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[https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/6/cann\\_contemporary1.pdf](https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/6/cann_contemporary1.pdf)**Contemporary Death Practices in the Catholic Latina/o community**

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**Abstract**

This article is an initial review of the everyday death and bereavement practices of the United States Latina/o community, and is meant to serve as an initial corrective to the traditional studies of American death that present death from a largely Anglo and Protestant perspective.

*“The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it, it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.”*

— Octavio Paz!

**Funeraria Brazos: The Latina/o Funeral Home**

In the summer of 2015, I taught a course on death and dying and as part of that course, took my students to a local funeral home dedicated to specifically serving the Latina/o community living in Waco, Texas. Located in the center of Texas, and in between the two metroplexes of Dallas and Austin, Waco has a fairly sizeable Hispanic population with approximately thirty percent of its total population identifying as Hispanic.<sup>2</sup> The Funeraria Brazos was opened on November 2, 2003, Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, to specifically serve the Latina/o community. The ethnocentric funeral home generally claims to address specific needs of a particular community that might not be effectively addressed in the same way by a corporate model funeral home. Funeraria Brazos' first funeral director, Vidal DeLeon argued at the opening of the Funeraria Brazos, that “Hispanic families typically expect more time for viewing and visitation. Children are frequently brought to the funeral home. Hispanic families also stay much later into the night during the viewing than is typical in Anglo culture. ‘We have extended hours,’ De Leon said. ‘We have organized all-

<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: And the Other Mexico; Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude; Mexico and the United States; The Philanthropic Ogre*. Vol. 13. Grove Press, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics vary on the exact amount, and part of this may be due to undocumented migrants, so the exact number may actually be larger, but current statistics range from 29.3% to 33% of Waco's population. See Waco (city) quickfacts from the U.S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4876000>, last accessed February 29, 2016.

night wakes, and we have been here Saturdays and Sundays.’ Funeraria Brazos is more than willing to meet each family’s needs as it works to achieve success ‘one funeral at a time.’”(Stewart and Anderson, 2005) Apart from these extended service hours, Funeraria Brazos also emphasized the Latin American influences on its décor, with bright colors painted on the walls, pottery, and artwork from Latin America (ibid).

On our visit in 2015, Funeral Director Josh Blake explained Latina/o death practices to my students, highlighting some of the differences of Funeraria Brazos in contrast to Anglo funeral homes. Blake explained that some of the key services at the funeral home included catered food from various countries served at the visitations: enchiladas, burritos, tacos, rice and beans (Mexican-American funerals), and empanadas, arepas, and plantains (Colombian visitations). There are various caterers around Waco cooking and serving food for the long overnight Catholic vigils. He also described how it was common to bring children, and set up card tables, so that families could play dominoes and other games during the long wakes, while extended families sat and ate with the deceased.

My students (nearly all Anglo) were fascinated by the differences they encountered in this funeral home, as they felt they had walked into another world. They had never attended a Hispanic funeral, and this world was entirely foreign to them. The idea of eating and serving food at a wake, for example, was one that my students found not only foreign, but repelling, and they couldn’t imagine eating in the presence of the dead. I realized that these practices reflect a central part of Latina/o identity formation, yet seem invisible to many, because the death industry in the United States remains so highly segregated. As a thanatologist, I wanted to at least attempt to counter the myth of death in the United States as uniform and analogous.

Many books addressing death and bereavement practices in the contemporary United States assume that American death culture is monolithic and/or homogenous and do not generally examine how diasporic identity influences and shapes practices in remembrance rituals, purchases in consumer death goods, or memorialization rituals. Research that has been conducted thus far on death and dying in the United States tends to either minimize difference, presenting the Anglo-Protestant view of death as the dominant practice, or examine death from the perspective of the outlier – offering rich and interesting analyses of unusual aspects of death that are unique but uncommon. This review is an initial attempt at a corrective, and offers a glance into the everyday death and bereavement practices of Latina/os, examining death, bereavement and memorialization practices in the Latina/o diaspora. This review is only introductory, inspired by initial local fieldwork, and consisting of current written archives (both academic and popular) centering on death and grief practices in the Latina/o community. This initial study reveals that there is much more work to be done here. Examining these death rituals and practices offers an opportunity to view how ethnic identity is reinforced, influenced, and essentially made. Before examining the death practices of this community, however, I briefly examine the definition of Hispanic identity.

### **Latina/os in the United States**

Neris Diaz-Cabello utilizes Fukuyama and Sevig’s description of Hispanic culture arguing that, “the Hispanic culture in the United States is the grouping of many entities, nationalities, and cultures as ‘webs of significance’” (Diaz-Cabello, 2004, p.241), who share a common language, culture, or even liturgical calendar. The United States census states that Hispanics are those of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South American, or Central American descent regardless of ethnicity. Though some prefer to use the term ‘Latina/o,’ the term ‘Hispanic’ was first utilized by the 1980 American census, and the debate over which is preferred continues to be fraught with disagreement. Nydia Garcia-Preto argues

that “Labeling diverse groups of people as *Hispanics* or *Latinos* takes away their nationality and ‘symbolizes a loss of identity.’” (McGoldrick et al, 2005, p. 155) While beyond the scope of this particular review, it is important to understand this distinction and the political ramifications of generalizations of a people, and I, myself have struggled with the correct terminology as I seek to provide a corrective to the dominant Anglo discourse. When possible, I find it best to be more specific, rather than choosing an over-generalization, though this is not always feasible. With my daughter, for example, I usually explain that she is Argentine-American, preferring her specific national heritage over a general categorization of Latina. For the purposes of this brief review, I will use both Hispanic and Latina/o but the reader should keep in mind the ongoing controversies over such linguistic categorizations.<sup>3</sup>

### **Catholic Influence in Beliefs & Practices**

Because of the historical and institutional influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, many Latina/os in the United States practice Roman Catholicism, though there is a growing movement towards Protestantism, and more specifically Pentecostalism (Suro et al, 2007). Even those who are practicing Protestants, however, may adopt culturally Catholic traditions (the rejection of cremation in favor of burial, or the adoption of purchasing memorial notices in newspapers, for instance), so the cultural influence of Roman Catholicism cannot be ignored even in the Protestant realm. For purposes of this review, however, I focus exclusively on Catholic Hispanic funeral traditions.

Latina/o Catholicism often intertwines with local indigenous cultures, resulting in Catholic folk practices<sup>4</sup> that may seem very different from traditional European and American Catholicism. Latina/o Catholicism consists of a rich plethora of saints and martyrs in the Catholic tradition, with each country in Latin America tending to favor particular saints, martyrs, and icons depending on cultural values (e.g. in Mexico, Saint Death, or Santa Muerte, is growing more popular, though she enjoys little to no recognition in Chile or Uruguay).<sup>5</sup> The most popular figures are the Sacred Heart Jesus (representing the heart that suffers, yet lives love more purely) and the Virgin Mary (who represents purity and suffering).<sup>6</sup>

Statues and prayer cards with the pictures of these saints are often placed in the room of the deceased, along with candles (preferably electric, which can constantly burn) so that the saints may intercede on behalf of the dead. Figures such as the Sacred Heart Jesus, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Santa Muerte present a cultural syntax through which the religious language is spoken (in this case, Mexican Catholicism), while reflecting the communal values that bond a community together.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see Alcoff, Linda Martín. "Latina/o vs. Hispanic The politics of ethnic names." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31, no. 4 (2005): 395-407.

<sup>4</sup> Raquel Romburg interprets syncretistic Catholic beliefs as originating as “a way out of the repressive, dogmatic, and often classist institutional church.” Romberg, R. (1998). Whose spirits are they? The political economy of syncretism and authenticity. *Journal of folklore research*, 69-82, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Santa Muerte is known as the patron saint of healing, protection, and safe passage to the afterlife. Popular with people on the margins of society, she is most known for being the preferred saint of drug cartel members, but she is also popular with undocumented migrants, trans-gender individuals, and others on the fringes of society. Santa Muerte is generating a fast following, ties together some traditional indigenous beliefs with Catholic thought, and has been officially denounced by the Catholic Church because she is not an officially recognized saint from the Catholic canon. For more on Santa Muerte, see Chesnut, R. A. (2011). *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Each country has its own particular favorite version of the Virgin that is popular; for example, in Mexico, the most popular Virgin Mary is the Virgin of Guadalupe, while in Argentina, the Virgin Mary of Lujan is the most revered. These Virgins often embody not only religious ideals, but nationalist values as well.

### The Wake and the Latina/o Funeral Home

The hallmark of the Latina/o Funeral Home is the extended wake. Usually food is brought to the wake, and card games and dominoes are played as the older members in the family sit, eat, play, and exchange stories about the deceased. Flowers and candles will be placed near the body where the visitation occurs, and the wake is not a quiet affair, but often loud and emotional. Because of the emphasis on wakes, embalming is commonly practiced, though it is not as widespread in Latin America, where embalming is often considered cost-prohibitive. Generally, from the time the deceased is brought to the funeral home, she is not left on her own, and family members often choose to help with the preparation and washing of the body for visitation. This is in marked contrast to contemporary Anglo practices, where the body is usually procured from the hospital (and much less frequently, the home) and then prepared by the funeral home, not to be encountered again until/unless the visitation.

In the Latina/o funeral home, the family of the dead may even help with the makeup and dressing of the deceased once the embalment has occurred, and the family will usually sit with the body following the embalming. Two Cuban-American women (a mother and grandmother) living in Florida and mourning the loss of their daughter/granddaughter, explained the difference (in their views) between Latina/o and Anglo practices:

“We would spend the whole night,” said N. [and] H. told me that they spent “the night at the funeral home in recliners...set up by the funeral home, which happened to be a Cuban mortuary in Florida.” N. explained, “It’s not like [Anglo] Americans...Americans go from 1:00 to 8:00 o’clock or from 1:00-10:00 and that was it. We would not. Once the body is there, we would stay with that body until it is buried.... “There was lots of coffee being passed around—espresso coffee. I remember...whose going to get dinner? We would go in shifts—like Grandma was going anywhere! We couldn’t leave her alone, so certain shifts went and ate and came back; the other shift would go and eat and come back—somebody was always there keeping her company.” (Heller, 2001)

While the deceased is no longer alive, she remains in a liminal state<sup>7</sup> until her funeral mass, and thus should be accompanied at all times. It is not until the formal religious ritual of the rosary and mass that she is believed to be officially in God’s care, and until this moment, prayers and presence are required to aide the deceased in purgatory. Staying with the deceased allows the family to distinguish themselves from other mourners, and to reassert familial ties through presence.

Food gifts are offered to the deceased and are shared among the bereaved, usually as one of the highlighted dishes served in the wake. Food offerings tie the deceased to the present, by viewing the dead as still operating in some way in the realm of the living. Food also acts as a social currency for the bereaved – reinforcing national and ethnic identity and underscoring the social cohesion of the grievors. Sharing food is an essentially communal act, and eating and drinking together with the deceased at the wake allow the community to reintegrate the deceased in his new status into the community.

However, some funeral homes are not equipped to offer catering services such as the Funeraria Brazos, and in these instances, food will be shared in the form of offerings to the deceased, with social consumption of food either after the ceremony at the church, or in the home of the deceased following the burial. This stands in stark contrast to traditional Anglo/Protestant practices, in which food is shared by the community only after the burial of the deceased, and the

<sup>7</sup> The liminal state is a state of transitional existence; coined by Victor Turner, the liminal is believed to be both dangerous and powerful, as a person in a liminal state belongs to two realms, while exclusively belonging to neither. For more on this, see Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites of passage." *Betwixt and between: Patterns of masculine and feminine initiation* (1987): 3-19.

sharing of food functions as a symbolic restructuring of the community without the deceased.<sup>8</sup> Family and friends will also bring small gifts and tokens to place in the casket. Many families purchase caskets that come with memory drawers to hold photos, jewelry, and keepsakes, in addition to choosing cap panel inserts that allow for the insertion of photos, pictures, flowers, and letters to the deceased (Interview with Blake, 2015). Material offerings to the deceased signify a belief in purgatory, in that there is some notion that the deceased is still present in some form, and will appreciate the material objects given to him for his behalf.

### *Rosaries, Relics and the Latina/o Funeral*

Religious icons and trinkets are often placed in or near the casket, serving as both an appropriation and approximation of holiness. This practice initially emerged from the material objectification of sanctity found in saint relics and pictures because they represented the holiness of the church space, and represented the nearness of God, and has a long historical precedent in Latin American Catholicism (Voekel, 2002). As Adam Warren argues, “To be buried in such as space near the altar or saints’ images served not only as a symbolic reflection of one’s piety for mere mortals to observe, but also as an enhancement of one’s holiness and virtue in the eyes of God.” (Warren, 2011, pp.172-173). Warren argues that in colonial Lima, the farther the cemetery was from the church itself, the more elaborate these material symbols of sanctity and the funeral processions became.<sup>9</sup> In the contemporary Hispanic funeral home, the community is dislocated both geographically and physically from the home country, and thus these material objects in the funeral home are doubly invested with meaning, both religious and nationalist. Additionally, when the service is held in the funeral home and not the home church, these contemporary objects, not unlike those in colonial Lima, function as an alternate way to imbue secular space with sacred presence. Finally, funerals assert familial and clan ties with the deceased, the community and each other. Pictures placed in the cap piece or around the casket serve as a visual reminder to the community of kinship and social ties, and serve as a tableau through which the community can demonstrate and reassert their ties and association with the dead and the family of the deceased.

In Catholic services, rosaries are usually recited in the presence of the deceased the first and/or second night, and then they continue to be recited for nine nights following the funeral at the home of the family of the deceased. The rosary recited at the wake is generally followed by a rosary that is said once a month for a year following a death, and annually repeated after that. Reciting the rosary generally takes half an hour (though this depends on the speed of the prayers and the amount of time given to pause and reflect in between the prayers), so the time investment in this spiritual act on behalf of the dead is not insignificant.<sup>10</sup> Following a death, Catholics pray the rosary as a way to pray for the intercession of someone’s soul, as the rosary is intended to help the soul of the deceased secure their place in heaven. The belief in Purgatory<sup>11</sup> informs nearly all the practices surrounding the care for and remembrance of the dead among

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see my book *Dying to Eat*, University Press of Kentucky, forthcoming 2017.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 191. In Warren’s article, he argues that the medicalization and needs of the city to sterilize both the church and the city led to more stringent rules regarding mandatory burial in cemeteries located out of the city walls. Because these burials were so far from the supposed sanctity of the church, families then brought images and material objects imbued with sanctity to the cemetery.

<sup>10</sup> The rosary beads are a string of beads consisting of a crucifix and five beads, attached to a string of fifty small beads, grouped into five groups of ten beads separated by five additional large beads. One prays various prayers while holding to each bead and moving through the beads in succession. At each of the beads and at the crucifix, the petitioner prays a particular prayer, including the Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer (Our Father), Hail Mary prayer, and the Glory Be prayer, meditating on particular events that occurred in the Bible. These are specifically laid out. For more specifics, see United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, “How to Pray the Rosary,” <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/rosaries/how-to-pray-the-rosary.cfm> (accessed June 2, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Purgatory is a place where one’s soul is sent if one’s positive deeds do not necessarily outweigh the negatives ones (or in theological terms, if one’s sins are too great to go straight to Heaven). It can be difficult for Protestants to understand purgatory and the practices

Catholic Latina/os.

Most Latino Catholics still prefer burial over cremation,<sup>12</sup> and the body plays an active role in the Hispanic funeral, from the wake and rosary to the funeral mass and burial, as a central ‘actor’ in the religious rituals remembering the dead (Morrill et al, 2016). Following the wake and the rosary, there will also be a funeral mass, in which the larger community of the deceased is both invited and expected to attend. If the deceased is cremated rather than buried, she is generally cremated following the funeral mass and wake, so that the body itself is present during the service, but cremated prior to interment. The Catholic funeral mass differs from the wake and Protestant funerals in that its purpose is not only the remembrance of the deceased, but also to be considered a rite of worship. For this reason, funeral masses may only be performed by priests. However, funeral vigils and the Rite of Committal may be performed by either Catholic deacons or chaplains as long as there is no Eucharist.<sup>13</sup> The Catholic requiem mass consists of four parts: the receiving of the body, the liturgy, the Eucharist, and the final committal, but unlike other masses, have no exchange of the peace. Eulogies generally occur during the wake before the funeral mass, as the Catholic church has proscribed eulogies of the deceased, as many believe it takes the focus away from the worship of God and praying for the intercession on behalf of the dead (Moyer, 2014). At the site of burial, the Rite of Committal is performed,<sup>14</sup> and then families generally accompany the deceased to its final resting spot, and generally the extended community will also participate in this aspect of disposal. In total, funeral services generally last three to four days, followed by nine days of rosary prayers and regular commemorative masses for the dead.

Like the broader Hispanic community, Latina/o religiosity is far from monolithic, with popular syncretistic and indigenous symbols interwoven with traditional Catholic beliefs to shape individual beliefs and practices. Pineda-Madrid writes, “It is through popular Catholic practices that most U.S. Latinos/as become Catholic and sustain their Catholicism. When in the midst of life’s struggles, Latina/o Catholics will turn to popular religious practices and in the process negotiate their Catholic identity and lay claim to it anew.” (Pineda-Madrid, 2006, p.208) Examples abound among Latina/o communities: people relying on Afro-Cuban Santería folk beliefs, or holding séances in order to reach their deceased loved ones, and Ligia Houben gives an example in her book of a man who conducts a séance with his family in order to say goodbye to his mother through a medium possessed by her spirit (Houben, p.83). These accounts illustrate the importance of the pervasiveness and significance of folk beliefs in practices, even within the dominant Catholic framework. Often, it is through these folk practices that specific nationalist strains reveal themselves, as many of the indigenous practices preceded the colonialist impact of traditional Roman Catholicism.<sup>15</sup>

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surrounding this belief, but it is from the belief in purgatory that the practices of saying rosaries, celebrating masses for the dead, offering anniversary masses for the deceased, and observing the holidays of All Souls’ Day and Día de los Muertos emerge. All of these practices are meant to help the deceased move from purgatory into heaven, while also allowing the functional purpose of giving the bereaved something to actively *do* in honor of the dead. For more in-depth studies on the influence of Purgatory beliefs and practices in the Latino community see Timothy M. Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella’s book, *Horizons of the sacred: Mexican traditions in US Catholicism*. Cornell University Press, 2002 and William V. D’Antonio, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier. *American Catholics in transition*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Cremation rates, however, are increasing (and are predicted to continue to increase) in the Latina/o population, as it is a cheaper form of disposal, is portable (ashes can be transported to the home country), and the Roman Catholic Church now recognizes cremation as a legitimate form of disposal.

<sup>13</sup> One should note here, the role of the Eucharist as a symbolic last meal not only with Christ, but with the dead themselves, and a symbol of the future sharing of meals between the living and the dead that is promised through Christian teachings; thus the Eucharistic mass serves as a consolation that they are still in communion with the dead through the mass.

<sup>14</sup> This consists mainly of a blessing of the interment site with a spoken prayer, the sprinkling of holy water, and a final blessing over the deceased.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Fernando A. Ortiz and Kenneth G. Davis. "Latina/o Folk Saints and Marian Devotions Popular Religiosity and Healing." *Latino/a Healing Practices: Mestizo and Indigenous Perspectives* (2008): 29-62.

## Mourning traditions and Remembrance Rituals

Following the final interment of the body, the family usually retreats to the house of the family of the deceased, where more food is brought and remembrance of the deceased occurs. Food, flowers, and gifts of money to help cover the funeral expenses are the most common gifts given to the family at and following the funeral. Extended family and friends usually gather as death is viewed in social terms with mourning a negotiation and restructuring of social relations without the physical presence of the deceased. According to E.R. Shapiro, grieving models in the Latina/o tradition emphasize a reintegration of the dead in a world without the deceased, unlike the traditional Western/Anglo model of working through stages of detachment from the deceased (Shapiro, 1995). Scholar Tony Walter calls this model a framework of mourning based on 'caring for the dead,' rather than 'remembering the dead.' (Walter, 2009, p.216) For this reason, most Hispanic traditions of mourning and remembrance involve the (passive or active) participation of the deceased themselves in addition to the involvement of the extended social family structure.

### *Memorialization Practices for the Dead*

Catholicism encourages regular prayers for the dead, particularly on significant dates following the death of the deceased. The purpose is that while one might be morally certain of the deceased's place in heaven, masses help provide additional assurance through the prayers of the living. One's family will honor the dead with masses on the third, seventh, and thirtieth days following a death or a funeral, and then annually after that (the count of days begin with the day immediately following the date of death or the day of burial; both days are appropriate starting points). Small stipends (usually somewhere around \$5 or \$10) are given to the priest to recite the mass for the deceased, and a card is given to the family who has requested the mass for the dead in acknowledgement. This card is somewhat like a greeting card and tells the receiver that her loved one has had a mass recited in honor of him or her. In between masses for the dead, it is common practice to light a candle (with a small token payment) at the church in honor of the deceased and to offer additional prayers in memory of the dead.

Prayer cards in remembrance of the dead are also often distributed at the funeral and/or anniversary mass for the dead. Often these contain a picture of the deceased, with their birth and death dates on one side and a prayer of intercession for their soul on the other side, often with a reference to the favored saint of the deceased. These cards are usually handed out so that attendees of both the funeral and mass for the dead might pray for the deceased. These prayer cards operate as portable and meaningful memorials, material and visual reminders to the bereaved of the deceased, that can be carried and displayed, and offering a link to the funeral itself. They also operate as a sort of souvenir, evidence of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased, and asserting the right of the bereaved to grieve.<sup>16</sup> With the Internet, it is now becoming easier for families to sign up for intercessory masses online, to have candles lit for them in prayer at churches (also for a small donation), or to create web-based memorials. In this way, many traditional practices are moving online.

Finally, it is usually common to place small notices in the local paper for important anniversaries of the death (usually one, five, ten, fifteen, etc.), in which the family honors the deceased with a short message to and about the deceased and, if they are Catholic, announces the time and place of the anniversary mass. Often the messages are short but illuminating, and, like obituaries, they tend to privilege immediate family members and their relationship to the

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<sup>16</sup> Material memorials are particularly popular in Catholic memorialization. See my book for more on memorialization cards and other material memorials: *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-first Century*, Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014.

deceased, reinforcing kinship affiliations within the community, while asserting one's right to grieve. Here again, as the Internet replaces the newspaper as the primary medium for news, many families now use more informal channels (such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram) for remembrances of the dead and announcements of masses.

Apart from the annual anniversary of the death of the deceased, the most important regular remembrance of the dead is November 2, or All Souls' Day, when families gather in homes, at the graves, and in churches to remember the dead.<sup>17</sup> Mexican families will frequently erect small family altars in their homes to honor the dead, complete with pictures of the deceased, candles, incense, and food and drink for the deceased. The Mexican Day of the Dead ceremony emerged from the popular Catholic practice of memorializing the dead in the Catholic Feast celebrating All Souls' Day. The purpose of Día de los Muertos is to remind the living that life is short. The day connects the living with stories of the dead through the symbolic and fixed geographical location of the tomb. In recent years, Día de los Muertos has become more widely celebrated in both Hispanic and American culture; a popular animation movie, *Book of Life* (2014), reveals the crossover appeal of the holiday, while the upsurge in local fiestas, festivals, Día de los Muertos iconography, and even Halloween costumes reveal that the holiday has become more mainstream in American culture.<sup>18</sup>

Día de los Muertos, however, represents only one cultural and nationalistic interpretation of the celebration of All Souls' Day. The various nationalities residing in the United States vary widely in how this day should be commemorated.<sup>19</sup> Thus, while Día de los Muertos has exploded in popularity and recognition in the United States, its emergence in American pop culture has marginalized some Latina/os who don't celebrate it as it is celebrated in Mexico. Regardless of whether one is Catholic or Protestant, Cuban or Mexican, however, the liturgical calendar and remembrance of the dead play a major role in the Latina/o worldview, and the dead are regularly remembered and memorialized.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, death and memorialization in the Latina/o community reinforce Latina/o identity, and culture, through the emphasis on shared cultural values, language, practices, food, and customs. Death practices thus serve as a way to distinguish oneself from the larger community, through a shared set of rituals that reinforce kinship ties, communal values, and behaviors. Practices such as long all-night wakes and/or vigils, remaining with the body until burial, the

<sup>17</sup> Originating in Catholic beliefs in Purgatory, and the need to intercede on behalf of the dead, the practice of observing All Souls' Day is first credited to St. Cluny, on November 2, 998. The observation of this practice soon spread to the rest of the Cluniac order, then to Southern Europe, and finally, in the fourteenth century, to Rome. Originally one day of intercession for the dead, it was not long before the November 2 observance expanded to encompass the entire month of November, with names of the deceased prayed over in masses for the dead and including October 31, All Saints' Eve, November 1, All Saints' Day, and November 2, All Souls' Day. When the Spanish colonialists settled in Mexico in 1519, the Roman Catholic tradition was fused with indigenous Aztec tradition remembering the dead through reverence of the goddess Mictecacihuatl, known more contemporaneously as the Lady of the Dead. (The images of the Lady of the Dead are not that different from those of the Grim Reaper popular in Europe in the sixteenth century, with a similar emphasis on the macabre as an everyday occurrence: the reminder in both images is that of death made commonplace.) The indigenous summer holiday was moved to coincide with the later church date, and thus a new and indigenous interpretation of All Souls' Day was begun.

<sup>18</sup> I would argue, however, and slightly beyond the scope of this paper, that the appeal of Día de los Muertos remains a niche market, and the iconography and artwork generally associated with the holiday are appropriated and fetishized in ways that their original meaning is not always retained. Rather than demonstrating a serious cultural amalgamation or appropriation, Día de los Muertos iconography functions on the periphery in a similar way that Japanese anime and kawaii culture (Hello Kitty, Pokemon, etc.) function—that is to reveal a particular worldliness while perhaps not a contextual understanding of the objects. This type of appropriation may serve as a way to objectify and minimize the religious meaning originally attached to these images, and re-package them in such a way to nullify their cultural and contextual import.

<sup>19</sup> Cuban-Americans, for example, will often visit the graves of their loved ones, bringing flowers and saying prayers, but view the holiday as a more solemn occasion, and not necessarily filled with laughter and music, as in Mexico. Argentine-Americans will celebrate the holiday formally with a mass and a visit to the grave, but view the other customs with distaste, preferring only the formal church customs.

offering of food and other material goods or keepsakes to the deceased, incorporating drawers and cap-pieces into caskets to accommodate material reminders of kinship and familial ties between the bereaved and the deceased, foods marking ethnic and/or nationalistic identity, symbols and artwork representing cultural icons and values (e.g. particular saints), the reordering of time through memorialization, and the importance of presence and social networks are all unique characteristics of Latina/o death practices. This review is by no means a comprehensive analysis, but an introduction, and there is much more work to be done here. Death practices in the contemporary United States are one of the few remaining places in which diasporic identity is emphasized and even solidified.

### Biographical note:

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### **Abstrakti**

Tämä artikkeli on alustava katsaus Yhdysvaltojen Latina/o yhteisöjen jokapäiväisiin kuolemaan ja suremiseen liittyviin käytäntöihin. Katsauksen tarkoitus on palvella alustavana oikaisuna perinteiseen tutkimukseen amerikkalaisesta kuolemasta, joka esittää kuoleman pääosin anglisesta ja protestanttisesta perspektiivistä käsin.