

On the Path of the Marigolds: Living Traditions of México's Day of the Dead / En el camino de los cempasúchiles: Tradiciones vivas del Día de los Muertos de México

By Ann Murdy. 2019. Staunton, Virginia: George F. Thompson Publishing. 176 pages. ISBN: 978-1-938086-72-4 (soft cover).

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[Review length: 1024 words • Review posted on December 19, 2019]



These stunning photographs of the Days of the Dead celebrations of the central Mexican heartlands are a meditation and an *ofrenda*, an offering to readers to participate in an ancient and colorful tradition. The palette of yellows and orange of the marigold/*cempasúchitl*, and the chiaroscuro tones of death and points of candle light draw us into the world of returning spirits. The souls of the dearly departed find their way home on paths of flower petals, attracted by their bitter scent and the sweet and pungent aromas of chile, chocolate, and fruit. The multi-tiered altars replace loss with abundance. Art historians have identified the underlying aesthetics as "folk baroque," the echoes of the Churrigueresque in the popular imagination. Stone cathedrals were built for the ages, but these altars are built yearly for two nights (October 31 and November 1), masterpieces of ephemeral art.

Ann Murdy's journey of the souls began in 1989, at the altar made for her friend, the deceased Chicano artist, Carlos Almaraz. Since her first trip to Oaxaca in 1991, her images were made with love, respect, and permission. Her practice of sharing the pictures she took with families as prints shows an understanding of the mutual obligations and reciprocity at the heart of mestizo and indigenous cultures. The altars to the dead are as touching and personal as they are spectacular. Every one includes photographs of the dead in life, fleeting moments both in and out of time, spirits captured and free. With a mirror cleverly placed, one altar takes a step further, displaying the reflection of photos hidden below, a metaphor of memory and the ephemeral—an image of an image of an image (33).

Besides captions, the accompanying texts include a heartfelt foreword by celebrated Chicana novelist Denise Chávez, plus an interview. Chávez's prose poem is prayer to her own mother and a sumptuous description of the spiritual delights that sweeten remembrance. Instead of an introduction, the interview by Cesáreo Moreno, of the National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago), invites the reader into a conversation with the artist, as if on a stroll through a village or an exhibition.

Murdy remarks that "death is not the end; as long as you honor the people who are no longer with us, they're going to live forever" (139). She doesn't mention Purgatorio, perhaps because the church has de-emphasized it, but these are indeed the *ánimas benditas*, the Blessed Souls of Purgatory, who inhabit the confluence of Catholic doctrine, pre-conquest religions, and folk tradition. The faithful pray both for and to their *difuntos*, *their departed ones, working them through the pain and trials of living memory. Mexican Days of the Dead spring from the millennial Christian memorial days, so handily displaced, secularized, and militarized in modern countries as patriotic holidays.*

Memorial holiday traditions in Mexico are rich in material culture, including variations on memento mori, the reminders of death: calaveras or sugar skulls, a huge array of skeleton toys, weeping angels, prints, and satirical verse. The ofrendas—private and public altars offered up to the dead—are festooned with cut and paper flowers, and loaded with pan de muertos or special sweet bread in the form of corpses, fruits, candy,

favorite foods, and drink. Saints and photographs take their places of honor as candles burn in clouds of incense. Cemeteries become places of celebration as well.

With an eye to the future, Murdy records what she suspects might be a high-water mark for an ancestral tradition under the constant siege of modernity and pop culture. She documents the tradition in three epicenters and their associated indigenous groups: Huaquechula, a region of Nahuatl culture in Puebla; Teotitlán del Valle, a Zapotec village in Oaxaca; and the Tarascan homeland area surrounding Lake Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, including the city of Pátzcuaro and the Purépecha and mestizo villages around the lake.

*Murdy and her friends lament what they call the impending "Cocoization" of the Day of the Dead, after the critically acclaimed Disney/Pixar animated film *Coco*. Plastic and plaster images of the main characters are sold alongside the beautiful ceramics and folk arts all over central Mexico. By necessity, local artisans have always kept a watchful eye on trends in the marketplace. After all, Day of the Dead traditions survived the promotional campaigns of the 1970s. The Mexican Ministry of Tourism and state Casas de la Cultura cultivated artisans and villagers with cash prizes for the best-decorated graves, the tastiest pan de muertos and candies, and most beautiful ceramics, honoring both tradition and innovation. The boom in national and international tourism was a bonanza for artisans and local economies. The adoption of Día de Muertos as a Mexican National Holiday and its 2008 inscription on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List promoted and enshrined the tradition beyond regions and borders.*

In the 1980s, public schools in the northern Mexican border states incorporated the largely unknown Day of the Dead traditions of the south into the curriculum. The growing popularity and "cultural contamination" of secularized and commercialized US-style Halloween had to be contested. On the northern side of the border, bilingual programs in the public schools and Chicano Studies programs in the universities followed suit.

*Across the twentieth century, celebrated Mexican photographers like Miguel Álvarez Bravo, Graciela Iturbide, Juan Rulfo, and Austrian-born Ruth Lechuga documented the Días de Muertos. American photographers interested in folk ritual or on assignment, illustrated in passing the traditions that Ann Murdy documents so thoroughly. Across many decades, the core values and components of the tradition survive, evolve, and thrive. Documentary movies offer more points of comparison. Back in 1957, when Mexican folk customs surrounding death were still very private, regional devotions, Charles and Ray Eames directed *Day of the Dead*. The renowned designer Alexander Girard assisted them and featured his own collection of Mexican folk art, the largest in the US. The altars and customs of the 1950s are remarkably similar to what Murdy found six decades later. Her concern "that popular culture is going to become more important than authentic culture" (146) is fortunately unfounded in these contexts. The path of the marigolds, *el camino de los cempasúchites*, is as eternal as it is ephemeral.*