

## DAY OF THE DEAD

Decolonial Expressions in  
Pop de los Muertos*Cruz Medina*

Sweet smells of pan de los muertos and sugar candy skulls, vibrant pastel paper cutouts lining the streets for processions in skeleton face paint, with oversized papier-mâché figures and altars decorated with pictures of family members lead the way to the cemetery with offerings of bottles and plates of food at tombs and headstones, with golden bouquets of marigolds adorning burial plots.<sup>1</sup> These familiar sights, smells, and tastes of Día de los Muertos pop cultural memory possess distinct layers of indigenous, colonial, and decolonial expression. The indigenous Mexican practices associated with Pre-Columbian Nahua and Mayan civilizations surviving the Conquest would be adopted by mainstream Mexican artists and intellectuals following the Revolution, translating into more current U.S. representations that gained popularity via the Chicana/o art movement. That struggle and resistance can be identified with each of these time periods when Día de los Muertos re-emerges “suggest[s] an almost irreverent, macabre confrontation with mortality” (“Day of the Dead, Halloween” 360). Día de los Muertos expressions derive much of their rhetorical power from Pre-Columbian roots and the anti-colonial ethos of the Mexican Revolution that express not only a distinct visual aesthetic, but more importantly, symbolize the decolonial belief system that resists Western traditions. That the popularity of Día de los Muertos continues to grow demonstrates an exigency for conceptualizing death in a manner that diverges from a Western ideology of imperialism through consumption and fear of the afterlife.

Contemporary productions of Día de los Muertos reflect the traditional skeleton art popularized by José Guadalupe Posada and his image of “La Calavera Catrina,” which was meant as social criticism of the elites in Porfirio Díaz’s pre-Revolution Mexico. The anti-colonial ethos of this aesthetic levied towards Spain further emphasized the importance of Día de los Muertos as a cultural practice that was indigenous to Mexico. Building on this tradition, Regina Marchi notes that “[m]any Chicano artists were inspired by José Guadalupe Posada’s satirical calavera caricatures, and began to create stylistically similar drawings that critically commented on California’s politicians, urban youth, and other political topics” (40). The self-determination embodied by the art created before and after the Mexican

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Revolution provided a clear inspiration for the Chicana/o art movement that paralleled the civil rights movement and the spirit of anti-colonial resistance.

The incorporation of anti-colonial messages into popular cultural productions such as theater can, in fact, be traced to the project of the conquest of the Americas. While some argue that there is a lack of explicit connection between Día de los Muertos and its Pre-Columbian roots, this argument remains indicative of the colonial project that sought to erase the history, literacy and knowledge of Pre-Columbian populations through the burning of codices. Pre-Columbian culture served to differentiate Mexico from Spanish colonialism, and Día de los Muertos highlights the difference in how death is represented in Western pop culture amidst the current popularity of zombies in TV, comic books and movies, providing an alternative—even liberatory—worldview that values family, communing with the dead, and cultural memory.

### Framework of the Dead

In the pop culture imaginary, death is often associated with Halloween and the fantastic and fear-eliciting zombies populating a “hell on earth” that fits within a Western colonial religious belief system. Día de los Muertos serves as a cultural practice that not only differentiates how death is represented in film, movies, and comics, but the celebration of the dead signifies a cultural break from Halloween, which in Mexico “has become a symbol of the United States and its cultural imperialistic designs” (“The Day of the Dead, Halloween” 371). Although Stanley Brandes also speculates about the connection between Dia de los Muertos and Pre-Columbian traditions (“Day of the Dead, Halloween” 366), it is important to keep in mind that decolonialism is not just a study of history, culture and artifacts. Decolonialism offers a framework for interpretive projects and the creation of knowledge: “A delinking that leads to de-colonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (Mignolo 453). Decolonial epistemologies can develop when we authorize Pre-Columbian fragments remaining from the codices and archives of knowledge burned in the project of the Conquest. In both authorized and unauthorized epistemologies, fragments of texts provide sources of background knowledge and evidence that generate arguments with decolonial methodologies that recognize the hermeneutic potential of indigenous culture and practices.

To study how pop culture expresses particular rhetoric related to death, it is important to recognize how a decolonial methodology offers alternatives for how death is conceptualized. In his discussion of sacred rhetoric, Morgan Marietta examines the psychology behind ‘sacred’ topics in political arguments often associated with religious beliefs. Marietta concludes that sacred rhetoric possesses absolutist reasoning that influences “public discourse rather than public opinion” (777). Although the dominant epistemologies in the U.S. purport to rely upon logic as a guiding principal, the ideological underpinnings of U.S. politics demonstrate that even logic fails to effectively persuade audiences with entrenched beliefs. In keeping with the psychology undergirding rhetoric of the dead, Joshua Gunn’s “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity, and Talking to the Dead” conceptualizes communication with the dead as “a conspicuous and exaggerated elaboration of the underlying fantasy that is central to the ways we think about rhetoric: the mediation or reconciliation of self and other across a terrible, yawning gap” (2). Gunn’s main site of analysis is the television psychic John Edward who channels the dead for the members of his studio audience. That Edward remains something of a punch line shows how communicating with the dead is

viewed pejoratively; in addition, the ability to speak to the dead is defined by Gunn as a fantasy, and death “a terrible, yawning gap” as opposed to an inevitable stage of life.

Día de los Muertos pop culture express layers of semiotics associated with these representations beyond the yawning gap of zombies. By following decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo’s advocacy to examine parallel “loci of enunciation,” sites of analysis related to Día de los Muertos stem from the distinct epistemologies associated with the history and people of that geographical space, rather than the thoughts from imperial outposts of power. After contact, the Franciscans recognized Aztec rhetoric that connects with the Día de los Muertos practice of speaking the words of the ancients and elders:

What the Franciscans recognized as rhetoric the Aztecs themselves called *huehuetlahtolli*. This Nahuatl word is formed by compounding *huehue*, “old man” or ‘men of old’ and *tlaholli*, “word”, “oration” or “language.” Thus *huehuetlahtolli* is variously translated as “the ancient word,” “the speeches of the ancients” or “the speeches of the elders.”

(Abbott 252)

Pre-Columbian *huehuetlahtolli*, or speech of the ancients, can be traced to the tradition of pláticas in Día de los Muertos celebrations. The holiday serves as a time for children

to listen to these pláticas (talks) because they are expected to embrace these stories [of the deceased] and retell them in other venues. It is understood, and often explained by the family’s leader to the child, that he or she will eventually lead these discussions in the future”

(Pimentel 264)

These pláticas perform an important role in the remembrance of the deceased. Like Día de los Muertos, *huehuetlahtolli* performs an epideictic role that “consists of orations relative to the life cycle. These speeches were delivered by elders or parents at crucial junctures in human experience: birth, infancy, marriage, death” (Abbott 255). Día de los Muertos ritualizes the remembrance of the deceased, so it possesses elements of epideictic rhetoric.

By speaking the speeches of the ancients, celebrators are also reminded to think about death as more than fantasy, or acting as willing colonial subjects to earn passage into the afterlife. Día de los Muertos supports a decolonial ideology because the holiday “helps to create an interpretation of the world in which Mexico is unique, culturally discrete, and above all different from the two powers that have dominated the country throughout its long existence: Spain and the United States” (“Day of the Dead, Halloween” 359). Rather than fearing zombies who hunt the living to feed, or praying to saints who mediate prayers for the dead, Día de los Muertos symbolizes a liberating worldview that draws on ancient indigenous practices that continue to resonate.

### Day of the Dead Expressions

When it comes to Latina/o representations of the dead in the pop culture collective unconscious, Cuban filmmaker George Romero occupies a sacred space due to his iconic, cult cinematic representations of the dead. In the U.S. tradition of Halloween zombies, Romero’s *Dead* series established a blueprint of cinematic tropes and rules about what the dead can do when they come back to life in an unthinking form in search of living humans for consumption. Because Romero’s 1978 *Dawn of the Dead* takes place against the backdrop

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of a shopping mall, the critique of consumerism rings through because in an unthinking, zombie state, the dead return to the mall as they were trained to in life (Bishop; Harper; Walker). The horror genre remains popular in the U.S. because it is inexpensive, and much like the artisans of Día de los Muertos crafts, “they [traditional Mexican artisans] do not object to the introduction of Halloween symbols, so long as their handiwork sells” (“Day of the Dead, Halloween” 377). Still, the critique of western imperialism through the metonymy of consumerism reflects the decolonial ethos that expressions of the dead facilitate.

The characters in Romero’s films remain in the colonial paradigm that focuses on the catharsis of fear through *schadenfreude* for characters finding themselves in post-rapture storyworlds. In *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero’s Visions of Hell on Earth*, colonial morality plays “a part of Romero’s symbolism that the characters who do reject the sinful perversions of reason and violence are once again people who … stand outside the power structure of the ‘normal,’ pre-zombie, prejudgement America” (Paffenroth 89). The western religious paradigm represented in Romero’s films that include the judgment and rapture exhibits the enduring tradition of evangelical passion plays that the Franciscans employed in the conversion during the Conquest of the Americas. However, even the Nahua (Aztecs) infused the evangelical theater with messages of resistance: “This [evangelical] theater gave the Nahuas the opportunity of managing public space again, of showing their unrivaled ability to incorporate new meanings … and possibility of encoding ‘hidden transcripts of resistance’ for the consumption of the indigenous audience only” (Balsara 63). Similar to the Nahua during the Conquest, Romero composes within the expectations of the horror genre, although he manipulates the conventions to communicate social critique.

Without explicitly drawing on Día de los Muertos beliefs, practices, or ritual, George Romero’s 1985 film with the title *Day of the Dead*—the third film following Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978)—demonstrates a subversive translation of the deceased occupying the same space as the living. Taking place in an underground Florida missile silo, *Day of the Dead* (1985) centers on a tyrannical military leader who takes over a scientific mission to reverse the zombie outbreak. Romero’s social critique is evidenced by the location of Florida, where many Cubans sought refuge following Fidel Castro’s *paredón* firing squads, as well as the resemblance of the soldier named Rickles, portrayed by actor Ralph Marrero, to Cuban revolutionary soldiers, wearing a thick black beard and up-turned army cap. Though Romero does not widely discuss his Latino heritage, his father was born in Cuba; and in an interview with the *Daily News*, Romero said that he traveled with his family to Cuba during his youth before Castro came to power (Monell).

The military tyrant’s isolation from the world of the living in *Day of the Dead* is analogous to the disconnection of Romero’s cultural homeland of Cuba. In Joe Kane’s book *Night of the Living Dead: Behind the Scenes of the Most Terrifying Zombie Movie Ever*, Romero explains that the *Day of the Dead* depicts a world where structure and communication are suddenly removed. He says,

[W]hen that structure is gone, they don’t quite know how to behave or they cling to old behaviors and no one talks to each other and no one communicates. So there’s this sort of tragedy about how a lack of human communication causes chaos and collapse even in this small little pie slice of society.

(Kane 140)

On the surface, the scientist character’s experiments in *Day of the Dead*, attempting to reverse the zombie process, portray Gunn’s explanation of the death fantasy as

communicating across the “terrible, yawning gap” (2). Still, many Cubans in the U.S. like Romero literally experienced “a lack of human communication” once Castro seized power and the U.S. placed an embargo on Cuba (Kane 140). When Russia experienced economic hardships during the Cold War and it could no longer financially assist Cuba as the Communist outpost in close proximity to the U.S., the small island nation also experienced the structural “collapse” that Romero’s films portray.

The political commentary of Romero’s zombies functions as critique within the horror genre, although Romero’s influence in popular culture extends outside of the U.S. film industry. The influence of Romero’s *Dead* series can be seen, as both parody and homage, in the Spanish-Cuban zombie comedic satire *Juan of the Dead/Juan de los Muertos* (2011). The *New York Times* film review calls attention to how *Juan of the Dead* follows in the tradition of Romero’s social commentary in the political context of Castro’s Cuba: “As the zombies turn Havana into a gory circus of flying limbs and severed heads, the nightly news anchors continue to calmly assert the government line, that the attacks are not the work of the undead but dissidents in the pay of the United States” (Burnett). Independent from the state-financed Cuban film industry, *Juan of the Dead* has a title character that connects with Día de los Muertos pop culture with Spanish influence from pre-Revolution Mexico: “In the year 1847, a play by the Spanish playwright Jose Zorilla arrived in Mexico. The play, ‘Don Juan Tenorio,’ … takes place in a cemetery where statues and spirits come to life. It became a popular play, often performed during the Days of the Dead” (Moss 5).

Even if *Juan of the Dead* does not follow the belief system represented by Día de los Muertos, the social criticism follows the traditional use of death in Latina/o pop culture. Sarah Misemer explains,

death invokes the ongoing syncretic nature of the fight to integrate all segments of the Mexican population—a goal of the Revolution. Artistic figures such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and Guadalupe Posada among others used the trope of death to make social and political commentary through their art”

(763)

The zombie plague metaphorically standing in for Cuban unemployment and crumbled infrastructure in *Juan of the Dead* hardly mirrors Día de los Muertos philosophy about death, yet the powerful critique of government embodies the same decolonial ethos of resistance to an oppressive authority.

### Pop de los Muertos

In the genre of documentary, Lourdes Portilla’s *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead* captures the preparation, the cleaning of cemetery headstones, the offering of traditional food dishes, and the construction of altars in Oaxaca, Mexico. Often overlooked, Juan Velasco (40) explains that “*La Ofrenda rescata dos elementos memorables de la tradición Mexicana del día de los muertos: el altar y el acto de ofrecer* [La Ofrenda rescues two memorable elements of the Day of the Dead tradition: the altar and the act of offering]” (author’s translation). Marta Turok explains that in Mexico “[t]he *ofrenda* has also taken on new values … it becomes a medium for reaffirming Mexican cultural values in schools, countering the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Halloween” (79). Portilla’s focus on the *ofrenda* in both Mexico and in San Francisco, California, shows how the traditional cultural practice provides a decolonial space where altars and offerings draw attention to the impact of AIDS in the LGBTQ community.

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Portilla channels the rhetorical power of “remembering loved ones through ofrendas [that] could also serve as a way to publically commemorate individual and collective experiences of the Mexican American community” (Marchi 39). The Día de los Muertos expressions engage in critique of what mainstream society has ignored.

In music, Día de los Muertos is represented in multiple genres ranging from traditional son jarocho from Veracruz, Mexico, to Latin American electronic dance pop, as well as the fusion of hip hop and cumbia by musicians in the U.S. (Raygoza). A salient example of the conflation of Día de los Muertos pop culture and western ideology is the traditional son jarocho song called “La Bruja” about a drunken man who is held hostage by a witch. The song has become associated with Día de los Muertos because of the influence of traditional western Halloween symbolism, and it additionally reveals “insight into Catholic-Latin sexuality; the enticing fear of the woman who ‘consumes’ men in the wee hours of the night and is promiscuous even in her cannibalism” (Garsd). Though a traditional folklore song, colonial ideology permeates the negative portrayal of female sexuality.

The mestizaje of Día de los Muertos culture with Halloween can also be seen with Gilbert Hernandez’s, of *Love and Rockets* notoriety, contribution of a variant cover of *The Walking Dead* for the Las Vegas Wizard World Comic Convention. Still, Día de los Muertos iconography is fundamental to the aesthetic and storyline in the film *The Dead One* (2007) from the comic by the name *El Muerto: The Aztec Zombie* by Javier Hernández. In *El Muerto*, the main character Diego is killed by “Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec God of Death, also known as Mictlan” before Diego is reborn as *El Muerto* with a Chicana/o consciousness of Pre-Columbian history (Foster 235). Unfortunately, the attention to Día de los Muertos in the U.S. also attracted the colonizing efforts of the Disney Corporation that attempted to copyright the holiday in May 2013, leading to Lalo Alcaraz’s “Muerto Mouse” image that circulated through social media (Medina 2015).

With the original working title *Day of the Dead*<sup>2</sup>, the animated film *The Book of Life*<sup>3</sup> (2014) exemplifies Día de los Muertos imagery expressed in mainstream pop culture with notable Mexican actors Diego Luna and Kate del Castillo, as well as Zoe Saldana, Channing Tatum, Ron Perlman, Christina Applegate, Ice Cube, Cheech Marin, Danny Trejo and Gabriel Iglesias lending their voices. Told in a frame narrative, Christina Applegate portrays La Muerte in human form, working as a museum tour guide for children, exposing them to the “wonder of Mexico.” In a decolonial gesture, Applegate as the museum guide tells the children that “Mexico is the center of the universe” as an image of Mexico appears with a comically large mustache across the center of the country. While non-Mexican audiences may resist the assertion that Mexico is the center of the universe, the caricatured mustache softens the remark and positions the belief system of the film within a non-U.S.-centric worldview. *The Book of Life* appeals to audiences with “the humor and gaiety that pervade the holiday,” along with visually lush and arresting colors and imagery from the traditional celebrations (“Day of the Dead, Halloween” 363).

Guillermo Del Toro’s role as producer accounts for the level of detail and aesthetic feat that *Book of Life* achieves, given the arresting visuals in *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006); however, Del Toro’s first feature film *Cronos* (1993) reveals the Mexican director’s long fascination with the themes of death and resurrection. Discussing *The Book of Life* in an interview with *The Telegraph*, Del Toro espouses the Día de los Muertos belief that the dead co-exist with the living:

Ultimately you walk life side-by-side with death ... and the Day of the Dead, curiously enough, is about life ... Because I’m not a guy that hides the monster: I show it to you

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with the absolute conviction that it exists. And that's the way I think we view death. We don't view it as the end ...

(Harrod)

In addition to a non-western view of death, Del Toro also acknowledges his rejection of western culture's emphasis on materialism. He explains, "I think we live in a culture that is actually hedging all of it towards comfort and immediacy, things that scare me. All the things that they sell us as a way of life scare me" (Harrod). Del Toro's perspectives illuminates a decolonial stance in opposition to both western beliefs about death and consumerism, which manifest in the rejection of military power and fame in favor of love and artistic endeavors in *The Book of Life*.

In the film, the first Day of the Dead celebration occurs when the main characters Manolo Sánchez, Joaquín Mondragon, and María Posada are children playing in a cemetery while their families honor the dead who appear as ghost-like figures alongside the living who decorated the headstones with marigolds, altars with offerings of *pan de muerto* and pictures of the deceased. The central narrative of *The Book of Life* takes place against the backdrop of multiple Days of the Dead in the town of San Angel. The town name San Angel relates to the intended audience of children and underscores the Mexican belief system, in which "angelito, literally 'little angel,' the word used to describe a child who dies in sexual innocence and therefore is destined to go directly to heaven, without having to pass through purgatory" (*Skulls of the Living 4*). The storyworld of the film operates outside of the belief system of purgatory, further undercutting the existential burden imposed by colonial religious paradigms.

Above the cemetery, La Muerte, the goddess of the Land of the Remembered, and Xibalba (from the Mayan *Popol Vuh*), the god of the Land of the Forgotten, place a bet. La Muerte wagers that Manolo will win María's heart while Xibalba bets in favor of Joaquín. In the Spanish audio of the film, La Muerte is called La Catrina, which refers specifically to the popular Día de los Muertos figure. In addition, the characters María and her father General Posada also pay homage: "[Dia de los Muertos] decorations often center on images of La Calavera Catrina, a skeleton of an upper-class woman whose image was made popular by the late-Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada" (Contreras). Following the bet, Xibalba bestows upon Joaquín a magical medal that gives him indestructible power to help the young man win María's heart through military glory. Even though Xibalba's name comes from the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, his intervention supports the belief that Pre-Columbian "Nahua gods were tricksters ... [Tezcatlipoca for example] sowed discord and trouble both among and within opposite parties" (Balsera 29). Xibalba further reveals himself as unscrupulous in his desire to win his wager with La Muerte when he sends his snakes to strike, killing Manolo, and thereby winning the bet by default.

Even though the god and goddess of the underworld place bets on and trick the living, death is portrayed as a celebratory stage of life connected to the living and to ancestors. When Manolo arrives at the Land of the Remembered, it is a colorful place where skeleton figurines celebrate the Day of the Dead while an upbeat anthem called "El Aparato/Land of the Remembering" by Gustavo Santaolalla and Café Tacvba plays. The song is a lush arrangement with a familiar indigenous chant in accompaniment. Manolo crosses realms of the underworld from the Land of the Remembered to the Land of the Forgotten, where he finds La Muerte and notifies her of Xibalba's meddling. In another bet with Xibalba to return to the world of the living, Manolo faces an enormous bull that Manolo has the chance to defeat, although, instead of finishing off the bull, he sings a song of apology. The

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bull stops charging and disintegrates into dust, rising into the air as marigold petals. The dust from the dead alludes to a deeper level of Aztec mythology in which Quetzalcoatl was said to have gathered bone fragments in the land of the dead to carry them back to other gods in order to give new life:

Quetzalcoatl was the god appointed to go down to Mictlan to collect bones and ashes of the previous, deceased generation of men ... The bones were ground into fragments by a goddess, at which point the rest of the assembled gods proceeded to bleed themselves or to perform self-sacrifice so that life could spring forth from the bone mass.

(Nicholson, quoted in Balsara 32)

This mythology provides an additional layer of understanding to the Land of the Forgotten in *The Book of Life* where relatives who no longer have families to remember them go and fade into dust.

The historical context of *The Book of Life* is particularly indicative of the moment after Mexico had earned its independence from Spain. Mexico continued to face civil war in the form of bandits such as the character in *The Book of Life* named Chakal who threatens the safety of San Angel. Cristina Ramírez explains, “The Revolution, which had started out as a movement through which she hoped to bring justice for the campesinos and fair wages for industrial workers, turned into a movement of power grabbing among the elites” (149). The threat of Chakal and his bandits motivates María Posada’s father to pressure her into marrying Joaquín, so that he will stay to protect the city from Chakal and his men.

María’s elite class position and education abroad support her articulation of opposition to the gendered expectations of her father Joaquín and Manolo, although she remains strategic in her stance for the safety of the town. Even though María embodies strong feminist qualities such as superior sword-fighting skills and education, she acquiesces to her father’s patriarchy because “feminism is not only an active stance against oppressive systems but a strategic critical position emerging from a newly acquired literacy” (Ramírez 17). Comparatively, Manolo’s dead female cousins Scardelita and Adelita make visible the role of Mexican women in the Revolution through their appearance by wearing ammunition belts, long skirts, and large sombreros.

*The Book of Life* concludes with Manolo and María teaming up to defeat Chakal with self-sacrifice on the parts of both Manolo and Joaquín. Neither act on motivations for power or glory, but rather in service of friendship and concern for the town. The message communicated to the younger audience is an anti-colonial argument for family, true love, and artistic passions, rather than the destructive imposition of desire for meaningless glory. At the very least, the representation of death in *The Book of Life* undermines the western religious paradigm that provides a blueprint of the living co-existing with the dead “as zombies, who are walking damned, robbed of intellect and emotion, or as surviving humans, barricaded and trapped in some place from which there is no escape ... a shadowy, trapped, borderline existence that resembles hell” (Paffenroth 22). As a Día de los Muertos pop culture expression, *The Book of Life* and other pop culture offer an alternative history, perspective and culture for conceptualizing relationships with the dead.

## Conclusion

The decolonial ethos of Día de los Muertos transmits distinctly Latina/o messages about indigenous cultural memory, political critique, and the stages of life. The holiday and its pop

culture productions persist through conquest, genocide, revolution, civil war, and cultural imperialism because they are “a product of changing political agendas and economic circumstances … the symbolic value of this holiday for those who might draw upon it to define personal and collective identity” (*Skulls of the Living* 11). The differing genres and manifestations of Día de los Muertos portray the history and cultural identity that the projects of imperialism and colonialism actively sought to erase.

The proliferation of Día de los Muertos is related to the spread of culture through the Mexican and Latin American diasporas, yet the Pre-Columbian belief about death as a stage of life persists because it is rhetorically effective. Without Día de los Muertos, death falls into the colonial Halloween paradigm where it threatens purgatory through pop culture manifestations of dystopian *Walking Dead* realities. Although George Romero’s *Dead* series defines the contemporary tropes of the zombie horror genre by personifying colonial Catholic beliefs about death (Paffenroth 2006), Romero’s Cuban heritage informs the film series’s rhetorical commonplace of losing communication. Día de los Muertos emphasizes cultural memory as it celebrates communicating with the dead.

Death dances among the bodies of the living as long as they are remembered and their stories passed down through the discursive power of *plática*. If history endures through cultural expressions, then the presence of death is merely a stage in the cyclical movement of bone and blood to dust and spirit. Decoloniality opens the free flow of knowledge and history from parallel sites of cultural creation—burrowing further deeper through the mouth of Xibalba’s cave into lands and histories that extend beyond the reaches of colonial outposts in the collective unconscious, warning of damnation, yawning gap embargos, and limitations on how the deceased may be remembered. Día de los Muertos pop expressions give cultural communion to those who choose to celebrate belief systems that reinforce family rather than occupy the superego with threats for defying the corrupt power structures of the living.

## Notes

- 1 Thanks to the generous feedback from Juan Velasco and Enrique Reynoso during the writing of this chapter.
- 2 “Guillermo Del Toro Joins with Reel FX to Produce Epic Animated Adventure Day of the Dead.” Reel FX. 21 February 2012.
- 3 The title *The Book of Life* appeals to Judeo-Christian ideology, although the title was no doubt influenced by the subtitle applied to the *Popol Vuh* of *The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*.

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