

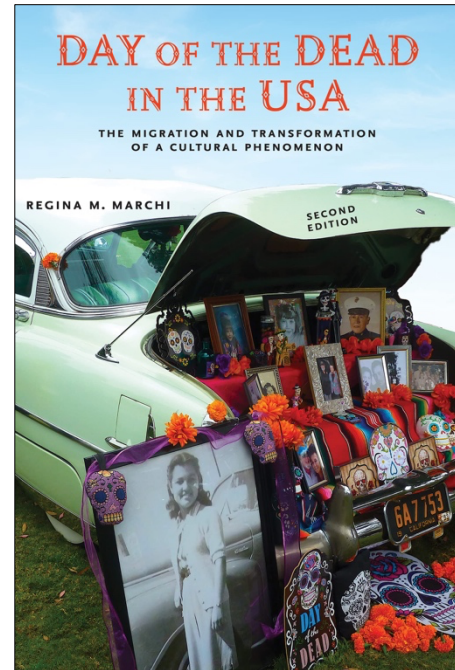
Regina M. Marchi, **Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon (rev. 2nd ed.)**, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022, 217 pp., \$25.65 (paperback).

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The readers of Regina Marchi's *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* enter a cheerful world where you smell the fragrances of copal incense, marigolds, and *pan de muerto*. The accents of her language are not heavily scientific, but the book provides a compelling insight in the growing success of Day of the Dead celebrations, as they fill a void in how Americans are used to dealing with death. The celebrations empower Chicanos and Latin American immigrants. The commodification of the celebration is not necessarily threatening to the traditions; it helps to keep the rituals alive.

Marchi corrects a few common misunderstandings. First, the *origin* of the celebration. Elaborate rituals for remembering the deceased are not unique to Mexico. They are germane in several other Latin American countries like Honduras, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Ecuador. The festivities in the United States are a syncretic mix of Latin American Indigenous and Roman Catholic spiritual practices that have been reconfigured by Chicanos and other U.S. Latinx populations. Second, the *authenticity*. Marchi provides a nuanced description of authenticity. In Mexico, for instance, both folk and earnest celebrations in rural areas and carnivalesque celebrations in the cities already existed at the same time. In the 1950s and 1960s there were no skeletons, sugar skulls, or *pan de muerto* involved. Before the 1970s most Mexican Americans did not identify with Mexico's Indigenous cultures. Mexicans and Mexican Americans prefer to identify with the country's Indigenous rather than Spanish colonial history, but, for instance, the skeleton imagery that is said to be an inheritance from the Aztecs could equally well be of Catholic origin. In fact, as Marchi describes, many Mexicans have only recently embraced the celebration. The European aspects have been downplayed in a postcolonial, nationalist strategy.

For many Americans, Day of the Dead is an "invented tradition." Here, an obvious comparison with the Venice carnival forces itself upon us, but Marchi does not touch on it. Simultaneously with the popularization of Day of the Dead in the United States, the Italian government decided in 1979 to reinvent the festival heritage to rejuvenate the local culture and economy of Venice after a period of desuetude for almost two centuries (O'Rourke, 2015). Another resemblance of Day of the Dead to carnival is the temporary reversion of power relations that leaves the underprivileged position of the Latin American immigrants as it is. For example, the Chicanos' knowledge advantage about how the rituals must be performed is of no use after the celebrations.



Marchi acknowledges this phenomenon in the United States but omits to mention that this even might confirm the positions that society values so much during the rest of the year (Pleij, 2016).

Another dispute is about how bad commercialization of the celebration is. Commercial brands utilize and trivialize Day of the Dead to promote their products and get access to Latinx consumer markets. The celebration is sometimes more focused on the aesthetics of costumes and makeup artistry than on ephemerality or remembering the deceased. Some people fear that the commodification turns the celebration into a consumption spectacle where Mexican culture is superficially consumed without being understood. Stores for handmade Day of the Dead crafts have had to close due to the import of ceramic calaveras made in China. Marchi describes how a McMuertos art exhibit humorously criticizes this tendency and, with tongue-in-cheek humor, cites marketing language for commercial Day of the Dead products, like "homage to Mexican folklore with a film noir twist." She calls it an "ironic twist" that practices must adapt and appeal broadly to grow and thrive by commercial forces.

Key factors in popularizing Day of the Dead in the United States have been nonprofit organizations, the mass media, city governments, commercial interests, and foundations grants. What began as a Chicano ritual is now an American holiday, and print, broadcast, film, and digital media have been crucial to the mainstreaming of the celebration, which was nearly unknown in the United States 50 years ago, according to Marchi. After Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, social media like Snapchat, Pinterest, and TikTok entered the scene in the last decade. They are used to share information about Day of the Dead, but immigrants who lack access are more likely to become disconnected from cultural traditions in their communities of origin. The increased popularity is also caused by the massive influx of Latin American immigrants into the United States, Marchi explains. With this explanation she ignores the same development in Europe where there is not a comparable influx of Latin Americans.

The way Marchi describes how Day of the Dead became popular in 50 years in the United States in the second edition leaves some of the criticism on the first edition (Tornquist, 2010) far behind. Tornquist (2010) commented that she did not reflect on the impact of Day of the Dead in American society. Marchi now shows how the celebration appeals to a universal need to cope with death, although there are differences in time and space. In pre-Columbian cultures the afterworld was viewed as a desirable province offering peace from earthly suffering. American Indigenous people pray *to* the souls, whereas European Christians pray *for* the souls.

The author performed historical research, textual analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork. Obviously, the fieldwork is Marchi's passion. For over twenty years, she attended many Day of the Dead events such as exhibitions, processions, and festivals during the "Muertos season," even revisiting some to register the differences over the years. Marchi's devotion is endless. For instance, she did 25 workshops on how to make sugar skulls, ofrendas, and *pan de muerto*. She interviewed artists, event organizers, altar makers, sugar skull producers, curators, students, teachers, and so on. To increase the potential number of interviewees, she used the snowball sampling method. This is a common method in qualitative research that fosters homogeneity of results instead of variety. Most of Marchi's interviewees are highly involved in emancipation movements and have strong opinions about how the Day of the Dead should be celebrated. Only in a subclause we get to know that there are transcripts made of (at least part of) these interviews. How the

analysis of the transcripts was performed remains unclear. The ethnographic research is partly participant observation. Marchi does not show reflexivity here about her position as an observer. Altogether, there is a risk that the author interprets what she hears into her own preliminary thoughts about the subject.

The revised edition was published the year of the 50th anniversary of the first secular *Día de los Muertos* celebrations in the United States in 1972. The first edition of the book was published in 2009, and in the intervening years, the Day of the Dead has continued to grow in popularity and evolve in the United States. In the second edition, Marchi provides updated analysis of the ways in which the holiday has changed since the first edition was published. She discusses the increasing commercialization of the holiday, the role of (social) media and other agents in its spread, and the tensions over the appropriate ways to celebrate the Day of the Dead. Nowadays, Day of the Dead provides a platform for honoring and remembering individuals, groups, and movements, such as youth sexually abused by Catholic clergy, cancer and AIDS victims, human rights activists, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter. It celebrates Latinx culture and identity, empowers Latin American immigrants, and comments upon a wide variety of contemporary political issues. Marchi adds interesting examples of how the Day of the Dead outline is applied in recent years. The celebrations not only employ aesthetic creativity and craft but also remember the dead to critique dominant systems of power, such as White supremacy and police brutality. A street altar arose at the intersection where George Floyd had been killed by a police officer. In 2019 and 2020, Day of the Dead altars throughout the United States remembered child immigrants who died on the U. S. border. They remind us of how needed humane immigration policies are. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, a gallery set up ofrendas in three shopping malls with an altar for victims of COVID-19, drawing attention to the disproportionate high number of Black and Brown people dying from the disease. This makes the tradition reach larger audiences and populations who might not otherwise see the exhibitions.

Altogether, Marchi's *Day of the Dead in the USA* is highly recommended for people interested in transnational dynamics, the power of the media and commercial forces in maintaining cultural traditions, and the huge and universal importance of remembering the dead.

### References

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