becoming. Along with the army's key role, the events sought to foster a sense of patriotic nationhood that was focused on *caudillos*, militarism and masculinity. The suffering of civilians was subsumed within the suffering of the state, without recognition of violence against individuals or particular groups. These two historic precincts were broadly representative of traditional museum cultures in Mexican battlefield museums, in which a once-colonized nation must constantly fight and reassert itself against would-be invaders and colonizers. Museums reinforcing such histories in the body politic was core to the continuation of a vibrant and virile nation.



Figure 3: Museum of the Army and Air Force, 2017. Image: Author.

'What it means to be *poblano*' (and political) in museums

The 2012 celebrations for the sesquicentenary of the battle marked the start of a decisive shift in museums' portrayal of the *Cinco de Mayo* in Puebla. This shift was closely connected to Governor Moreno Valle's signature policy to develop tourism for economic development, but also with his desire that his state-based politics might enable a platform through which he might achieve national political office. These two factors saw museums within the city used to signal a vision of civic participation and community inclusion that would differentiate him from President Calderón. Despite its laudable aim of reducing the power of drug cartels, the so-called War on Drugs had rapidly escalated violence across parts of the country and precipitated a collapse in public confidence in politicians.⁷ By the end of Moreno Valle's term as Governor of Puebla, national homicides were at their highest levels ever recorded in Mexico and a sense of crisis was growing.⁸ Moreno Valle was eager to develop an alternative platform that emphasized his state's lack of crime and vibrant cultural offering, as a means to chart a path for development in Mexico more broadly. In order to make this a central policy offering,

he had invested significantly in more than a dozen museums throughout the State of Puebla during his governorship. Of these, two new museums to the *Cinco de Mayo* would be central in transforming the city's tourism and historic cityscape.

One the largest of the museums to be relocated and opened was the Museum of the Army and Air Force (*Museo del Ejército y Fuerza Aérea*), previously part of the Zaragoza Museum and Library. The new museum was housed in a renovated former penitentiary, which abutted a large park close to the city centre. Importantly, that penitentiary had been one of the improvised forts from which the city had been defended in the second Battle of Puebla in 1863 (which the French won resoundingly after a siege). The building had been partially destroyed during the fighting, requiring a large number of French troops to engage in close combat within the city itself. The new museum was orientated around the former prison exercise yard, now enclosed with a transparent roof that facilitated natural light and a sense of space within the museum. The museum was one of a number of recently renovated military museums throughout Mexico, but was the largest dedicated to the army. The former Zaragoza Museum and Library remained open as a reading room that was shared by the public and military, but the new museum was no longer a shared military-civilian space and was wholly for the enjoyment of tourists. The relocated and renovated Museum of the Army and Air Force narrated the army's evolution from pre-Hispanic times to the present in a series of displays that took the *Cinco de Mayo* battle as the point of departure.

The other major new addition to the museums of the battle was the wholly new Interactive Museum of the Battle of *Cinco de Mayo* (*El Museo Interactivo de la Batalla del Cinco de Mayo*). The museum is located in the historical forts precinct, between the two original museums of Loreto and Guadalupe (which continue to operate). The museum is unusual in Mexico for its emphasis on experiential rather than traditional didactic displays, and guides acknowledge its 'experimental format'. These guides accompany visitors through a series of interactive exhibits. Visitors are able to download items of interest to a USB device so that they can continue to read and disseminate information after leaving the museum. Lifesize holographic images describe the everyday lives of impoverished *poblanos*, connecting visitors directly with un-named civilians in the days preceding the battle. These arresting images describe the reasons for the battle from the explicit perspective of marginalized poor and rural residents. Exiting these rooms, the guides walk with visitors through a series of modular buildings that take the visitor inside and outdoors through the topography of the fort, exiting to gaze down at the steep slope from which the French had sought to capture the forts. The effect is an emotional connection for visitors that reinscribed the historical actors into the city's contemporary landscape.

Previously inaccessible subterranean tunnels, which cross much of the city, were also opened by the governor to offer additional encounters with the past. Visitors enter the tunnels from a location on the busy 'Cinco de Mayo Boulevard' close to the city centre, consolidating a touristic zone that connects the forts with the colonial centre. Within the tunnels, multiple layers of excavated archaeology are juxtaposed with dynamic lighting and sound. Popular with amorous college students, eager to escape prying eyes, the tunnels periodically exit disorientated visitors onto street level, before descending again. The tunnels acknowledge and address multiple eras in the city's history, but use the *Cinco de Mayo* battle as a primary means to frame Puebla's history and elicit civic pride. Visitors exit the long series of tunnels at the base of the fort precinct, at the location from which hidden soldiers and cavalry had exited the tunnels to surprise the unsuspecting French troops during the battle.

The tunnels seek to connect the historical past with the city's contemporary centre through the sense of subterranean exploration and periodic emergence into the current streetscape. Their entrance proclaims that they are designed to 'strengthen what it means to be *poblanos*' through pride in the battle and connection to the present. While the exhibit acknowledged a famous general had used the tunnels during the battle, visitors are asked to '[p]ause a moment, and think of the heroes who passed through here, anonymous Mexicans, who with their rifles, carried the pride of a nation' (*Los Secretos de Puebla*). The repositioning from the former museums' emphasis on 'great men' is clear. Visitors are told that '[t]o enter the passages of the *Cinco de Mayo* is to reconstruct a past that is open to the imagination of all. The echoes that sound that which is not said. The material in every wall allows us to reveal in every cavity, histories that can only be from here, histories that are now realities that extoll our state' (*Los Secretos de Puebla*).



Figure 4: Subterranean tunnels, 2017. Image: Author.

The tunnels and new museums form part of a project of remythologizing the *Cinco de Mayo* battle as a key moment in the formation of modern Mexico and its citizens' relationship to the state. Significantly, the moment of the battle now places greater emphasis on the state of Puebla in the redesigned museums. Local *poblanos* are urged to feel civic pride, as well as patriotism, at the role played by the people of the city in the nation's defence. Rather than a narrative of the historic bravery of male leaders, the new exhibitions introduce the voices and suffering of a broader range of locals. Some forms of suffering continue to be privileged over others, but exhibitions have expanded the manner in which visitors can see themselves reflected in the national story as part of a narrative of pride, inclusion and development. The remainder of the article investigates the implications of this shift in how the battle has been depicted, and the attempt to co-opt it for national political ambition.

The new museums have taken care to reposition the role of the army and its relationship to local communities. While sections of the Museum of the Army and Air Force retain references to General Zaragoza, the emphasis is on the role of the army as a protector of the weak. Resisting the French troops was less a matter of nationalistic pride than of the injustice of the French occupation for the local population. From the wars of independence in the early eighteenth century onwards, the museum portrays the army as having been constituted from all sections of the population as a force for protection. Despite its well-known role in the Dirty Wars of the 1960s onwards, the museum positions the army as the premier institution for the promotion of human rights in Mexico. As a uniquely Mexican institution, which emerged from the military traditions of the Aztecs, the army is framed as central to an inclusive national identity.

One of the key voices that the new museums sought to incorporate into the battle narrative was that of local small farmers (*campesinos*). The guides who accompany visitors in the Interactive Museum of the *Cinco de Mayo* take considerable time at the start of tour to explain the centrality of support from small farmers and Indigenous locals for the Republican victory. The guides explain that 'the army relied on Indigenous locals for support because

Puebla was a highly conservative city, and did not particularly support the Republicans', positioning Indigenous *poplanos* as the community's moral compass. Within the museum itself, a male and female rural worker form the core holographic narrators. Through their speech, such voices are positioned as having been uniquely opposed to 'imperialist aggressors', whether French or from the USA. At a time when 'Liberals and Conservatives were trying to force their ideologies' onto the country', who (the hologram asks rhetorically) 'would take the responsibility to confront the threats? It was a call to the national conscience to defend the territorial integrity of the nation' (*Desde la Independencia Mexicana*). The result is a co-opting of the rural voice into a standard articulation of Mexican patriotism, but which is nonetheless noteworthy for the centrality and leadership it affords residents more commonly marginalized in museum displays.

The holographic woman in the Interactive Museum of the *Cinco de Mayo* is similarly prominent and arresting for visitors. She addresses visitors directly on how the local community had to act to defend the nation, acting as the apolitical expression of the nation at a time of crippling divisions between politicians. The Museum of the Army and Air Force similarly seeks to reintroduce women's voices through repeated vignettes of women's role in defending the nation, noting that 'unjustly, the national history does not depict the true impact of the feminine presence in its development, including in military matters... [These displays seek to demonstrate] that there have always been women who defend their ideas and who have been willing to sacrifice their wellbeing or life' (*Participación de la Mujer*). Although the Museum of the Army and Air Force retains a predominant focus on men, with the Interactive Museum of the *Cinco de Mayo*, there is a clear attempt to represent women at the centre of the expression of civic pride.

The displays attempt to incorporate women and the rural poor into the army's narrative of itself. Simultaneously, those groups are positioned within the civic community of Puebla. In so doing, the diversity and potential dissonance of rural voices are co-opted into a harmonious civic community that eludes contemporary divisions. Rather than the focus on the redemptive capacity of war and religion, there is a shift to the battle representing the apotheosis of the Mexican nation in arms. As the room titled 'Distinguished *Poblano* Military' says, '[o]ur enemies were the best soldiers in the world, but you were the best sons of Mexico' (*Militares Poblanos Distinguidos*). Thus the Museum of the Army and Air Force, which commenced with the discussion of the *Cinco de Mayo* battle, ends with army's role in providing humanitarian aid in contemporary disaster relief. In a compact with visitors, it promises to be guided by principles of 'impartiality, justice, transparency, responsibility, [support for the] cultural and ecological environment, generosity, equality, respect, and leadership' (*El Ejército en la Sociedad*).

The aim of much of the redevelopment was for museums to drive both economic development and a sense of pride in the state of Puebla. The fort precinct had initially been redeveloped to coincide with the 2012 sesquicentennial celebrations of the battle, with new parklands provided on the westward slope facing the historic city centre. Governor Moreno Valle determined to take this use of public space further, and the new Interactive Museum of the *Cinco de Mayo* included a large outdoor auditorium that faced east. The auditorium regularly attracts hundreds of visitors to open air film nights. Yet, in developing the new museum and auditorium, Moreno Valle permanently destroyed sections of the historical precinct that had been undeveloped for 150 years. Rather than provide a space for the public, his actions were widely viewed to be those of a self-aggrandizing politician. Rather than benevolence, his actions in promoting the battlefield heritage of the *Cinco de Mayo* led to accusations that he suffered from 'megalomania'.⁹ As the national chapter president for ICOMOS wrote:

Despite the requests to INAH to stop the multiple acts of aggression on the heritage of the historical city of Puebla, between the demolition of listed buildings to convert them into stations, the irreversible loss of the historic landscape of the precinct of the Loreto and Guadalupe forts occasioned by what is currently being called the 'Interactive Museum of the *Cinco de Mayo*' ... we have not had any reaction to our petition.

Moreno Valle's attempt to co-opt historical sites and existing historical narratives prompted serious controversy throughout his tenure as governor. One of his most infamous propositions was a cable car that would take visitors from the colonial heart of Puebla directly up the hill to the forts. The cable car would have dominated a skyline that is otherwise famous for the

plethora of domed churches that are a significant factor in the city's UNESCO World Heritage status. His hope was to attract new visitors into an integrated tourism precinct framed by the forts and Museum of the Army and Air Force at the respective eastern and western extremities. The project was only halted after outrage at the destruction of part of a seventeenth-century building to make way for one of the cable cars' supporting towers. Only two cable car towers now stand, connecting Fort Loreto and Fort Guadalupe, but without a means to descend to the city below.

Moreno Valle sought to ensure that he gained the credit for the development prompted by the new museums, which reposition civic pride and progress at the heart of the battle narrative. The Museum of the Army and Air Force is a mix of narrative panels and historical objects on display. More than one quarter of all historical objects on display bear the sign 'Donation of the Moreno Valle Family'. The governor's donation of hundreds of pieces of firearms from his personal collection occasioned a sharp shift from the earlier museum in the Zaragoza Library. His actions were viewed with considerable scepticism by the public, who worried about the debt his initiatives have incurred, as well as to the long-term influence of the governor on the institutions through his patronage. The entanglement of heritage discourses that emphasize inclusion, with political cultures that emphasize progress and economic development was increasingly stark in the new museums.

Moreno Valle's fixed six-year term as governor ended in early 2017, when he began exploratory efforts to become his party's nominee for President of Mexico. Tourism as a tool for economic progress and social cohesion was central to his campaign. The number of visitors

to Puebla had increased rapidly during his time in office, jumping 31 per cent in the first two years of his being in office,¹⁰ distinguishing Puebla as one of the fastest growing tourist destinations during his tenure.¹¹ Moreno Valle had ensured that Puebla was an early signatory to the National Agreement for Tourism, which sought to align all three levels of government to invest in tourism and diversify visitor experiences, providing him with a national platform to celebrate Puebla's new museums.¹²

This investment in new museums to drive economic growth and a narrative of social inclusion became part of his strategy to gain his party's nomination. While Governor of Puebla, Moreno Valle had asserted that 'tourism is a source of generating taxes, which promote growth and economic development, highlighting that the Historic Centre [of Puebla] is the heritage of all *poblanos*'.¹³ As a prospective presidential candidate, he was more direct and ambitious in his claims for



Figure 5: A typical display in the Museum of the Army and Armed Forces, 2017. Image: Author.

heritage precincts and museums. Addressing a festival audience in a neighbouring state, less than a month prior to standing down as governor, he declared that Mexico 'must demonstrate that we do not only have extraordinary beaches, but also history, culture, traditions and gastronomy.... Mexicans must be united and [accept] a civic responsibility to work to coordinate' and increase touristic experiences.¹⁴

Moreno Valle's campaign to be nominated as a presidential candidate was ultimately unsuccessful, and he dropped out of the race in early 2018 (instead becoming a federal senator). His wife was elected Governor of Puebla soon after, before both were killed in a helicopter crash just ten days into her tenure in December 2018. Moreno Valle's legacy in Puebla is highly contested. Many locals remain enraged by the destruction of historic buildings to develop touristic infrastructure, and point to the deep debt that his initiatives have caused.¹⁵ Yet, he has also left a legacy of more than a dozen new museums throughout the state and a number of showcase museums in the city of Puebla itself. Foremost among these are those connected with the *Cinco de Mayo* battle. Not only do the new museums portray the events of 1862 as a formative national event, but they also position it as a first expression of an inclusive and empowered community. As Moreno Valle noted in the opening ceremony for one such touristic infrastructure project, Puebla was the site for battles 'that defined the course of the nation ... [the question for the current generation is how] to take advantage of the rich history of the state, amplify it, and transform it as a force for progress and development'.¹⁶ The question is the extent to which historical narratives and museum practices primarily influenced at the state-level were amplified and transformed by the desire to portray an inclusive community, and the entanglement of this battlefield tourism for overtly political purposes.

Conclusion

Battlefield tourism remains a highly studied aspect of heritage and museum studies, as researchers reflect on tourists' preoccupation with sites of dramatic historical events as well as on the problematic ethics of visiting sites of mass death. That these deaths were partly sanctioned by virtue of having been in the defence of the nation provides an added resonance, which binds visitors to the historical moment that is commemorated. In so doing, the sites provide a particular opportunity for reflection both on the role of the dead's sacrifice in contemporary life and on the potential to co-opt their sacrifice for political ambition.

The museums and exhibitions connected with the *Cinco de Mayo* were dramatically transformed in the five years following the sesquicentennial celebrations of the battle. While tourism related to the *Cinco de Mayo* had long been a central part of the city's appeal, this had existed alongside Puebla's principal fame as a UNESCO World Heritage site and its colonial centre. The decision to invest significantly in the heritage of the battle shifted that relationship between the various aspects of the historical centre, drawing renewed attention on locals' sacrifice and an idealized moment of national unity.

The decision to invest extensively in new museums and heritage precincts was closely tied to the ambitions of the then-governor of the State of Puebla, who sought to use the potential for economic development through tourism as a central tenet of his bid for the Mexican presidency. He donated extensively to the new museums, and sought to overcome resistance to his developments in order to leave a demonstrable track record of progress. The new museums went to considerable efforts to present voices that had not previously been present in local museums dedicated to the battle. Women, *campesinos* and poorer residents were co-opted into a narrative that portrayed the battle as a singular moment of civic inclusion and agency that had transformed the nation's history. In so doing, they provided a presence for groups that are often excluded from representation in military museums. However, their voices reinforced a narrative of progress that was closely associated with the governor's platform for national office. In aligning these changes so closely to his own political ambitions, the heritage associated with the battle has become divisive and associated with the public's distrust for politicians more broadly.

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Notes

- ¹ Person of the State or City of Puebla.
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- ⁴ Felipe Calderón, 2011, 'Palabras del President Calderón durante la Instalación del Comité Nacional Conmemorativo del 150 Aniversario de la Batalla de Puebla', *Presidencia de la República*. 19 July. <http://calderon.presidencia.gob.mx/2011/07/palabras-del-presidente-calderon-durante-la-instalacion-del-comite-nacional-conmemorativo-del-150-aniversario-de-la-batalla-de-puebla/>
- ⁵ Felipe Calderón, 2012, 'El President Felipe Calderón durante la Toma de Protesta del Servicio Militar Nacional', *Presidencia de la República*, 5 May. <http://calderon.presidencia.gob.mx/2012/05/el-presidente-felipe-calderon-durante-la-toma-de-protesta-del-servicio-militar-nacional/>
- ⁶ The Iberian and Latin American tradition of 'strong men' as leaders, often combining populist and military authority.
- ⁷ Jason M. Breslow, 2015, 'The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico's Drug War', *Frontline*, 27 July. www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/
- ⁸ Alejandro Hope, 2017, 'Febrero Rojo', *El Universal*, 22 March. <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/entrada-de-opinion/columna/alejandro-hope/nacion/2017/03/22/febrero-rojo>
- ⁹ Gabriel Hernández, 2012, 'La Megalomanía Turística de Moreno Valle', *Proceso*, 13 December. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/327761/327761-la-megalomania-turistica-de-moreno-valle>
- ¹⁰ National Office of Statistics, cited in Rafael Moreno Valle, 2012, *Gobernador del Estado de Puebla: Segundo Informe de Gobierno*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/121122572/Rafael-Moreno-Valle-Discurso-del-Segundo-Informe-de-Gobierno-Puebla>
- ¹¹ Secretaría del Turismo, 2012, *Presentan SECTUR y Gobierno de Puebla Estrategia de Promoción Turística*. http://www.cmic.org.mx/comisiones/Sectoriales/turismo/normatividad/Boletines_sectur/Enero2012/Bolet%C3%ADn%2004.pdf
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- ¹⁵ Fermín Alejandro García, 2017, 'En el Informe RMV Definirá su Discurso para Buscar la Candidatura Presidencial', *El Jornada de Oriente*, 12 January. <http://www.lajornadadeoriente.com.mx/puebla/informe-rmv-definira-discurso-buscar-la-candidatura-presidencial/>

- ¹⁶ Rafael Moreno Valle, 2014, 'Inauguran en Puebla el Museo del Ejército y Fuerza Aérea Mexicanos', *Diario Marca*, 19 November. <http://www.diariomarca.com.mx/2014/11/inauguran-en-puebla-el-museo-del-ejercito-y-fuerza-aerea-mexicanos/>.

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