Risa y Muerte: The Literary Calavera, and the Mexican Intimacy with Death

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"Mexico, with its splendid funeral toys, establishes itself as the chosen land of black humor." - André Breton (1940)

Abstract

When I speak of my short time in Mexico—up until the age of 5—it seems to come across in bits and fragments closer to dreams, ghost stories and distorted memories than anything mirroring reality. Yet, when retelling such chimeric stories to my hispanic relatives, such recollections are treated as facts of life. It is precisely this counter-intuitive merging between life and death, within Mexican culture, that this paper aims to capture. In order to explore this intimacy and attitude towards death, this paper uses the epitaph-like art form of the literary calaverita as a microcosm of Mexican identity. The literary calavera deliberately blends together: death, humor, spectacle, myth, mysticism, and the absurd in a surrealist scenario where death comes for our dear loved ones. In using the literary calavera as stand in for Mexican culture, this paper than conducts a comparative literature analysis through the usage of Chicano and Mexican literature such as Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*, John Philip Santos, *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*, Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, and Max Aub's *Mucha Muerte*. Carlos Reygadas' debut film *Japón* also plays a vital role developing this understanding. Lastly, give the notion that such an exploration of Mexican identity focuses heavily on a communal form of storytelling and myth, I add my own literary calaveras, and short vignettes of my own experience where counter-intuitive instances between life and death take place.

Key Words: Death, counter-intuitive instances, humor, myth, literary calavera, Mexican identity

The Abuelita

Standing outside of the Mexican consulate, my mother began making conversation with an elderly woman, an abuelita. She had all of the characteristics of an abuelita, a rosary tightly sealed between her interlocked fingers, a lovely mandil—with those deep *amarillos, y azules*—and a soothing low raspy voice. A voice so low, afraid that raising it might anger the saints."Yo ya me voy a mi pueblito," ["I'm going back to my little pueblo"] she said, "Aquí no me pienso morir." ["I don't plan on dying here."] As she said this she listened attentively for her name to be called, as if any kind of delay might spoil her plans with *la Calavera.* Everything about her reminded me of my own abuelita. Everything from her short biblical peasant build, to those black mystic eyes that only a soul acquainted with *sufrimiento* and *privación* poses. Rattling the silver beats of her rosary she leaned in close as if about to reveal a secret and said, *"*Dicen que aquí enterran a uno parado. ¿Cómo quieren que uno descanse en paz así? No, yo me voy a mi pueblito." ["They say they bury the dead standing up here. How is one supposed to rest in peace like that? No, i'm going back to my pueblito."] The image of it almost made me burst out into laughter. In the caricature style of Posada, I pictured the abuelita as a *catrina* buried underground in a standing upright position, with big skeleton swollen feet.

It was only a few months later while reading Octavio Paz, that I finally understood the nature of such a common, yet surreal encounter. It was a blatant rejection of the American and western world view of death. Death in this context is, "…abstract and disembodied…For Americans death is what is not seen: absence, the disappearance of the person." (Paz 366) In contrast, the abuelita, even in death, still thought of herself as a conscious being—an extension of herself if you will. To her death and life are not viewed as opposing, and unmentionable forces, but rather to her death is a tangible, buoyant and even droll concept. In other words, the

abuelita so perfectly managed to express the Mexican characters' intimacy and attitude towards death which so brilliantly merges together, humor, spectacle, and a sense of mysticism. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* Paz states the notion that, "The Mexican…is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his toys and his most steadfast love…death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience disdain, or irony…life and death are inseparable…" (57-58). Death in this context is not a coda but a continuous cycle meant as a form of celebration.

The Mexican Intimacy with Death

The vignette of the abuelita is one of many such instances where an intimacy with death and the mystical mingle with humor and the materiality within Mexican culture. In fact within the Mexican community, death, mysticism, humor, and surrealist imagery are all ingredients that make up daily life– from our healing rituals (currando empachos), to our storytelling, (cuentos de la llorona) and most importantly to our celebrations. For instance, in many parts of the world Mexican culture is synonymous with *El Dia de Los Muertos*; an annual holiday often accompanied by giant banners reading, "Life in Death". Within each of these examples death and life undergo what many folklorists have come to call, "counter-intuitive instances" (Brandes 222), where mortuary rituals fall outside the box of what the Western World has deemed as "normal." Immediately what comes to my mind is an image of sitting around the dinner table, with perky ears, listening to my mother tell stories that weave all of these elements together; such as the phantom apparition of my great grandmother that appeared to her the day before her passing. Though one might get the impression that these stories sound like a scene right out of a horror movie, the opposite is true. When my mother tells these stories, she did not purposely

tighten her vocal cords to produce a sound akin to a bedsheet ghost, but rather she tells the story with vehement pride, and feeling comer to an extraordinary adventure than to anything remotely morbid . In such instances, death, life, humorous irony and the mystical all come together and are taken in, chewed, and swallowed with unyielding resistance.

In order to explore these fanatical elements of Mexican culture and identity, I will not focus on *El Dia de Los Muertos*, as many other scholars in the past have done. I will instead focus my attention on a comparative literature analysis of a far less known celebration; the literary Calavera. The literary Calavera, is an annual Mexican mortuary ritual that I believe lends itself as a perfect microcosm for the Mexican Identities' ingrained intimacy and attitude towards death, humor, and the mystical. Such a form takes death, and as anthropologist Luis Alberto Vargas claims, "makes it the object of jokes and tries to forget it by transforming it into something familiar" (57). The transformation is that of taking the morbidity and unknown nature of death, and manifesting it into an intimate and amicable companion of daily life. In order to explore this transformation, I believe that it is important to place the literary calavera form in direct contact with two literary works of Chicano literature, that even *en el norte* still continue to portray and view Mexican identity through a lens engrained in myth, and a view of death entangled in macabre humor: John Philip Santos' Memoir *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation,* and Ana Castillo's magical realist novel *So Far From God.* These literary works not only ground their narratives with essential questions and concerns with death, but they also engrain the Mexican intimacy towards death by portraying such a phenomena extension of our corporal existence. Next, I use Carlos Reygadas' debut film Japón, as a way to explore death through a means of rebirth and cathartic celebration. Further, I will implement Max Aub's *Much Muerete,* as a way to express the Mexican view of death as apocryphal, humourous and absurd.

Lastly, as a framework stretching across the entire paper is the work of Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* which serves as a way of giving text of between the literary calavera, and the corresponding texts.

It is also important to mention that like a needle embroidering a mantil, I weave in personal literary calaveras that I wrote for people in my life. This decision was made not only as a way to showcase the Mexican character's attitude towards death but most importantly as my own contribution to this beautiful and traditional form of expression.

The Literary Calavera

The literary Calavera or Calaverita, which translates to skull or little skull, can best be described as a small epitaph or poem rooted in macabre humor. While no such manual book exists which outlines the so called rules of a literary Calaverita, the recurring pattern within each literary calavera lies in its short length—anywhere between 2 to 10 lines—and its comical rhymed verses. The counter-intuitive instance within the Calavera, lies precisely in the fact that it is meant as a free invitation to unblushingly poke fun at someone, though an imaginative scenario in which *la muerte* has unexpectedly come for them.

Adriana

Dicen que antes de morir Adriana tuvo un sueño

que al fin tenía dinero

pero cuando se levantó

lo primero que miro

fue La Muerte

que su vida se llevó

(Juan Diaz 2023)

The calaverita above, which I wrote for my older sister, expresses this very sentiment. It is a running joke among our close-knit circle family that Adriana loves money. Therefore, the calavera imagines a scenario where Adriana enjoys a dream where she finally has endless riches, only to be awakened by death herself. In, *Of Corpse*, Brandes states the idea that, "by presenting a calavera to a friend or relative, the poet implies that there exists such a strong bond between the two that not even a mocking jab at the victim's weakness will threaten the relationship" (224). Therefore, by such measures the literary Calaverita manages to juxtapose the theme of death with humor, mysticism, storytelling and surrealist imagery. The ambiguous concept of death is twisted and brought into the material world where it is personified, respected, and made fun of simultaneously. In other words, it becomes a spectacle and celebration, collectively bringing forth life and death on equal plains. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* Octavio Paz poetically describes the insatiable state of the Mexican identity as that of being, "…suspended between heaven and Earth…he that has been torn from the center of creation and suspended between hostile powers" (20). It is precisely this quality of mysticism, spirituality, and surrealism within the hispanic identity, anchored alongside reality, that the literary Calaverita so perfectly is able to express.

Rogelio

Ahora muerto Rogelio ya aprendió

Que los borrachos no piensan como tu o yo

Porque antes de darle fuerte al suelo

Rogelio le avia pregunto a Pedro

que si le disparaba una Modelo

Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation: The Old Story

John Philip Santos' *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation,* functions as a Mexican-American autobiographical novel that attempts to understand the complexity of Mexican identity through the exploration of one's *antepasados*. In doing so Santos taps into what scholar William Arc refers to as a *compromiso, "*a promise to keep the stories of one's ancestors alive" (3). It is precisely the nature of these stories, which are consumed in folklore, myth, and a deep intimacy with death that connects Santos' unique autobiography to the Mexican identity, and the literary Calavera. Like the literary Calavera, *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation,* sets out to understand and familiarize the corporal —such as family history— through the unique blurring of life and death.

In a genre that is often labeled as being rooted in facts and historical accuracies, Santos embodies the literary Calavera by transforming the expectations of an autobiographical/memoir into a counter-intuitive instance. For example, within the first few pages of *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation,* Santos greets the reader by proposing the driving existential question of the novel: "We may be latter-day Mexicanos, transplanted into another millennium in *El Norte,* but we are still connected to the old story, aren't we?" (4). The "old story" that Santos refers to is that of the *antepasados* and ancient Mexicans, who did not view life and death as distinctive, but as one and the same. In the *Labyrinth of Solitude,* Octavio Paz explains the idea that, "life and death was not so absolute to the ancient Mexicans…Life extended into death and

vice versa. Death was not the natural end of life but one phase of an infinite cycle" (54). This precisely explains why Santos settles upon the usage of dreams, myths, and a mixture of the two when actively trying to create a genealogical study of the "old story".

In the first chapter of the autobiography Santos embodies this view of family history by writing:

"There are a few photographs, rosary chains of half-remembered stories, carried out of another time by the old Mexicans I grew up with. In dreams, the ancestors who have passed on visit with me, in this world, and in a world that lies perhaps within, amidst, and still beyond this world—a mystical limbo dimension that the descendants of the Aztecs call el inframundo. In the Inframundo, all that has been forgotten still lives. Nothing is lost. All remembrance is redeemed from oblivion…These ancestors, living and dead, have asked me the question there were once asked: Where did our forebears come from and what have we amounted to in this world?" (9)

In the passage the lines between life and death become obsolete through the juxtaposition of the corporal with the mystical. The i*nframundo*, the dreams and the encounters with the *antepasados*, are compared to old photographs and half-remembered stories. This ultimately implies the notion that such events are not make-believe but based on actual recollections and past events. This is perfectly illustrated when Santos writes, "In dreams, the ancestors who have passed on visit with me, in this world, and in a world…beyond this world—a mystical limbo…"(9). In this instance, Santos describes an image of actively speaking with dead relatives in the same way someone else might describe a visit to their grandmother's home. In other words, dreams, reality, and death are made to interact and collide on one another, evoking the ancient idea of life and death being an infinite cycle. Further, Santos' describes the visits to the inframundo, not in a frightening manner, but rather with the same celebratory jovialness of a

family reunion. In this instance death and the afterworld differ immensely from the western view of death which is bleak and a synonym for horror.

When compared to the literary Calavera, *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation,* similarly rejects the anglo-saxon view of death; a scary, intangible, and abstract phenomena. In contrast, the Literary Calavera, and Santos' autobiography, equally describe and portray death, as a palpable place full of tangible artifacts, where the dead and the living coexist.. In *Treasury of Mexican Folkways*, Frances Toor perfectly expresses this sentiment when he writes, "the Mexicans, fatalists that they are, accept death uncomplainingly but also bravely. They fraternize, play, joke with death even while they weep," (236). In *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation,* Santos' speaks of the Inframundo—a place where, "all that has been forgotten still lives. Nothing is lost. All remembrance is redeemed from oblivion…" (9)— as a sacred limbo that he frequently visits with passed ancestors. Similarly, the Literary Calavera, evokes an equal view through its endearing poetic scenarios of *la muerte,* walking hand in hand with friends, and relatives. In both instances death, and the mystical are transformed into mediums meant to keep the *compromiso* alive. The obvious counter-intuitive instance here lies precisely in the fact that in both narratives death is used as a means of keeping histories, and loved ones alive.

Vanelly

Vanelly se crea muy valiente

que hasta se burlaba de la muerte

decía que si algun dia se le ponía enfrente

"con un golpe, le vuelo un diente"

pero Vanelly nos salió muy mentirosa

porque en toparse con La Muerte

A la pobre se le acabó la suerte

So Far From God: Humor in Grief

Ana Castillo's magical realist and absurdist novel, *So Far From God,* explores the grief ridden struggles of a single Mexican-American family, made up of five women, in the border state of New Mexico. Like *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation, So Far From God*, also finds its necessary to summon elements of mysticism, macabre humor and an intimacy with death in order to make sense of one's reality. However, in *So Far From God*, the combination of such fanatical elements result in a magical realist narrative, grounded in grief and mourning, that reads both like folklore, and a satirical commentary. In other words, what Castillo sets out to do, is to make sense of grief and death by deliberately transforming it into a counter-intuitive instance. Thus, in the novel, scenes of death and grief go on to play out more like surrealist absurdities, than straight weighty dramas. In *Ana Castillo's "So Far from God:" Intimations of the Absurd,* Manriquez, accurately describes Castillo's narrator as, "pyrotechnic" (40), implying the notion that, like the Literary Calavera, Castillo also deliberately attempts to capture an identical counter-intuitive attitude. It is an attitude that merges death, life, mysticism and humor in order to make sense of materiality. As a result, to the hispanic ear, *So Far From God*, reads like the *fantasma*, and *legendas* stories that our abuelitas, and mothers recounted after the *tamales* or *posole* had been served and eaten. In such narratives, all of these magical realist elements collide, bringing forth the amalgamation of life and death.

In *So Far From God*, the death and humorous counter-intuitive attitude of the literary calavera can be identified from its very inception. Like many other narratives dealing with Mexican identity, Castillos also births her novel through a sequence that brings together death, family and grief. The novel opens with the details of Sofi's harsh reality. After being abandoned by her lover Domingo, Sofi must also bear the death of her three year old daughter, *La Loca*. Although, such a narrative might sound absolutely bleak, Costillo's manages to transform this grief and suffering into a dark humorous spectacle and celebration. In fact, Castillo's narrative manages to perfectly mirror Paz's definition of the Mexican celebration and *fiesta* which he defines in the *Labyrinth of Solitude* as, "an experiment in disorder, reuniting contradictory elements and principles in order to bring about a renaissance of life. Ritual death promotes a rebirth" (51). In other words in, *So Far From God*, grief and death, are not morbidly undermined or made fun of, but rather, like the literary calavera, it turns these instances into humorous spectacles of rebirth. For instance, during the burial of *La Loca*, which just so happens to take place on an absurdly hot afternoon of 118 degrees, Castillo writes:

"The lid had pushed all the way open and the little girl inside sat up, just as sweetly as if she had woken from a nap, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "?Mami?" she called, looking around and squinting her eyes against the harsh light. Father Jerome got hold of himself and sprinkled holy water in the direction of the child, but for the moment was too stunned to utter so much as a word of prayer…the child she lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof." ( )

In the passage, the resurrection and rebirth of *La Loca*, plays out like a scene from a literary calaverita, where *la muerte* and the living come together in outlandish scenes of absurd violence and celebration. Similarly, in the passage, the bleak and downcast funeral of a three year old infant–whose pseudonym literally translates to crazy woman– is suddenly turned on its head and transformed into a farce surrealist spectacle. The vivid image of a corpse nonchalantly

waking up, as if from nap time, while a priest fearfully sprinkles holy water, conjures up laughter and a sense of spectacle more than anything resembling sorrow, or dread. Further, the demure and child-like diction within the passage is juxtaposed with themes of death. For example, words that evoke innocence and purity, such as “sweetly”, “Mami”, and “holy”, are brought to the foreground and are made to be the centerpieces to an otherwise somber setting–a funeral. All of these counter-intuitive instances echo the essence of pyrotechnics at play. In *Ana Castillo's "So Far from God:" Intimations of the Absurd,* Manriquez writes, “Within the novel, Chicana religious customs, dating mores, and cultural idiosyncrasies are presented in farce, magical realism, satire, and black humor–all characteristics of the absurd” (40). This is exactly why the funeral to some might feel like a hispanic telenovela. Yet, alongside the absurd, the funeral also magically turns into a resurrection. In a fantastical and folkloresque way, Sofi’s daughter comes back to life and flies to the church rooftop. This perfectly illustrates the way Castillo manages to deliberately transform grief and pain into a spectacle or *fiesta* of rebirth. In suddenly turning a funeral into a celebration, Castillo evokes the attitude and unique essence of the calaverita, which identically attempts to turn the subject of death into a joke meant to cheer up our dear ones.

Dr. Appel

La profe manzanita era muy estudiosa

Dicen que se la pasaba noche y día leyendo cosas

Tan enfocada estaba en su libro

Que no se dio cuenta que se vía morido

Japón: Death as a Rebirth

In order to continue the exploration of the literary Calaveritas mystical and surrealist dance between life and death, I think it is worth taking a look at Carlos Reygadas' 2003 debut film *Japón*. *Japón's* premise is quite simple: a disillusioned painter–simply known as the the man- from the city, embarks on a trip to a remote part of the country with the solemn intention of committing suicide. While the film does indeed follow this thread, it is a thread that Reygadas often throws aside, forgets to pick up, and often dismisses completely. Therefore, what Japón ultimately becomes is not a morbid film about suicide, but—for a lack of better words— a film about a surrealist, mystical, and spiritual rebirth set within the Mexican rural landscape. In other words, like the literary Calaverita, Japon uses death as a means of rebirth. Japon uses the attitude of the literary calavera and the Mexican character, which in return transforms the idea of dying into a cathartic celebration of life. In particular, *Japón* achieves this counter-intuitive transcendence between life and death through the motif of ascension ingrained within its omnipresent camera, and the juxtaposition of the material with the mystical.

It is not a coincidence at all that the character who unintentionally saves the protagonists from suicide is appropriately named Ascen–short for Ascension. The Christian definition of ascension as written in the *Oxford Learner's dictionary*, reads, "The journey of Jesus from the Earth into heaven - the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ". In other words, the word ascension alludes to the idea of being reborn from death. Therefore, it is through the deliberate motif of ascension, that Japón manages to establish a literary calavera-like sense of surrealist mysticism aimed at celebrating life through death. This sensation of ascension can be precisely seen through the movement of the camera in the most pivotal scenes of the film, such as when the protagonist of the film attempts to commit suicide.

In the scene above, the nameless man climbs to the highest mountain accessible to him in order to fulfill the goal of his journey–to kill himself. As the man takes out his gun which is carefully wrapped in a thin veil, he takes a moment to look out into the vast distance. It is a view with a misty blanket of fog, which resembles that of Santos' *inframundo*. As the man takes his gun and aims it towards his temple, the camera suddenly pans and ascends upwards into a white and cloudy sky. It is as if the camera in that instance has ascended into heaven. When the camera descends downward back to the man, he proceeds to put the gun down and walks away in order to lay down beside the carcass of a horse. In *Sacrifice and Recognition in Carlos Reygadas's Japón,* Epplin refers to Reygadas' usage of death in his films as, "channeling death for the purposes of life" (290). In other words the only way for the man to achieve life is to get near death. Although pushed to its most extreme, in Japón Reygadas' uses the motif of ascension in order to showcase the literary calavera attitude towards death. It is an attitude where death is seen as the ultimate expression of life. In the scene death and life dramatically collide through the surrealist ascent of the camera, which in the end results in a cathartic embrace of life.

Additionally, I would argue that another significant way that the film achieves this feeling of the mystical mixed with reality is directly through the juxtaposition of the material with the mystical. This becomes apparent within the first establishing shot of the film.

Here–in what looks like an homage to the great surrealist filmmaker Federico Fellini-the camera looks out across a congested sea of cars inside an expressway tunnel. At the far end of the tunnel, which is shrouded in darkness, is a beam of intense white light. The atmosphere is ordinarily dull yet dreamlike. Ordinary mundane sounds such as car horns go off, as the camera glides forward towards the light, creating a unique feeling of a transcendent ascension toward an unknown mythical elsewhere. The pale light simultaneously draws allusions to birth and death. It is precisely this collision and interplay between reality and the mystical that Reygadas sets out to capture with his camera. For instance, it is important to take note that although the camera ascends upwards with a mystical otherworldly essence, as we move, the camera also has all of the qualities of being handheld. The camera shakes, and stutters mirroring the light turbulence of the cars. Therefore, although we are in the midst of a mystical and spiritual ascendance, the ascension towards an unknown mythical elsewhere does not feel detached from reality. Identical to the literary calavera, in Japón the corporal and the mystical coexist as one and the same.

Mucha Muerte: Apocryphal Myths

On March 17th 1948, the exiled writer Max Aub inscribed in his diary, “No hay nada más espectacular que la muerte” (10). Such a statement alone conjures up a writer not only with a dark sense of humor but one with an eye for both the surreal and the spectacular. Therefore,

although much less known than the previous literary works mentioned here, I think that in order to continue our understanding of the Mexican intimacy with death, it is important to take a look at the work of Max Aub. In particular, Aub's humorous and absurdist *Mucha Muerte,* which so perfectly mirrors the attitude and aesthetic quality of the literary calavera. Like the literary calavera which conjures up and mingles humor, surrealism and spectacle out of an imaginary scenario where death comes for our dear friends. In *Mucha Muerete* Aub evokes these same aesthetic qualities through a series of unrestricted apocryphal and over the top confessions of murder, suicide, and cannibalism. According to the Oxford Language dictionary, apocryphal is defined as "(of a story or statement) of doubtful authenticity, although widely circulated as being true." As a result, what *Mucha Muerete* untimely resembles is a collection of calaverita-like accounts of false, violent and absurd scenarios that end with death and a good laugh. For instance, at one point Aub writes: "Lo maté porque me dieron veinte pesos para que lo hiciera" ["I killed him because they gave me 20 pesos to do it"][1] (37). Therefore, what *Mucha Muerte* and the literary calavera share is not only the epitaph-like form, but also the apocryphal and mythic nature of turning death into an absurd and humorous spectacle meant to be taken at face value.

When one reads *Mucha Muerete*, instantly the feeling that someone is trying to pull your leg comes to mind. The confessions sound too spectacular and absurd to be true. Yet, we continue to read, and we can not help but to laugh in repulsion as we do it. Therefore, the counter-intuitive instance within *Mucha Muerete* lies in its ability to transform violent death into myth and absurdity. Like the literary calavera, in *Mucha Muerte,* death is transformed into something familiar. In *Max Aub's Magical Labyrinth of Exile*, Ugarte states the notion that

[1] All subsequent English translations of Spanish texts are my own with the aid of ChatGPT.

"Writing is for Aub the recording of memory, yet through the grid of memory, reality becomes transparent, weightless, like something in the air" (738). In other words in order to make sense of materiality Aub deliberately uses a mystical-like framework where death, memory, dreams and reality all collide. Further, the scenarios that Aub creates are short enough, and spectacular enough that, like a game of telephone, the confessions have the potential to get shared over and over until they ultimately become true. It is the active creation of myth. For instance one such confession reads:

> Hacía tres años que soñaba con ello; estrenaba traje! Un traje clarito, como yo lo había deseado siempre. Había estado ahorrando, peso a peso, y, por fin, lo tenía. Con sus solapas nuevecitas, su pantalon bien planchado, sus valencianas sin deshilachar…Y aquel tio grande, gordo, asqueroso, quiza sin darse cuenta, dejo caer su colilla y me lo quemo: un agujero horrible, negro con los bordes color cafe. Me lo eche con un tenedor. Tardó bastante en morirse. (35)
>
> [It's been three years since I dreamed of it; I was wearing a suit! A light-colored suit, just as I had always wished. I had been saving, penny by penny, and finally, I had it. With its brand-new lapels, its trousers well-pressed, its Valencia shoes without fraying... And that big, fat, disgusting guy, perhaps without realizing it, dropped his cigarette butt, and it burned a hole in it: a horrible, black hole with brown edges. I ate him with a fork. He took quite a while to die.]

Similar to the resurrection of *La Loca*, the confession of murder above deliberately uses an apocryphal approach in order to blur the lines between materiality and the fantastical. Aub merges together dreams, reality, vivid detail and humor so well that the reader often loses the thread of which realm he is in. This can be perfectly seen in the surrealist diction that Aub

evokes. For instance, the confession begins with the dreamlike and ambiguous line, “It’s been three years since I dreamed of it”. While this implies the notion that the account we are reading is only a dream, it quickly becomes unclear whether the dream is just a random dream or whether the dream is actively recreating the memory of a real murder. The rest of the account takes this further by illustrating the events leading up to the murder in grand detail. Descriptions such as, “With its brand-new lapels, its trousers well-pressed, its Valencia shoes without fraying…”, help give the scenario a sense of apocryphal authenticity; as if it actually happened. Therefore, the result is an act of blending together dream, death and spectacle and molding them into ambiguity and myth. When I first read the confession I was so taken back by the level of detail, and the shocking ending that I completely forgot the fact that the word dream was even remotely mentioned. In the prologue to *Mucha Muerete,* Pedro Tejada Tello touches upon this by writing, "These confessions from the criminals themselves are always marked by an absurd and verbal humor. The surrealist absurdity embedded in play and the freedom that claims the supremacy of the unconscious and the dreamlike over the conscious" (12). In other words, similar to the literary-calavera, through these confessions Aub actively attempts to capture an *inframundo*-like limbo where dreams, absurd humor, and death coexist.

Conclusion

The literary calavera, as we have seen, manages to perfectly encapsulate all of the counter-intuitive wonders of the Mexican character. Unlike the common westerner who might hide or scorn their dreams or mystical brushes with death away as nothing more than a nuisance, the Mexican character treats such elements like a compass. As a result, when speaking with my relatives back in Mexico, I was not all surprised to learn that literary calaveritas are still annually performed in front of a packed audience in *la plaza*. I am not surprised because, although I have

not returned to my birth place of *Puruandiro* since the age of five, I still remember it as a mystical and enchanted place full of living myths. It is a pueblo where saints being carried on royal thrones are as common as the moon at night. It is a *pueblo* where everyone you speak to has a story to tell–one that encompasses all of the ingredients of humor, death, mysticism, and spectacle. There is the story of the man who walks with rattling chains, the lonesome man on a black horse, and the llorona weeping for her children, to name just a few. Everyone seems to have their own subjective version of these tales. These stories are so common and always told with such pride, that one can not help but get the impression that they ultimately become a celebration of life. To have a story to share becomes a declaration that one is not only alive but attune to the world. Through death, life blooms.

Therefore, I would finally like to share the counter-intuitive history of my pueblo, that like the literary calavera, Aub's apocryphal confessions, Santos's *Inframundo*, Castillo's humor in grief, and Reygadas' ascension from death, expresses the Mexican characters celebration of life in death. It is the story that was told to me, and the one that I will continue to pass on.

The Old Story of My Pueblo

If you happen to be near the small *Pueblo* of *Puruandiro*, during the first days of November,you are likely to be met with the deafening sound of cannon fire. I have a short recollection of this. It is the work of thousands of achromous firecrackers incautiously tied together outside every door, and every street– like a clothesline full of tiny bombs stretching across the entire pueblo. As every little *cohetito* explodes into a beautiful and violent eruption of silvery smoke, some devoutly follow along, street by street, blast by blast, while others simply pop their heads out of windows in anticipation. I asked my mother, why these people—why my

people— do this? Searching for words appropriate for a child she finally said, they are celebrating *El Senior de la Salud*, the Saint of Good Health. I still did not understand. What did *El Senior de la Salud* have to do with firecrackers?

As the story goes, during the years of independence, as Mexico fought the superior French army with little less than plows and machetes, a silent plague fell on the *campesinos* of *Puruandiro*. Dozens of adults and children alike fell prey to *la muerte*. Overwhelmed by war, and death, it is said that the padre of the church retreated to the solitude of the attic in order to pray in silence. It was there that he found the dust covered corpse of El Senior de la Salud. He did not know how the poor saint ended up captive nor for how long, but it seemed as if the illness too had also fallen on the forgotten saint, for his skin was blistered and pale and the same feverish sweat, el padre had seen on the sick also ran down his flesh. With his cassock, el padre carefully cleaned and dusted the saint, and like Christ on his way to the cross, he placed the sickly saint on his back and made his way down stairs. After who knows how long, El Senior de la Salud had finally been returned into the heart of the church. El padre placed El Senior de la Salud right in the middle of the church where everyone could have the pleasure of seeing the restored saint once more. It did not take long thereafter for the campesinos to notice the miracle of the saint's presence, for everyone who came to see him was cured. In flocks, the feverish and deteriorating bodies of sickly Children, and adults, wrapped in layers of shawls, began to be placed before the saint. Still many fragile bodies could not make the journey, and so it did not take long for the saint to be placed upon a throne and paraded across the pueblo. Slowly, like a miracle from beyond, the illness began to alleviate its burden upon the poor campesinos. So spectacular was the miracle that in order not to forget the campesinos declared it a holiday. To celebrate and pay their respects, the campesinos gathered together to feast and danced and it was

during this festive jubilant atmosphere that the spontaneous idea to light as many firecrackers as possible took place. The firecrackers, although violent and loud, became the symbol of rebirth. Incredibly grateful must have been the saint for one last miracle occurred. The campesinos were to learn of it the next day. They were to learn that during the celebration of El Senior de la Salud, while this danced and drank and lit the fire crackers, a fleet of French soldiers marched towards them hoping to pillage the poor pueblo. However, so violent and thunderous were the sounds of the firecrackers and high pitch shouts, that it frightened and persuaded the invaders to flee. Shortly thereafter news began to spread of the victory over the French army. In less than a month the saint had rid the pueblo of two plagues.

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