

Death and the Colonial Difference

An Analysis of a Mexican Idea

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Abstract

The Mexican poet and philosopher Octavio Paz writes, “there are two attitudes toward death: one, pointing forward, that conceives of it as creation; the other, pointing backward, that expresses itself as a fascination with nothingness or as a nostalgia for limbo.” The attitude that points forward is found amongst the peoples of Europe and North America; the backward pointing attitude holds sway in the Mexican and Latin American imagination. We will call the forward pointing attitude, the instrumental attitude; the backward pointing attitude will be referred to as the historical attitude. My claim in the present paper is that the historical attitude toward death reflects a cultural phenomenon where death is a constant presence. The instrumental attitude reflects a more generalized “Western” notion that places death as an event of the future. The contrast between these views can be explained by what is known as “the colonial difference.”

1. Introduction: Two Deaths

In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican poet and philosopher Octavio Paz writes: “there are two attitudes toward death: one, pointing forward, that conceives of it as creation; the other, pointing backward, that expresses itself as a fascination with nothingness or as a nostalgia for limbo.”¹ Paz goes on to say that the attitude that points forward is found amongst the peoples of Europe and North America; the backward pointing attitude holds sway in the Mexican and Latin American imagination. We will call the forward pointing attitude, the *instrumental attitude*; the backward pointing attitude will be referred to as the *historical attitude*.

To say that one’s attitude toward death is instrumental is to say that death, my death and death in general, is something that *will happen*, it is an event of the future, always on the horizon and always a possibility. The historical attitude, on the other hand, is one which holds that death is a permanent presence or a perpetual recovery of a past annihilation.

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¹ Paz (1985), p. 61.

The first, forward pointing, instrumental, attitude is neatly described by Sigmund Freud when he says, “The goal of all life is death.”² This means, for Freud at least, that life is a steady progress *toward* death. As a goal, or a destination, death motivates life *forward*. The relationship between life and death is summarized by the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker in his *The Denial of Death*: “[T]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man.”³ As a “mainspring of human activity” it is “creation” in Paz’s bifurcation above.

The second, historical, attitude appears most poignantly in the poetry, literature, art, and philosophy of Mexican’s throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Although this attitude reflects a relation to and with the past, it is a past that is present or made present in everyday existence. The Yale-educated, Mexican poet, Xavier Villaurrutia sings, “If you are everywhere / in the water and in the earth / in the air that engulfs me / ... in the breath I take / in my confusing blood / could you not be, Death, *in my life*, / water, fire, dust, and breath?”⁴ In a similar vein, and a few decades later, the Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga theorizes, “For the Mexican, death is ... an everyday accomplishment [*un hecho cotidiano*] ... all would agree that for the Mexican death is familiar. Our people coexist with death.”⁵ Both Uranga and Villaurrutia lend voice to a rationality that holds that death is not an inevitable event that will befall me in a near or distant future, but, rather, that death is a happening in the now, codified in the social space as an “everyday,” “familiar,” presence. As such, it is not a “goal,” as it is for Freud, but an “accomplishment” of the past and repeated in the present.

What the Mexican attitude implies is that to coexist with death is much different than simply being aware of its inevitability. For his part, Paz sees death as a presence which makes possible the very intelligibility of life: “Death defines life.... Our deaths illuminate our lives. If our deaths lack meaning, our

² Freud (1950), p. 50.

³ Becker (1973), p. xvii.

⁴ Villaurrutia (1933). The untranslated stanza goes as follows: “Si en todas partes estás, / en el agua y en la tierra, / en el aire que me encierra / y en el incendio voraz; / y si a todas partes vas / conmigo en el pensamiento, / en el soplo de mi aliento / y en mi sangre confundida / ¿no serás, Muerte, en mi vida, / agua, fuego, polvo y viento?” This is my translation.

⁵ Uranga (1950), p. 64.

lives also lacked it.”⁶ To be defined by death is to be captured by it, as in a glow or a shadow. It is all around, inescapable and personal. That is why a meaningless death can only correspond to a meaningless life—by defining life, death shares in life’s significance or lack thereof. Coexistence and connection allude to an intimacy and identity with death; the case is different with Becker’s idea of death, one which evokes separation and distance, which is why death, Becker says, “haunts the human animal like nothing else.”⁷

My claim in the present paper is that there is more to the *difference* between these two conceptions of death, i.e., the instrumental and the historical. Paz’s, Villaurrutia’s and Uranga’s conception of death reflect a particular cultural phenomenon, one in which death is affirmed as a constant presence, a *fait accompli*. Becker’s, and to some extent Freud’s, characterization reflects a more generalized “Western” attitude that places death, as the “mainspring of human activity,” squarely on par with other events to be realized at a future time. Another way to say this is that Becker’s conception is a quintessential expression of *modernity*, while Paz’s is *not*.⁸ That is, Paz’s conception of death is representative of a uniquely Mexican *response* to modernity, a response nestled in a particular historical and intersubjective configuration nowadays referred to as “the colonial difference” or, what is the same, it is a response conditioned by an existential-historical situation Mexican philosophers themselves call “*situación límite*” (limit situation).

What follows is thus an attempt to clarify the *Mexican* idea of (or attitude toward) death *as* an expression of the colonial difference or the *situación límite*.

2. Quintessential Expressions of Modernity

But what does it mean to say that Becker’s idea of death is a quintessential expression of modernity? Famed sociologist Anthony Giddens defines modernity in the following way:

⁶ Paz (1985), p. 51.

⁷ Becker (1973), p. xvii.

⁸ Ultimately, what the Mexican idea of death retrains that modernity’s does not is a connection to the past. While death for the modern European signifies flight *from* existence, death for the “modern” Mexican signifies a *return* to its origins. Thus, Paz writes, “Death as nostalgia, rather than as the fruition or end of life, is death as origin.” Paz (1985), p. 62.

At its simplest, modernity is a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy.... It is a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which unlike any preceding culture lives in the future rather than the past.⁹

Put differently, modernity is a market-driven, future-oriented, existential-political condition grounded in market capitalism and industrial production. Important in the maintenance of this condition is *productivity*, *efficiency*, and *individual freedom*; less important is history, which with its failed projects and investments, represents an obstacle to productive, efficient, fulfillment of individuals' and society's goals and aspirations. Becker's conception of death is rooted in this condition. As such, it is a manifestation of the conceptual schemes (viz., forms of intelligibility) that arise as a result of the progressive, scientific, and instrumental rationality at work in the project of modernity. This would account for Becker's characterization of death in terms of "fear," "fatality," and "destiny"; it would account for thinking about death according to the logic of anticipation, as what Becker calls a "mainspring of activity," and thus as essentially futural. Indeed, Becker's death necessarily privileges the future which, he says, is the "final destiny of man."¹⁰ In tune with the progressive, or instrumental, rationality, of modernity, Becker's talk of death evokes the future or progress towards it. We "fear" what is to come, "fatality" always announces an absolute end to a process that has not ended, a "mainspring" uncoils to drive the mechanism to some end, and "destiny" is always an event to be fulfilled. (Modernity, of course, has not turned out beautifully for the European. The greatest "modern" poet, Hölderlin complained of the "homelessness" of which modernity was responsible.)

Modernity's notion of death is thus characterized as an anticipated encounter. It is an encounter feared and avoided both for its mystery and for its price. In the modern state one has the luxury of thinking and fearing this future death. Death

⁹ Giddens (1988), p. 94.

¹⁰ Becker (1973), p. xvii.

is not on the doorstep, so to speak. Its futurity lends it its mystery; its disruptiveness lends it its price. Couched in the conceptual reality of industrial production and capital, death is considered as having economic consequences (e.g., the costs of burial), industrial repercussions (e.g., lost labor), and social, or political, effects, as exemplified in social and political efforts to control death (e.g., with abortion, euthanasia, etc.). In the history of philosophy, it is easy to find such a future-oriented, economic, view among the great spokesmen¹¹ of modernity. Take Hegel: “death is the fulfillment and the supreme ‘work’ which the individual as such undertakes on [the community’s] behalf.”¹² That is, for Hegel human death is a task, a goal, the end of *work*. As such, it is the ultimate accomplishment of a communal sacrifice. Hegel’s idea of death fits Giddens’s definition of modernity nicely, as it is a “fulfillment” which “lives in the future rather than the past,” something with utility and purpose (i.e., the welfare of the community). Already in his *Labyrinth*, Paz identifies this notion of death: “Modern death does not have any significance that transcends it or that refers to other values. It is rarely anything more than the inevitable conclusion of a natural process. In a world of facts, death is merely one more fact.”¹³

Consequently, an idea of death grounded in modernity will presumably abide by an essential demand for futurity. This future orientation announces modernity’s philosophical commitments regarding time, where time is instrumental, *sequential*, and a perpetual movement towards the not-yet. The everyday concern with time is reflected in an incessant planning, *projection*, expectancy, and waiting typical of modern society’s *ethic of productivity*.¹⁴

3. Limit Situations, Coloniality, and the Colonial Difference

The Peruvian social theorist Aníbal Quijano finds the roots of modernity’s conception of time in the discovery of the “New” world, which, as new and untapped, represented the *promise*, at least to the European mind, of future glory, re-birth, or utopia. It is at this point that, in the European imagination, “[t]he past

¹¹ I mean this literally. With few exceptions, modernity is embodied by European and North American *men of letters*.

¹² Hegel (1977), p. 270.

¹³ Paz (1985), p. 57.

¹⁴ This is the way Martin Heidegger describes Dasein’s everyday concern with death in *Being and Time*. See Heidegger (1962), especially pertinent is Part II, Chapter 6, sub-section 79.

is replaced by the future as the privileged seat of the hopes of humanity.”¹⁵ Opposed to this, time in Latin America, while nonetheless progressive in an objective sense, retains the past and, in subjective consciousness, seems to stall in the immediate present; time does not progress toward the not-yet, but, rather, it remains anchored in the present and to the past. As Quijano points out, “In Latin America, what is a sequence in other countries, is a simultaneity. It is also a sequence. But in the first place, it is a simultaneity.”¹⁶ The simultaneity of time makes possible the constant presence of the past and the “nostalgia for limbo” that characterizes the Mexican idea of death (according to Paz). In the progressive, instrumental, and sequential temporality of modernity, nostalgia has been replaced with forgetfulness.¹⁷ Both *times* condition a view of death: modernity’s death is an event to be avoided, or forgotten; death for modernity’s *other* is an event which is constantly recovered, made present—contiguous with life.

Clearly, Villaurrutia’s, Paz’s and Uranga’s conceptions of death are not rooted in modernity’s time narratives. So where do we situate this seemingly *very* Mexican (and Latin American) conception of death? To begin with, we have to re-think modernity. According to Quijano, “[t]he history of modernity ... began with the violent encounter between Europe and America at the end of the fifteenth century.”¹⁸ Thus, the project of modernity—to which instrumental rationality and forward-pointing thinking belong as tools—is born in the “shock of conquest.”¹⁹ Once the shock subsides and New World resources begin to be exploited and exported during the colony, America, or more specifically Latin America, becomes instrumental in the development of the new world order, one that emphasizes progressive (and aggressive) economic expansion. Thus, Quijano argues that during “the apogee of the mercantilism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” Europe and Latin America equally enjoyed in the

¹⁵ Quijano (1993), p. 142.

¹⁶ Quijano (1993), pp. 149-150.

¹⁷ Quijano (1993), writes: “Until then, all previous images of the universe lay in the past, associated with the past. Hope was an insistence on a return to a golden age. More accurately, it was nostalgia.” p. 142. But “nostalgia” here does not mean what it meant for the Enlightenment Europeans, namely, a return to a golden age, but “that which the past defends in us as the basis for an alternative rationality against the instrumental rationalism that dominates our present.” p. 150.

¹⁸ Quijano (1993), p. 141.

¹⁹ This is the term used by Serge Gruzinski in his groundbreaking historical-sociological study, *The Mestizo Mind*. The “shock of conquest” refers to the speed and ferociousness in which the native inhabitants of Mexico City were forced into compliance with European ambitions. See, Gruzinski (2002).

promises of modernity.²⁰ The Latin American condition, however, reveals that Latin America does not *today* participate in the ordered, progressive, agenda attributable to modernity, or to modern states. The question becomes: If Latin America shares in the creation of modernity, why has it not enjoyed of its spoils?

Quijano points out that while the project of modernity is a consequence of European ambitions *in* the New World, it was abandoned (as a project applicable to the New World) sometime after it was discovered that in Mexico, Central, and South America industrialization and capitalism was not proceeding (and *could not* proceed) in accordance with the ever expanding modernizing aspirations of the European imaginary. The complexities inherent in the constitution of the Latin American identity—ones rooted in *mestizaje*, hybridity, and dependence, complexities made even more problematic by the constant pressures of the colonizing countries—made the task of modernization ever more difficult.²¹ Add to this a history of violence, war, and rebellion, and Latin American nations begin to lose their economic appeal.

Quijano conceives the end of the orgy of conquest and colonization as a Kafkaesque metamorphosis the end result of which is the end of modernity in Latin America:

Latin America fell victim to its colonial relationship with Europe and was subjected to a literally Kafkaesque ‘metamorphosis.’ While in Europe, mercantilism started to transform itself into industrial capitalism, in Latin America, especially from the last third of the eighteenth century on, the parallel transformation was halted, and the economy began to stagnate due to the double effect of the continued restrictions imposed by the political economy of the Iberian metropolis and the displacement of economic power in favor of England.²²

This metamorphosis leads to the creation of a vacuum that is at once filled by the lingering force of colonialism itself—this force is manifested in relations of power, control, and hegemony, that Quijano captures with the phrase: the

²⁰ Quijano (1993), p. 144.

²¹ Gruzinski (2002), p. 31ff.

²² Quijano (1993), p. 144.

“coloniality of power.”²³ Once the metamorphosis transforms Latin America into an unattractive caricature of what it once was in the European imagination, and the colonizing nations abandon the sub-continent so as to follow more economically fertile opportunities elsewhere, power relations remain that continue to influence Latin American thought and experience. Power itself colonizes. Hence, according to Quijano, the coloniality of power maintains the “difference” that distinguishes one type of thinking (in this case Mexican or Latin American thought) from another type of thinking (Western or European rationalism). Thus distinguished, Latin American thought represents that which is different, alien, or other to Western or European thought. The differing concepts of death here explored illustrate this point.

Already in 1950, the Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea had proposed that Mexicans existed in what he called a “*situacion limite*.” A decade long reflection on Mexican history and culture led him to question the differences that existed between Europeans and Mexicans and between Mexicans and their indigenous ancestry—a difference he finds at the core of Mexican mestizo identity. He surmises that in order to account for this difference the Mexican must be conceived in terms of a particular circumstance, one “determined by the physical, historical, social, economic, and political world.”²⁴ The Mexican terrain, its mountains, its temperatures, its volcanoes and its jungles determine its people in a particular way; the same goes for its history of conquest and colonialism, its political systems past and presents, its poverty and wealth, its customs, and its philosophy. Due to this determination, the existential, historical, and even biological, *being* of the Mexican will necessarily *be* different than that of the French, the Spanish, the Brazilian, or their own indigenous ancestors because the Mexican’s geo-historical and socio-economic situation is radically distinct. So determined, the Mexican’s situation is *limited*. Zea writes: “The Mexican is someone inserted in a particular situation that I will allow myself to call *a limit situation* [*situación limite*].”²⁵ Zea goes on to describe the *limit situation* in more detail:

The situation is limiting because it is found in that line that separates contradictory forms of the human, that line in which everything can be

²³ See Quijano (2007); See also, Quijano (2002).

²⁴ Zea (2006), p. 188.

²⁵ Zea (2006), p. 188.

possible.... A line that separates what we call the cult of barbarism. A line on the extremes of which, on the one hand, the human can be presented as paralyzed [*anquilosado*] by force of organization and anticipation of everything that might come [*a fuerza de organización y prevención de todas las actitudes*]; on the other hand, as the liberty of movements and actions without any sort of rational control, like an unbounded natural force. Extremes that can be presented in the form of stagnant [*antiquilosadas*] civilizations or in the form of states on the dawns of humanity. *Within these extremes and the line that separates them, fit multiple forms of human existence and co-existence.*²⁶

To exist in that line that separates “contradictory forms of the human” is to conceive oneself as either the embodiment of pure, fully developed rationality (which is how the European conquerors saw themselves when confronting the indigenous “savages”), or as a humanoid animal existing in a Hobbesian state of nature. The *paralyzing* “force of organization,” which belongs to one extreme, and the “unbounded natural force,” which belong to the other, push and pull on the limits of one’s situation. These *forces* influence existence, thought, and action, maintaining the Mexican in that limit situation that she occupies. Quijano calls this influence “coloniality.”

The Argentinean anthropologist, Walter Mignolo, following Quijano’s insights into the coloniality of power, calls the disconnect between the Latin American experience and those European ambitions that at first aroused the European imagination, “the colonial difference.” The colonial difference is *the* dissimilarity between Old and New World thinking and doing—it is the difference that maintains, via the coloniality of power, Latin America as Europe’s, and now North America’s, *other*. In Latin America, the colonial difference is a historical-existential reality which represents the vacuum left by the mechanisms of modernity once these no longer sought to transform Latin America into “the land of the future,” as Hegel had predicted.

Following Quijano, Mignolo stresses the economic-political sources of the colonial difference: “the colonial difference came into being during the so-called conquest of America, which is, in a different macro-narrative, the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and of the modern/colonial world.”²⁷ And, it is

²⁶ Zea (2006), p. 188. Emphasis added.

²⁷ Mignolo (2003), p. 81.

the in-between of these extremes that Walter Dignolo calls “the colonial difference.” In fact, according to Dignolo, “The colonial difference is the space where coloniality of power is enacted.”²⁸ Zea’s “multiple forms of the human” can thus be said to reside in the colonial difference which is, as Dignolo puts it, “quite simply, the reverse and unavoidable side of ‘modernity’—the darker side, like the part of the moon we do not see when we observe it from the earth.”²⁹

Just as Zea’s limiting situation involves navigating through “contradictory forms of the human” (between pure rationality and pure instinct), the colonial difference is caught up in inescapable “double bind.”³⁰ If Mexican thought stakes a claim to *similarity* with either North American or modern European thought then it loses its *difference*; if it affirms this difference, then it affirms its strangeness and loses its claim to reason. In the case of death: either the Mexican idea of death is similar to the modern, Euro-American conception, in which case the Mexican idea is a case of assimilation, *or* the Mexican idea of death is so alien to the modern conception as to be considered strange to modernity and, because of its strangeness, marginalized as “weird” or incoherent. When thought processes assimilate, they vanish in the similar; when they are marginalized, they are considered inferior, or doubtful. “That double bind,” Dignolo argues, “is the colonial difference.”³¹ Likewise, that double-bind is the limit situation, and as a historical reality, it will give rise to a different *logos* and a different rationality, resulting in an *other* historical logic, conception of time and, I argue, an *other* “idea” of death. The second attitude that Paz’s refers to, one which points “backward, that expresses itself as a fascination with nothingness or as a nostalgia for limbo” (op. cit.), is thus an expression from the colonial difference.

4. A Mexican Death

The absence of modernity is thus experienced as a *difference* in Latin America. It is the experience of those who exist in the fringes of the modern world order. But, Dignolo argues, it is precisely because of this limit situation, of this difference, that “[t]he colonial difference creates the conditions for

²⁸ Dignolo (2000), p. ix.

²⁹ Dignolo (2000), p. 22

³⁰ Dignolo attributes the idea of the “double bind” to Robert Bernasconi. See Dignolo (2003), p. 82.

³¹ Dignolo (2003), p. 82.

dialogic situations in which a *fractured enunciation* is enacted from the subaltern perspective as a response to the hegemonic discourse and perspective.”³² The colonial difference is that space from which the darker side of modernity speaks. The colonial difference, consequently, grounds a particular conception of death that *is not* an expression of modernity.

It would be a mistake to characterize this conception of death as radically other—as absolutely alien to the Western conception. After all, it is located in that negative space made possible by colonialism, namely, Latin America itself. This means that if there is a conception of death which is *other* to modernity’s conception, it will not necessarily precede modernity or be rooted in a pre-discovery “world-view.” The discourse, or dialogue, which places death as a presence in the continuity of life is such a “fractured enunciation” coming from the dark part of the moon, a splintering response to the modern-colonial world-view which sees death as the ultimate loss of human productivity, an event to be avoided until *the time comes*.

So what about Mexican death? In art and literature, Mexican representations of death can be found in the illustrations of José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), the poetry of Villaurrutia (1903-1950), or the fiction of Juan Rulfo (1917-1986). In contemporary culture, Mexican attitudes toward death are found in popular music and cinema, where the title characters consistently renounce themselves to death for the most trivial or the best of reasons, for instance, love, horse, rooster, country, money, or pride. If one looks carefully, death is everywhere in Mexican cities, towns, myths, and local histories.

Talk of the everywhere-ness of death, however, can be criticized as being an unjustified generalization; poetic hyperbole without much ground (see section 6, below). Then again, Mexican history itself begins in death. From the beginning, with the atrocities carried out during the periods of conquest and colonization in 16th century, which was a “veritable holocaust for the native population,”³³ violence and destruction have been an omnipresent reality.³⁴ Accounts of the first days following the conquest of, what is now, Mexico City report that “the dead floated, swollen with water, their eyes bulging like frogs ... and broken

³² Mignolo (2000), p. x.

³³ Lomnitz (2005), p. 68.

³⁴ Hegel makes this point: “In North America we see prosperity growing from an increase in industry and population, from civil order and firm freedom.... In South America (including Mexico), on the other hand, the republics rest only on military force. Their entire history is a continuing upheaval.” In Hegel (1988), p. 87.

bones lay on the paths. Hair was scattered around... The water was reddish as though it had been dyed. *We drank it as it was.*³⁵ From the beginning, death assumed an everydayness, like the filthy water, and it too was taken as it was: “We were all alike in this, whether young, priest, woman, or child.”³⁶

It could be said that the Mexican, or the *mestizo*, is a child of violent and destructive acts that began and continued past, what Serge Gruzinski calls, “the murderous reconstruction of Mexico City.”³⁷ It is no surprise, then, that Mexicans begin the 20th century in a death struggle. The Mexican Revolution was the first in a century of revolutions throughout the world; it once again made everyday death commonplace. Art, poetry, fiction, philosophy, and music followed suit: the modern, *civilized* and progressive, conception of death popular in the centers of modernity was turned on its head, given its own unique Mexican flavor. A classic study of Mexican art published by Anita Brenner in 1929, *Idols Behind Altars*, recounts the Mexican’s “strange” relation to death:

This familiarity with death is shocking to the European. But where death is so much at home in Mexico, he [*sic*] is no longer a dreaded and a flattered guest.... The city jabs slyly at him, makes a clown of him. It belittles him for his trumped-up value.... Except as a physical phenomenon, death itself is disregarded.³⁸

We can guess that what is “shocking to the European” is the lack of similarities between her own conception of death and what she finds in the Mexican home, street, and market place. The shock, as all shocks, is due to coming face to face with the unexpected and different. More accurately, it is due to the unresolved double bind that keeps the European from finding reason in what is not *the same*, thus, in the act of surprise, *marginalizing* it as barbaric or, in the best case, *poetic hyperbole*.

In *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, Claudio Lomnitz declares that “death in Mexico gets a very different rap.”³⁹ And, given the peculiarities of its colonial history and its *limiting situation*, it should. What makes the rap different is its tone, which represents a strange relationship to death, one of both familiarity

³⁵ Quoted in Gruzinski (2002), p. 34. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Quoted in Gruzinski (2002), p. 34.

³⁷ Gruzinski (2002), p. 36.

³⁸ Brenner (1970), p. 25-26.

³⁹ Lomnitz (2005), p. 20.

and indifference. According to Lomnitz, for instance, death is part of the national spirit to such an extent that it has become one of “Mexico’s national totems.”⁴⁰ Taking up a place alongside representations of the patriot Benito Juárez and the Virgin of Guadalupe, death, or the idea death, occupies a privileged position in the Mexican national consciousness as a symbol of national identity. However, unlike the Virgin (who represents hope and devotion) and Juárez (who represents law and reason), death “has a more nihilistic and lighthearted component.”⁴¹ In other words, death is not an event to be feared, but a presence to behold and admire. To admire death is to regard living itself with a nihilistic attitude, to mock it or mock those who, for some reason, are absorbed in their own lives, disregarding its limitations and its finitude. Thus, as a national symbol, or national sign, death represents an all-encompassing value that, instead of unifying, as totems are meant to do, divides and separates—or, in mockery, constantly threatens to separate. The presence of death becomes a constant reminder that our errands are fools errands, that our lives, full of sound and fury as they may be, ultimately signify nothing. So that rap that death gets in Mexico might be different to those who exist beyond its socio-political borders and are thus unencumbered by its history, but there is nothing *different* or strange about death’s rap for Mexicans themselves.

We thus emphasize that the Mexican idea of death is *other* to modernity’s. And, moreover, notwithstanding neighborly proximity, it is also other to the Anglo-American conception. Uranga makes this point in reference to the United States: “For the North American [*el norteamericano*], death is a reality that must be hidden, a phenomenon that is silenced and masked as much as possible so that it will not disturb, with its impertinence, the flow of a life that unfolds in radical dedication to [self]-realization and work.”⁴² The Mexican’s relationship to death is, plainly put, out in the open. The reality of death is not hidden, or masked; death itself forbids this, as it is what defines life. And Mexicans realize

⁴⁰ Lomnitz (2005), p. 43.

⁴¹Lomnitz (2005), p. 21. Further on, he writes: “The three great totems of Mexican national history—Guadalupe, Juárez, and the playful skeleton—correspond, as national signs, to three different version of the social contract. In the first case, Mexico was represented as having been born out of a relation of loyalty and filiation with the *virgin morena*. The Mexican nation was her particular community of devotees, and the compact that kept the nation together was its Marian devotion. In the case of the Juárez totem, the Mexican nation was born again, after a long battle with its internal and foreign enemies, in a social compact between citizens committed to the rule of law and reason. [...] Death emerged as a national totem in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution” (p. 43.)

⁴² Uranga (1950), p. 64.

and accept this intimate arrangement and they “coexist with death.”⁴³ But these are platitudes. In Uranga’s philosophical program, the question deals with this familiarity, with the apparent everydayness of death.

Uranga echoes Paz, Zea, and Brenner in his estimation that Mexican death “corresponds to a global project of life.”⁴⁴ This means that the clue as to why the Mexican possesses this idea of death is hidden in the Mexican’s idea of *life* itself. The Mexican idea of life, or his conception of life, is rooted in the historical experience of the conquest, colonization, and centuries of failed attempts to assimilate to the European, and later, North American, utopias—and this would be why Mexican death is both of the past and always a very old version of itself in the present. But being rooted in such an unyielding history allows Mexicans access to insights unavailable to the *norteamericanos*, for instance, that while life always begins, it never ends, it never wraps up, it never concludes. In other words, life’s ends are not meant to be fulfilled. As Uranga puts it: “the life of the Mexican is always consumed but never consummated [*la vida del Mexican se consume siempre, pero nunca se consuma*].”⁴⁵ The reason for this, i.e., that life will never be consummated, is given historically, in Mexico’s history of interruptions, and, as such, the history of projects begun and left unfinished, since, Uranga notes, “Life is always on the verge of being cut down [*tronchada*].”⁴⁶ And, since life is always on the verge of interruption, then there’s no reason to take it seriously—this lack of seriousness is, Uranga tells us, found in the Mexican attitude towards *both* life and death. Uranga summarizes the Mexican idea of death in the following passage from an essay published in 1950:

The abyss between life and death is not insurmountable; rather, there is an imperceptible passage from one to the other. Death is familiar to us, just as our own lives; we approach death, and we understand it [as we understand our lives]. And the manner in which we take ourselves seriously or in jest, that way in which we coexist in life, is also the way in which we approach death. The Mexican posits vitality in death, charges it with existential significance and in such a way recovers it and dislodges from it that value

⁴³ Uranga (1950), p. 64.

⁴⁴ Uranga (1950), p. 65.

⁴⁵ Uranga (1950), p. 65.

⁴⁶ Uranga (1950), p. 66.

that others put on it, who dehumanize it and alienate it, displacing it from life. When we affirm that death, for the Mexican, is a symbol of his own life we mean to suggest that he (the Mexican) recognizes himself in death, which means that everything that belongs to death as its own peculiarity is laid claim to by the Mexican's very existence.⁴⁷

This, of course, is the opposite of saying that thinking about death motivates me to act (what Becker tells us above, and what Brenner suggests). According to Paz and Uranga, death doesn't motivate me at all, since, like my own life, it lacks any tangible promise of fulfillment.

5. Life and Death

Another way to highlight the peculiarities of Mexican death is by offering a contrast. For instance, death is present in the life of Mexicans in a way that it is not in the life of, say, Euro-Americans.⁴⁸ Indeed, death for the Euro-American is a serious matter requiring of serious conversation. The subject of death presents itself only during moments of crisis, and far from mocking us, death itself signals its inevitability so that we may act to prevent it or thwart it a bit longer. As Lomnitz observes:

Modern liberal societies, with their concern with the management of *life* and their rejection of the state as a simple arbiter of *death*, have generally veered away from the exaltation of death. Indeed, the denial of death and the isolation of the dying have been identified by historians of death as core characteristics of Euro-American society of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The premium on preserving the life of the citizen above else has been a guiding principle not only of medicine but also of the modern state.⁴⁹

All of this would help explain the flight of modernity from Latin America, as a modernizing project will only get so far in a place where death is a tutelary sign.

⁴⁷ Uranga (1950), p. 65.

⁴⁸ Lomnitz uses "Euro-Americans" to refer to Westerns more generally conceived. I will adopt his usage.

⁴⁹ Lomnitz (2005), p. 36.

What Lomnitz calls the Mexican “death vocabulary”⁵⁰ represents, therefore, a *fractured enunciation* of those from the colonial difference. For Mexicans, Lomnitz reminds us, death is present even in the most quixotic forms of speech. Thus, “death is *la hora* (time of the hour) or *la mera hora* (the very hour, the time of all times) ... the moment of truth.”⁵¹ This language reveals that, as the moment of truth, death is all moments, or every moment.

The Mexican’s promixity and familiarity to death is a *difference* that is rooted in the violence and destruction initiated by colonialism and maintained by the coloniality of power. Lomnitz states: “The Mexican’s flirtation and familiarity with death is also the recognition of an achieved *modus vivendi* between the descendants of mortal enemies, a tactical and provisional collective reconciliation in the knowledge that no one escapes death.”⁵² As such, Mexico “has defined itself as a nation of enemies.”⁵³ So, “[i]nstead of having a towering and universally acclaimed hero, Mexico is haunted by an entire pantheon of caudillos, who often died at each other’s hands.”⁵⁴ But these enemies will never finish each other off—they will, however, try and try again. Thus death gets a different rap: it is, like violence, animosity, and destruction, part of the national spirit, a constituent of the *limit situation* that places Mexicans on the margins of advanced modernity, namely, in the colonial difference. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz writes, “The Mexican, in contrast [to North Americans or Europeans], 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.”⁵⁵ The fractured enunciation of poetry, which is Paz’s, says that death, for the Mexican, is *present*, familiar, playful, the “most steadfast love.” It is not the end of life, it is not nothingness, neither is it the absolute impossibility of a future experience; rather, it is what is nearest, what is most intimate in the human quest for meaning and significance.

If this is the case, then the socio-historical *life*-discourse modernity has assigned to Mexico, through coloniality, is also different: life, as the necessary condition for the bestowal of value, becomes but the site where death achieves expression. Villaurrutia lends voice to this sentiment when he writes that life is

⁵⁰ Lomnitz (2005), p. 27.

⁵¹ Lomnitz (2005), p. 27.

⁵² Lomnitz (2005), p. 60.

⁵³ Lomnitz (2005), p. 19.

⁵⁴ Lomnitz (2005), p. 41.

⁵⁵ Paz (1985), p. 57.

merely “a nostalgia for death.”⁵⁶ This is not to say that life is a burden the end of which releases one into Socrates’ dreamless sleep. It would be easy to conclude that this is what this whole talk of death as everyday and omnipresent amounts to, namely, liberation from life. If this were the case, then death would be something desired, in which case there would be no *indifference* to it. In fact, one would be very interested in death if it promised freedom; but, as Paz suggests, this would make us very interested in life as well, since one’s life is revealed in death. When Paz writes, “tell me how you die and I’ll tell you who you are,”⁵⁷ he is telling us that if death mattered, then life would matter, too, and one would strive to live the best life possible. But death does not matter; it is not valuable or significant, which explains the “nostalgia” associated with it, the homesickness of the homeless who never had a home.

But it is easy to see why death would *signify* liberation—why death would be valuable. The meaning-bestowal function of living, while already demanding, in and of itself, is even more so for those in the fringes of the colonial world-order, where significance is accidental and contingent; the political, economic, and even fashion, trends of the industrial powers hold sway and influence even over those who cannot vote, buy, or wear. The heaviness of life is made up of frustrations and insufficiencies in world-making given the accidentality of being Mexican and the insufficiency of *not* being Euro-American. In this case, death becomes the opportunity for relief from the weighty burdens of meaning bestowing, i.e., of life. In this sense, death as a loss of origins is death as the renunciation of ordinary world-making and sense-bestowal. Looked at in this way, however, death takes on a futural quality, i.e., you *look forward* to death. But the Mexican idea of death, as we’ve seen, is not futural. Couched in a historical rationality, Villaurrutia’s and Paz’s nostalgia for death means that death is of the past or, better yet, a very old version of itself in the present.

If we assume, as I am, that Mexican thought represents the colonial difference, then death is the constant presence of a lack of origins, something that describes those who exist in that difference. Hence, Paz says, “Death in Mexico is sterile, not fecund like that of the Aztecs and the Christians.”⁵⁸ Indeed, in the colonial difference, or in that limit situation that defines the

⁵⁶ Quoted in Paz (1985), p. 62.

⁵⁷ Paz (1985), p. 54.

⁵⁸ Paz (1985), p. 58.

Mexican, death *cannot* be thought of as either free from modernity (as the Aztecs) or a representation of modernity's self-consciousness (as Christianity). Death, in Mexico, is sterile: this means that it does not mean much more than what it is, namely, an unmoved companion, a cold presence, which demands nothing, accepts nothing, and promises nothing—it is a nothing-ness. It is not fecund, it does not endow life with any added value, as it does in modernity's version in which it motivates and animates; nor is it fecund in the Aztec sense, in which death is necessary to maintain the cosmic balance.

6. Conclusion: Poetic Hyperbole or Myth

Proponents of the idea that Mexican consciousness is privy to its own, peculiar, idea of death (poets such as Paz, artists such as Posada, philosophers such as Uranga, historians such as Lomnitz) will ultimately have to answer to critics who say that the Mexican idea of death is a mythological fabrication, and worse, something concocted to justify treating Mexicans, and other marginal peoples, as barbarians whose love for violence and destruction necessarily implies that they are always willing to put their life on the line—to *face the moment of truth* (which is every moment).

One such critic is the Mexican social anthropologist and essayist, Roger Bartra. In *The Cage of Melancholy (La jaula de la melancolia)*, Bartra offers a structuralist reading of Mexican subjectivity, arguing that the Mexican national identity is constructed by means of myths and icons created by powerful elites in order to uphold the historical *status quo* of the colonized masses, who, since the conquest, must be conceived as oppressed and miserable. The most important myth deployed to reinforce oppression and misery speaks about the Mexican's relationship with death. Bartra states: "the myth of the Mexican indifference to death, the man who disdains death; this is one of the most trite commonplaces of modern Mexican thought."⁵⁹ It is a "trite" commonplace, moreover, whose roots historians, poets, artists, and philosophers have forgotten. Thus, Bartra reminds us: "'indifference to death' is a myth having two origins: religious fatalism, which fosters lives of misery; and the disdain of the powerful for the lives of the workers."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Bartra (1992), p. 60.

⁶⁰ Bartra (1992), p. 62.

Of course, Bartra's suggestion implies that the Mexican idea of death—which I argue is a consequence of thinking from that limiting situation Mignolo calls the colonial difference—is, after all, a product of Catholic dogma and/or capitalist desire. Bartra is relentless, however, arguing that “[t]o suppose that there are peoples who are indifferent to death is to think o[f those peoples as herds of wild animals” because, “indifference to death...originates in disdain for lives removed from one's own.”⁶¹ In other words, according to Bartra, the very thought that conceives death as omnipresent and a *playful companion* (thoughts expressed by Villaurrutia, Paz, and Uranga), is an idea which dehumanizes Mexicans, treats them as animals, and represents a disdain for their very *otherness*.

If true, this criticism would undermine both the Mexican idea of death and Mexican thought itself, since thought in general and thought in particular would be products of systems of domination maintained by the ruling class.⁶² However, I agree with Mario Sáenz estimation of Bartra's critique in that, “Bartra offers a very reductionist analysis in which every theoretical perspective becomes merely a meditation of the interests of the ruling class.”⁶³ Treating the idea of death as a myth invented to maintain and exercise control over groups already marginalized by colonialism and capital (i.e., by modernity), hints at conspiracy and malice on the part of individuals or institutions. Bartra's reductionist view of death fails to account for the role that thinking from the colonial difference—or from Zea's *situación límite*—could have in thinking of the *value* death should be given or the seriousness that death deserves. History itself, as abstract, does not conspire to marginalize and exclude. Those marginalized and excluded respond to the demands of history in different ways, perhaps by conceiving of death in terms of a nostalgia for limbo.

Bartra subdues his conspiratorial tone, however, and offers a more socio-historical explanation of the invention of the Mexican concept of death. In conclusion, he says:

⁶¹ Bartra (1992), p. 61.

⁶² See Chatterjee (1993). This type of domination would represent an instance of “rule of colonial difference,” which turns difference into a means of oppression through “preservation of the alienness of the ruling group” (p. 10) which “represents the other as inferior and radically different, and hence incorrigibly inferior” (p. 33).

⁶³ Sáenz (1999), p. 78.

Thus, the Mexican's 'indifference to death' is an invention of modern culture. Its existence and history belong, therefore, to the realm of mythology and to the symbolism of contemporary society. Together, both the anxiety felt by those living in misery and the cultured classes' existential angst and lordly disdain for the lives of the dispossessed give rise to a peculiar way of contemplating death.⁶⁴

This conclusion, however, merely affirms the claim of this paper: the Mexican concept of death is a *necessary* invention given the double bind in which Mexican find themselves *existentially*, viz., neither sharing the spoils of a progressive modernization in which death is the luxury of a future yet-to-come (Western modernity) nor being able to relate to an ancient "cult of death" in which death is part of the fabric of life (pre-Conquest civilizations). As a discourse of the colonial difference, the Mexican idea of death, regardless of whether it is a function of myth or whether it is legitimately grounded, is part of the Mexican way of life. Bartra says this much when he writes: "Disdain of death, then, is a myth embodied in Mexican culture which manages to influence the day-to-day behaviors of some individuals and even, under certain circumstances, whole sectors of the population."⁶⁵ Again, this suggests that it is not important whether this idea is an invention of the cultured classes or a myth of and for the oppressed. It is there in the very constitution of the Mexican imagination.

* * *

The Mexican death-discourse represents an expression of coloniality, a fractured enunciation from the mouths and minds of those on the underside of modernity, on the fringes of power. Poets and philosophers do not differ in their representations of death or its significance—or lack thereof. We suspect that philosophers, specifically, those who are charged with a more profound and objective analysis of reason and its ideas, fall victim to their station in the colonial difference; philosophy, too, finds itself in a limiting situation. But this would be expected. Thinking from the colonial difference will necessarily give rise to different thoughts, different vocabularies, and a different rationality. It is by analysis of this rationality that we may gain a better understanding into the

⁶⁴ Bartra (1992), p. 64.

⁶⁵ Bartra (1992), p. 64.

reasons motivating that backward pointing, historical, attitude that gives rise to the Mexican idea of death.

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