

February 12, 2022

College of Arts and Sciences  
Western Michigan University  
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USA

To whom it may concern,

I was excited when I registered for a seminar on Grief, Death, and Dying during my first semester at WMU. During this class, I got to dive into questions about what grief is, how people who have experienced it write about it raising all kinds of philosophical questions, and how rituals can generally give us a clue about the dimensions of grief. It was the last of these topics that got my attention the most given my personal background as a graduate student from Mexico. Coming from a country whose culture is famous worldwide for our ritual on the Day of the Dead every Nov. 1st and 2nd, I knew how crucial it was to add my perspective, and those of my people, to this seminar. I immediately understood this situation as an opportunity to foster diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism in the classroom.

As I grew to appreciate that more attention to ritual could be helpful in the study of grief and, recognizing the great diversity of rituals of mourning around the world, I decided that I could draw from some of my own experiences in working through my philosophical ideas. At the end of the semester, this experience culminated into a research project on how the Day of the Dead informs and challenges dominant understandings of grief. It wasn't until then that I fully understood how important it was to create and celebrate spaces where diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism are all welcomed, especially in academic philosophy.

Having had the support from my professor and mentor, Dr. Ashley Atkins, I was able to develop my research paper into a presentation for a Brown Bag Series and give a talk to the WMU Philosophy department, all within two months from first submitting my essay for a grade in Dr. Atkins' seminar. This gave me the opportunity to engage the philosophy department at WMU in an intellectual discussion about grief from the lens of Día de los Muertos, helping foster diversity and inclusion within the WMU Philosophy department.

Both experiences have provided me with the opportunity to hone my writing and advocating skills in academic philosophy, amplify the voices of underrepresented perspectives in these spaces and simply become a better philosopher because of it. It became obvious to me that projects that foster diversity not only enrich our understandings about the questions that are of interest to us, but they also cultivate our intellectual curiosity about the world we live in in a much more thought-provoking way.

Grecia Sánchez Blanco | 312B Wall St. Kalamazoo, MI 49001 | [grecia.sanchezblanco@wmich.edu](mailto:grecia.sanchezblanco@wmich.edu)

I am applying to the Diversity and Inclusion Student Writing Award offered by the College of Arts and Sciences as I believe my work on the Day of the Dead encourages a much richer understanding about grief as it considers cultural and political practices from underrepresented perspectives in the philosophy literature on grief. As such, my work on “Sugar, Pan de Muerto, and Grief: How Rituals Inform our Understandings of Grief” advocates for the inclusion of the ritual of the Day of the Dead in answering questions about the duration of grief. By its very nature, this project develops themes of diversity and inclusion in the dimensions of ethnicity, national and regional origins, and religious, political, cultural, and intellectual ideologies and practices.

Thank you very much for your time in considering me for this award. I appreciate the type of work that you do in fostering diversity and multiculturalism in the university and I hope to learn more about it if given the opportunity. Looking forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Grecia Sánchez Blanco



# WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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1 February 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter of support on behalf of Grecia Sánchez who is currently a student in the Master's Program in Philosophy at Western Michigan University.

Grecia and I first met in Spring 2020, when she enrolled in a graduate seminar that I taught on the topic of grief. Grecia's paper for the class focused on the temporal dimensions of grief and, specifically, on the question of whether grief should be conceptualized as having an endpoint. Grecia's approach to this question is rather novel in the context of the contemporary Anglo-American philosophical literature on grief. Grecia examined this question through the lens of ritual (grief so understood is sometimes distinguished as "mourning" in the philosophical literature on grief and then set aside). Grecia drew, in particular, on her knowledge of Mexican celebrations of the Day of the Dead. In her paper, she defends the claim that the rituals associated with this celebration challenge the common assumption that grief has an endpoint on the grounds that (1) celebrants are encouraged to remember the dead *annually* and (2) this remembrance of the dead should be regarded as a manifestation of grief for the dead. Since submitting this paper for class, Grecia has gone on to refine her argument and to present this work to the department via our student presentation series. With a bit more editing and polishing, the paper could, I think, be published and it could make a valuable contribution to the philosophical literature on grief through urging attention to ritual and through examining the role of culture in shaping such practices.

Grecia has also made significant contributions in helping to promote work on topics that have been marginalized within philosophy. Last year, she organized a talk with Amy Reed-Sandoval on her book *Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration*, which focused attention on the ways in which 'undocumented' functions as an identity label well beyond any legal basis for that concept, limiting the life opportunities of those to whom it applies.

In light of her significant contributions toward representing different cultural perspectives in her academic work and in light of her efforts to increase the intellectual diversity of our department, I would strongly recommend that her application be given serious consideration for the College of Arts and Sciences Diversity and Inclusion Writing Award.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ashley Atkins".

Ashley Atkins,  
Assistant Professor

## **Sugar, Pan de Muerto, and Grief: How Rituals Inform our Understandings of Grief**

Grecia Sánchez Blanco

PHIL 5700: Grief, Death and Dying

December 18, 2020

**Abstract:** In this paper, I go over the standard philosophical assumptions made on the question whether grief ends, or if grief ever stops. Many of these questions, as I argue, do not consider rituals so what follows is also an introduction to my approach on how to answer this question by looking at the Day of the Dead. Día de los Muertos is a unique ritual which encourages the celebration of death without limit. This comes with important challenges to the dominant understandings on the duration of grief as the ritual is celebrated annually every November first and second and encourages Latinx people to continue to celebrate and remember their dead ones forever. Lastly, I will analyze an important objection concerning the difference between grief and mourning from the perspective of the Day of the Dead and I also hope to suggest other ways in which we can analyze and think of the duration of grief with new formulations of the question to avoid certain challenges I present here.

“Hay que tener consideraciones con los muertos, porque pasamos mucho más tiempo muertos que vivos” Macario (1960)

"We must have considerations for the dead, because we spend much more time as dead than alive” Macario (1960)

One of the most successful Mexican films in Mexico’s *Golden Cinema Era*, Macario, features the Day of the Dead’s celebrations. The main story in this film depicts the relationship between death and Macario, an indigenous man dealing with his fear of la muerte, or death, throughout the film. He says: “We must have considerations for the dead, because we spend much more time dead than alive” (Macario, 1960). The quote speaks to a long tradition in Mexican culture of thinking about death and dealing with her in a way that allows us to make sense of such a character in our daily lives and not just in those moments when we grieve. Notice how, already, this is a much different understanding than how we usually look at the duration of grief than the intuitive colloquial understanding of grief as a process with an end on sight, at least in the near future. However, the quote above speaks of a much different relationship to the dead and how we understand our grieving experiences from this, which consequently, I think, should make us think of the way that rituals of grief can be philosophically interesting and important to consider when analyzing questions on the understanding and significance of grief.

As the literature on grief keeps expanding, there has been relevant focus on the question whether grief has an end, or if grief ever stops. Such question(s) probe into one important characteristic of grief—its duration. The idea that grief is somehow a process which has an end still forms part of the common folk thoughts on grief in American culture for instance. Such remarks can be grasped from American culture by looking at informal instances where a person thinks the grieving person has “overcome” their grief or has even

“survived” it, especially when there is notice of the grieving person returning to their routine or being able to carry out their “normal” tasks in life. Similarly, the belief that grief ends is one that is commonly found in self-help literature (Sheperd, Rossenblatt, Klass, Silverman, Nickman, among others) as it encourages readers to reach, and even “achieve” a certain stage in grief where they can “no longer feel grief,” or when grief develops into an “easily managed” feeling.

In fact, in the philosophy literature of grief, it is common to describe the temporal aspect of grief as one that is closely related to the definition of grief itself. Philosopher Michael Cholbi (2017), for example, defines grief as “our emotional response to the deaths of intimates,” (p. 255) which presupposes that there is a start of grief and that this comes whenever a loved one has died. And if grief starts with death, he then argues for a backward-looking account of grief where what makes grief rational is the “fittingness of the attitudes individuals takes toward the experience of a lost relationship” (p. 257). Notice how his argument develops from the assumption that grief is defined as a process with a start, so the question arises: if grief has a start, does it also have an end?

Moreover, I believe the interaction between grief and rituals can shed light on how to define grief and whether it has an end. For the purposes of this project, I will put the questions on the definition of grief aside so that we look at the relationship between grief and certain rituals only. Specifically, communal rituals can be explored to understand the effects these have on people’s understandings of grief and its duration. As such, attention can be focused on the Day of the Dead ritual in Latinx culture as this is one unique ritual which celebrates death in perpetuity (Paz, 1962). This is a ritual that is practiced by large groups of people throughout Latin America, it is well-defined/studied and as such, is a useful ritual to consider

in exploring the temporal dimensions of grief. Plus, it presents a challenge to the view that grief comes to an end.

In this paper, I encourage the philosophy literature to recognize the Day of the Dead ritual as a unique ritual to better understand the duration of grief. Section 1 of this paper focuses on key literature which addresses the question of whether grief has an end. This section also emphasizes how these arguments do not take into account rituals which prolong grief forever. Such feature can be seen in the Day of the Dead, as this celebration is repeated annually every November 1 and 2 and encourages Latinx people to continue to celebrate and remember their dead ones *forever*. These features will be thoroughly explained in section 2 of the paper. As a result, the Day of the Dead poses unique challenges, introduced in section 3, to the dominant understandings of grief. In this project, I also hope to suggest other ways in which we can analyze and think of the duration of grief in section 4, where I will deal with new formulations of the question to reach a better understanding of the duration of grief and grief itself.

### **Part 1: Does grief have an end?**

This section deals with several key accounts which attempt to answer whether grief ends or if it ever stops. This is the space where I will also highlight how none of these accounts include rituals that encourage entire communities to regard death as a phenomenon which can continue.

First, the idea that grief is somehow a process which has a start and an end still forms part of the common folk thoughts on grief in American culture. As Rosenblatt states in his book *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, “many Americans still think that

grief can be finished” (1996). Such remarks can be grasped from American folk culture from informal instances where a person thinks the grieving person has “overcome” their grief or has even “survived” it, especially when there is notice of the grieving person returning to their routine or being able to carry out their “normal” tasks in life. Similarly, the belief that grief ends is one that is commonly found in self-help literature (Rosenblatt, 1996). Such literature encourages readers to reach, and even “achieve” a certain stage in grief where they can “no longer feel grief,” or when grief becomes one that develops into an “easily managed” feeling through the use and practice of cognitive behavioral techniques (Alkhunaizi, 2012).

Similarly, philosopher Cholbi argues for a backward-looking account of grief, where one of his main premises in his argument is that grief starts with death. In other words, when we reflect appropriately on the change that death brings to our relationships with those we love (Cholbi, 2017). Similarly, the philosopher Carolyn Price has written on grief as a staged process, where we can, for example, find the stages of anguish in grief and later the stage of desolation. She also argues that death is the final stage in grief, or in other words, the final stage is when we have finally accepted that our loved one has died (Price, 2010). This sets up the stage for an understanding of grief rooted in it being a process. So, it can be implied that the question on the duration of grief is related to Price’s account as any process has a start and presumably an end on sight.

Moreover, philosophers Ryan and Erica Preston-Roedder (2018) have written on grief and recovery, arguing recovering from grief entails exploring questions about the relationship we had with the deceased person and if this says something about the quality of our relationships and if it’s altered in some way during our grief or because of it (Preston-



Roedder, 2018, p. 94-96). Again, notice how these questions develop from the assumption that we can recover from grief; that there is an expected recovery on sight.

In fact, there are people who think that prolonged grief constitutes an anomaly, a peril to the grieving person and as such, that it should be treated. Virginia Hughes, a science journalist which writes on brain science, biotechnology and genetics, wrote an editorial piece for *The Science of Health* journal titled “Shades of Grief,” where endless mourning is described as a mental illness. Hughes introduces *Complicated Grief Disorder*, also referred as traumatic or prolonged grief, as “a new diagnosis which refers to a situation in which many of grief’s common symptoms—such as powerful pining for the deceased, great difficulty moving on, a sense that life is meaningless, and bitterness or anger about the loss—last longer than six months” (Hughes, 2011). Such definition entails grief not only has an end that is not being encountered by the grieving person, but also implies that grief which “lasts too long” should, and could, be “cured.”

Contrastingly, there are others who think that grief, far from being a process which can be finished or a phenomenon which stops, is rather a continuing mechanism in which grieving people seek to maintain, and even enrich, a relationship with the dead. For example, Joan Arnold has analyzed the grief experienced by parents who have lost their child, stating this is a type of grief which continues. This suggests the characteristic of duration seen in grief is one which lasts, as parental grief comes with the premise that this “devastating loss” is “lifelong” (Arnold et al., 2008). Similarly, research interviews with children who have lost their parents at an early age suggest they “develop a set of memories, feelings and actions that keep them connected to their deceased parent” (Klass et al., 2014). Moreover, *Continuing Bonds* highlights research on how certain kinds of grief seem to make space for the desire

for continued relationship with the deceased person, rather than “letting go,” in its folk understanding (Klass et al., 2014). This is a phenomenon Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven Nickman (2014) also saw with adopted children, reaching to the same conclusions, that grief, through the search for inner connections to the dead, does not have an end, but it is more like a continuing process. As a result, authors suggest a rethinking of grief must be done, given that there are certain kinds of grief which seem to continue, through the grieving person’s seeking to build or reestablish inner connections with the dead.

All these assumptions are precisely the ones I wish to challenge. These debates above frame grief into a process which can end, or one that far from having an end, continues in certain types of grief. This is something that will be directly challenged here. I want to add to this analysis that the accounts that attempt to answer the question whether grief has an end do not include certain rituals as part of what defines grief or as part of what could help explain some of its features. As we want to analyze whether grief stops in some form, or if we are interested in knowing about grief’s duration, I argue here that we need to take into account certain rituals that encourage people to think about the dead forever. Such ritual can be found in Latinx culture in the Day of the Dead, a ritual which originated in what is now known as Mexico with the then Aztec community, much before colonization processes (Paz, 1962). My objection here deals with a kind of grief that has no virtual end on sight, an understanding of grief which is opposite to the paradigm in self-help literature on grief.

Given the nature of the Day of the Dead, I argue that it is inaccurate to talk about grief in terms of a process with an end. This will become apparent as I will explain how the Day of the Dead encourages celebrants to think of death as part of life, and not something that

suddenly appears in our lives when a loved one dies. This has important implications to the way we make sense of grief, especially on the question whether grief ends.

Part of why I'm also challenging the assumptions here is also to explore how else to ask about the duration of grief given how annual rituals directly challenge the current dominant understanding of grief itself. As we want to analyze whether grief stops in some form, I argue here that we need to consider rituals that encourage people to reflect about the dead forever. This is because the interaction between grief and rituals sheds a light on features that directly challenge the way we think about grief and how people may experience it given the culture they are born into. As such, I argue the dominant understanding of grief can be aided by a cross-cultural understanding of grief in addition to making us think of the role rituals play in the experience of grief.

Let us turn now to the discussion on the nature of this ritual and how it challenges common conceptions in American culture about what grief is and its duration.

## **Part 2: The Day of the Dead ritual**

In this section, I'll summarize the main features of this ritual that give us a clue about how celebrants experience grief, going over the origins of the Day of the Dead ritual, common practices in the name of the ritual nowadays, and the significance of this ritual for celebrants.

First, the ritual of the Day of the Dead celebrates life and death as part of an intrinsic cycle itself. The ritual invites us to remember those no longer with us and share, honor, and show love to the important people in our life while they are still with the living. Death, in Mexico, represents rebirth in addition to the reunion with those loved ones who have departed

(Newspaper El Sol de México, Section Fin D, 2020). This is done through various practices which account for the remembrance of the dead and even the celebration of death itself.

November 1 and 2 in Mexico belong to the dead. They are national days, holidays, lonely days that become public, sacred days when we see ourselves in the mirror of Tezcatlipoca, Aztec god of the night sky, and we see our gestures and our vanity, because, isn't our effort on the earth for nothing if all we are turns to ashes and dust? And since everything is temporary, why not sing and eat with our difuntitos (dead ones) who have reached perfection and wisdom? (Poniatowska, 2005).

As Poniatowska points out, the connection between life and death dates to the Aztec community in Mexico before colonialism. In fact, much of the symbolism seen in the Day of the Dead dates to how the Aztecs viewed the death as a natural act, which had the paradoxical quality to fertilize life. Given such an outlook, the Aztec did not feel sad about death, but would feel grateful for it. This is because it was through death and blood that the cosmos would nourish, ensuring the fertility of future generations (Paz, 1962). This means that through the celebration of death, the Aztecs believed they were ensuring their continuation on Earth while celebrating their ancestors, a view which now characterizes the celebrations in Mexico and Latin America altogether.

Moreover, the philosophy behind Día de Muertos can be traced back to Aztec philosopher Netzahualcoyotl (1402-1472), who depicts death as an event which is part of life saying:

By any chance is it true that one  
Lives rooted in the Earth?  
Not always in the earth:  
Here for only just a while.... (Netzahualcoyotl)

In such poem, Netzahualcoyotl dives into our temporality as human beings on Earth and the uncertainty of our time in the Living world. Like many other Aztec philosophers, he understands death as a potential source of truth. In doing this, he suggests we are not rooted

on Earth, as we are here “only just a while,” suggesting that we might as well spend our time trying to understand this bewildering uncertainty through philosophy and the arts. This is important to my argument as it is key to understand how the Aztecs made sense of death and how that has important implications to the ways in which they would grieve. This also correlates to how this Aztec cosmology has survived to this day and can give us a clue about how celebrants of the Day of the Dead grieve today.

Nowadays we can see several artifacts today that speak of this Aztec mythology. For instance, the astral deity Xoloitzcuintle would not only represent a figure of accompaniment and loyalty beyond the underworld but would also serve as a guide for ancestral spirits to reach their final resting place into the afterlife. Moreover, beverages during Day of the Dead also trace back their Aztec influence as bottles of tequila or Atole, a traditional hot corn-based beverage, are offered to the deceased to help them on their long journey to the land of the dead. Similarly, it is believed that candles help guide the spirits back to their past homes in the Living world. It is important to note as well that this Aztec mythology has been mixed with elements from Catholicism that has heavily influenced Mexico since colonial times. We can see this mixture in every cross depicted in altars for example, to symbolize the presence and importance of Christ in the ritual. Another example of Catholic elements being showcased in the Day of the Dead lies with images of saints and religious figures commonly placed next to the photo of our loved one in an altar, especially if it involves images of the Guadalupe Virgin who is considered to be one of the most divine Catholic figures in Mexico. In total, these are some examples of the visible heritage of the Aztec cosmology for celebrants to pay respect, honor our ancestors, and grieve in each Día de Muertos.

First, the most common of the rituals which comprise the Day of the Dead is the making of altars, which are believed to be a practical, visible form to pay remembrance to our ancestors and those who have departed. In each altar, several objects are placed so that the memory of our loved ones remains, despite their passage to “the other side.” In fact, every altar must have a photo of the deceased person, a few personal very esteemed objects of the dead’s belongings, and even the food they used to enjoy when they were alive. It is also common to see the flower cempasúchil, the flower that is believed to serve as a guide for the dead when their soul crosses to the Living world into their former homes so they can join their loved ones during the Day of the Dead. In addition, an altar is adorned with sugared skulls, which represent the death as a sympathetic, almost joyful character; candles to light up the path; papel picado, or colorful cut-paper where skulls, bells, skeletons, and other Mexican symbols of the Day of the Dead are depicted; among other creative ways in which Latinx people adorn their altars to pay respect to those no longer with us.

Understanding how this ritual is performed through the making of altars gives us a way of making sense that this ritual is here, again, offering an opportunity to understand our grief. In one way, it’s a joyful experience to be setting up the altar for your loved one, but it is also a deeply saddening part of the ritual. The moment you put the photo of your loved one, that hurts. That is a direct reminder that this person died and that’s one of the moments where celebrants feel deep sorrow and all these other common symptoms of grief. Because it hurts to recognize our loved ones died and it hurts to remind ourselves of that every year, but again, the cosmology behind this reminds us that death is also part of life, and that we’re here “for just a while,” as Netzahualcoyotl suggests. So, feelings of deep sorrow, these

bittersweet moments where we experience even a sweet type of sorrow, can definitely arise with these practices.

Furthermore, another component of the ritual in which these feelings arise is the making of calaveras. This is a type of satire in the form of a poem which deals with depicting death as a charismatic, envious, and even playful figure, often female. Each calavera is supposed to tell a funny, eloquent story in which the death has come to the Living world and out of ordinary events and actions, decides to take a few people back with her. The people she takes are often the persons you are dedicating your calavera to. Just like that, the death and her power take away the life of people on Earth.

The Mexican... 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 (Paz, 1962).

As Paz suggests, these calaveras are often used to make sense of how a loved one departed, and people who celebrate the Day of the Dead are encouraged to create their own calaveras and dedicate them to their deceased loved ones or to one another. Children are encouraged to participate in calaveras contests, where the calavera with the best satire may win a scholarship to continue the child's education. Moreover, newspapers all over Mexico may dedicate space to the many calaveras reporters have created to make sense of how the political world relates to this character of la muerte to understand, in a very comical way, how ironic the behavior of politicians has been, for example, alluding to la muerte for deceiving them into behaving in the way they have and forcing them to go with her because of it. Moreover, many Mexican revolutionary manifestos have been turned into calaveras as well and are showcased in the Day of the Dead, as many people who participated in guerrilla warfare are now believed to be fighting alongside the death to regain political power from "the other side."

It is also a common practice in the ritual of the Day of the Dead to host or go to your family reunion to eat pan de muerto, or the bread of the dead, all together.

Although many cultures of the world celebrate their dead with different rites, no country does what happens in Mexico: we are the only ones who transform our bones into sugar, the only ones who make our skull a little head of candy in which we put our name. We are the only ones who open our mouths wide to eat ourselves and suck our fingers with our clavicles, tibiae and fibulae turned into pan de muerto (Poniatowska, 2005).

Poniatowska describes the many ways in which pan de muerto can be made and eaten, as this is an essential part of the ritual and a communal aspect of it, as it is done with your family.

The purpose of all members of the family during such ritual is to eat this bread together while talking about those who have departed, to tell and remember anecdotes and close personal stories that speak of the character and virtues of the dead. These stories often highlight love, affection, and gratitude for the dead and the lives they had while in *the world of the Living*.

These stories are also used to comfort those who have not processed their loved ones' passing yet. As such, the Day of the Dead shares some therapeutic practices that help heal those in grief as the ritual gives the opportunity to talk openly and thoroughly to other members of your family about the death of a loved one.

In addition to these specific characteristics of the Day of the Dead ritual, there are other aspects of the ritual which are done in large gatherings such as huge parades in Mexico's metropolitan areas and a few other rural towns, or pueblos mágicos, where people often walk the main avenues dressed as catrines and catrinas, which are famous worldwide for their skeleton makeup with fancy costume, often portraying regional dresses or mariachi suits; makeup and costume competitions to see which person makes the best catrín or catrina at a parade or public event; altar competitions in universities, churches, and community centers, where people often compete with one another in making the "most beautiful altar"



which pays respect to a public figure in folk culture; concerts in Mexico City where many local and national artists gather to interpret several versions of the song “La Llorona,” which is a character in Mexican folk culture that talks about an indigenous mother who decided to drown their children in the lake of Texcoco to spare them from the cruelties and agony of the Spanish conquistadors and cries for them ever since; among other communal practices. Since La Llorona is a figure who mourns eternally, this could also give us a clue about how certain characters within the Day of the Dead cosmology talk about an endless grief, further suggesting that grief can be experienced much longer than we normally appreciate.

Through the making of altars, the conversations with family where you remember and honor the dead, and through the making of calaveras, the ritual of the Day of the Dead encourages people to celebrate their loved ones who have deceased every Nov. 1st and 2nd of each year.

My dead do not live in tumbas nor nichos, they’re at the horizon of my dawns, in the sun which hides in the sunsets, in the music of their cantos, they are in their sillón de siempre, in their hugs and miradas, in their kitchen recipes, in their laughs, in their smell and flavors. My dead, they are not dead, they are beings more alive than most vivos terrenales, they enjoy of the life they parted from, because they look at it and they live it through my memories and my faith. (Patricia Herrera, 2020)

Now that we have seen the main characteristics of this communal ritual, let us dive into what the Day of the Deal *entails* when we look into the duration of grief.

### **Part 3: What the Day of the Dead reveals**

I argue the Day of the Dead poses several challenges on dominant understandings of grief and whether it has an end. This section will introduce these challenges given the nature of the Day of the Dead’s ritual.

Because the Day of the Dead focuses on celebrating life in death, this poses a challenge to those who think that our lives have a finite nature. If death turns out to be a phenomenon which is not an end in itself, but a transition from the Living to another state-of-being, as it is believed our soul will return for the Day of the Dead every November 1st and 2nd, then this could provide relief to those who experience grief. This relief comes with the understanding that even though death has taken away their loved ones, those no longer with us return on a yearly basis. This is not to be understood in the literal sense of the term; the dead do not return to the Living. But their memory fills our life again as we adorn our altars, set the *cepasúchil* path into our homes, and light the candle in their tombs as we bring their favorite dish, as if they had never parted away. This is what the Day of the Dead is for; its rituals and many practices are intended for us to not forget our ancestors in the individual and collective memory. Thus, those who have died live in our memory. As the popular saying goes, “you only die when you forget, and I will never forget you” (Llorente). Thus, it is only when they are forgotten that the life of the dead no longer is.

If the ritual is celebrated on a yearly basis, and its practices and cosmology are perpetuated forever by each family and the culture in celebrant countries, then it becomes hard to identify an end to grief in celebrants of the Day of the Dead. This is because this ritual gives the opportunity to celebrants to grieve and honor their dead in a much different way than what the current literature says. It is not about overcoming, or moving on from our deceased ones, or about returning to our routines. What matters is our communal reflection experienced in every *calavera* reading, or in the conversation about family anecdotes that give us a clue about how the dead lived while eating *pan de muerto*.

As we have seen, the Day of the Dead is about grieving through a series of practices that will help us understand our grief, our temporality on Earth and an entire cosmology

focused on love through the collective memory, far away from the focus on an end of life or an end in grief. It may even be funny to regard this ritual of grief as one that prolongs grief forever, but for celebrants of the Day of the Dead, we are really joyful people who are also grieving, who are also reminding ourselves that our loved ones died and experiencing grief with our sugared skulls, the making of our altars, and through each calavera reading where we make sense of our grieving experiences through writing.

Given that this is a yearly ritual, which does not focus on ends but is rooted in the celebration of life today, the grief experienced by the Day of the Dead celebrants has no virtual end on sight. Therefore, the question on whether grief ends becomes inaccurate as it does not capture what is of importance to the Day of the Dead celebrants or how they experience grief. Thus, the Day of the Dead gives us the opportunity to understand grief from a very different perspective. If we intend to celebrate life in death and understand that death is overcome by paying remembrance to those no longer with us in the Living, with love and appreciation for their lives, then it becomes inaccurate to regard this process as a staged one, or one that stops or ends.

In this sense, it is obviously not true that grief ends. Día de los Muertos makes for this case clearly. And I also suspect that my argument, because it's rooted in the cosmology behind this ritual, that it could also have an important implication toward grief having a start. After all, if grief does not start with death because death is part of our daily lives anyway, then it could make the case for grief not having a start either. But for the purposes of this paper, I will merely suggest this implication of my argument as the focus is on whether grief ends.

Contrastingly, one might say that celebrants of the Day of the Dead have in fact experienced grief and overcome it despite the practices and activities of the ritual itself. For example, a person might have experienced deep sorrow, an inability to engage with others because the world as they once knew it has drastically changed, and even though they celebrate the Day of the Dead ritual, they have come to not feel as desolated with each year's Day of the Dead. This might suggest that their grieving process has ended at some point between the yearly Day of the Dead celebrations as this person reaches an emotional state which allows her to engage with others and remain calm about the fact that her loved ones have died.

This objection misses the point of the Day of the Dead cosmology. The ritual encourages celebrants to understand that death is also part of life. As such, a person who has celebrated the Day of the Dead before and now commemorates the celebration as a loved one of hers has just died has yet to understand temporality and the Day of the Dead significance regarding grief and rituals. I'd argue this person has not "reached a final stage in her grief's process," but has come to understand that her loved one still lives through the candle lights in the altar she's made in her loved one's name, through the memory depicted every time she dedicates a calavera to her loved one, and through her word every time she talks about her loved one to her family or others. This is why she feels calmer than before, because she has found comfort in the Day of the Dead rituals and has come to appreciate them in a very different light, now that a loved one of hers has passed and she gets to experience their life through the varied Day of the Dead celebrations. Here, again, would be inaccurate to say that this person's grief has ended because she will perform these rituals on a yearly basis and her

understanding of her loved one's passing is not one of ends, but one of love and memory being the life force in which her loved one still relates to her.

#### **Part 4: New formulations of the question**

Let's now turn to a discussion on how else to ask about the duration of grief. In this section I'll introduce new formulations of the question whether grief ends, and I'll do this because we need new ways in which we can make sense of the duration of grief while also being careful about the way that we frame this debate as I think we would want to avoid the challenge presented by the Day of the Dead.

1. What are the visible and invisible effects from the feeling of grief?
2. How often do we experience these in our minds/lives?
3. In what ways can we feel grief?
4. Are there any levels of intensity that describe the ways in which we feel grief?

The first question deals with the effects from grief to understand the manifestations of the feeling of grief as this can help understand how grief interacts with our self no matter the culture we were born into. This helps avoid the obvious objection of my argument in accounting for the people who do not know the rituals of the Day of the Dead and have not experienced this way of celebrating death. The formulation of the question also avoids the challenges presented in the previous section because it focuses on the effects of grief, rather than defining it and relating the duration of grief to this preset definition.

Moreover, the second question also avoids the challenges posed by the Day of the Dead rituals as it asks about the frequency in which we perceive the effects from grief. This

parts away from the debate on whether grief ends or stops as it does not assume that grief is a staged process with an end in sight. On the contrary, questions 1 through 4 speak of the duration of grief through the intensity and frequency of this feeling. Both of these characteristics avoid the challenge of a time-based understanding of grief when introducing the Day of the Dead ritual.

As a result, these questions can help us reach a better understanding of grief as a result. Further work under such domains is needed to fully grasp what grief entails in the face of rituals and entire cultures that challenge the current dominant senses in which we understand grief, dying, and death.

### **Part 5: Conclusions**

In this work, I have argued that the current question on whether grief has an end is inaccurate given the nature of the Day of the Dead. I have briefly summarized the current literature on grief, explained how this fails to account for rituals that encourage celebrants of the Day of the Dead to regard death as intimately intertwined with life. Such traits are enforced when performing the various activities of the Day of the Dead ritual in the form of calaveras, altars, parades, catrina dressings, and pan de muerto gatherings with one's family to honor and remember the life of the deceased loved one. These are the rituals that comprise the basic teaching of the Day of the Dead, that those who have died live through us and our memory. Such understanding defies dominant understandings of death, grief and grieving in addition to making it clear how inaccurate it becomes to try and define an end to the grieving process, if one must define it as such.

I've also showed the Day of the Dead implies a type of grief which has no virtual end on sight as it is celebrated on a yearly basis and its celebrants are encouraged to think of death, not as a fearing figure, but as a funny, eloquent, envious, and even joyful character which accompanies us from the moment we are born, alerting us of our temporality on Earth and that our finite stay in the Living. I've argued as well for new formulations of the question whether "grief ends" to reach a better understanding of the duration of grief, suggesting focusing instead on the effects from the feeling of grief in its frequency and intensity. Such perspectives avoid the challenges presented by the Day of the Dead rituals while helping us figure out what grief is and what it entails.

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