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Reseña / Review

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The Intersections of Pre-Columbian and Colonial life through the Lens of Death and Dying

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Martina Will de Chaparro and Miruna Achim's edited volume *Death and Dying in Colonial Spanish America* is an engaging and thought provoking collection of essays that together explore the intersections of pre-Columbian and colonial life through the lens of death and dying. In their introduction "From Here to the Hereafter," the editors position this work in the context of early modern histories of death ways, a historiography that has been particularly strong for Europe but not for Latin America. Contributors to this volume chart the ways cultures of death among multi-ethnic populations, especially in urban areas, are embedded in key aspects of the colonial experience in Spanish America. These include the symbolism and practice of political governance; religious conversion and everyday practices of faith; health and medicine, and community and individual mourning practices and commemorations of the dead.

The six essays range in dates from the 16th to the 18th centuries and are organized chronologically, and focus their studies on Spanish colonial America, primarily on Mexico, Peru, and New Granada. They employ, in often fascinating and

detailed ways, a wide range of sources to explore colonial death ways, including traditional sources such as wills and burial records, but extending to Inquisition and criminal records, visual evidence, indigenous language sources, Spanish chronicles, sermons, newspapers, and medical treatises. Through it all, the contributors outline a world where the living and dead exist on a continuum of constant movement and communication through ritual and observance, arguing for "the sometimes blurry divisions between the profane and the sacred, of violence either thwarted or aggravated, of subjugated cultures seeking to negotiate survival, and of representation" (16).

Erika Hosselkus begins the collection with her essay "Noble Nahuas, Faith, and Death", where she persuasively argues for the significance of the September 1520 smallpox outbreak in the Aztec/Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan as a turning point in the ways that elite Nahua peoples and rulers prepared for death and the afterlife, and how native peoples commemorated those deaths through funeral rites and ceremonies. During the 1520 epidemic, a generation of indigenous rulers and elites perished, "decimating the region's indigenous population and challenging the Nahua's ability to respond to death through traditional funerals, or in any other manner" (31). To outline the changing meanings of indigenous cultures of death under colonial rule, Hosselkus draws on Spanish chroniclers who described indigenous deaths during the conquest period, Nahua pictorial annals that reported on deaths of rules, moralizing accounts of colonial life written by missionary friars that described death in central Mexico, and Nahuatl language wills.

Histories of self-inflicted deaths and suicides in colonial Mexico are explored by Zeb Tortorici in his chapter "Reading the (Dead) Body", where he provides a fascinating analysis of a little studied subject that complicates histories of death and dying in the Americas. Tortorici uncovered twenty-three Inquisition and criminal cases, and two artistic representations, of suicide across New Spain from 1564-1810. The act of reading the body, of interpreting signs found on the corpse—as signs of struggle or lack of it—that were then used to make important decisions about the state of the soul at the time of death to determine, for example, whether or not burial could take place on consecrated ground, the guilt or innocence of a prisoner, and mitigating circumstances of mental illness. Perhaps the most interesting part of Tortorici's chapter is his cautioning historians against interpreting suicides of African and indigenous slaves as "resistance" to colonial rule. Instead, Tortorici argues that suicide in colonial New Spain was a complex personal act, one that "offered

permanent relief through death to an individual suffering from any number of physical emotional, and psychological maladies—many, though not all, of them brought on by colonialism and colonial institutions" (77).

In "The Autopsy of Fray García Guerra", Miruna Achim probes meaning making in colonial society in the aftermath of the unexpected death of New Spain's Archbishop and Viceroy Fray García Guerra (likely stemming from injuries caused after jumped from a runaway mule-drawn carriage) in February of 1612 after ruling as viceroy for only eight months. Exceptional celestial and terrestrial events peppered García Guerra's rule, including a full eclipse of the sun, ash rain from a nearby volcano that blanketed Mexico City, and the public exposure of plans for a slave rebellion, events that intersected with the Viceroy's rapid decline in health. Shortly after, Mateo Alemán, a trusted member of the García Guerra's entourage, published two texts commemorating his death, writings that included a vivid description of an autopsy conducted on his corpse. To make sense of this, Achim deftly contextualizes the circulation of the autopsy details in print with other corporeal displays of bodies and body parts that circulated materially, visually, and in print in Mexico City at this time. This occurred most dramatically with the public execution of 29 Blacks and *mulatos* convicted of conspiring to rebel, and the mutilation and public display of some of their bodies and body parts as warnings. Achim concludes that when Alemán's publication of Fray García Guerra's autopsy is placed into this larger context, the deceased human body becomes "an intersection of meanings, as a powerful metaphor of political, religious, and cultural processes" in colonial society (98).

Understandings of "good death" and "bad death" are explored by James Flaks and Ana Schaposchnik respectively in their chapters in this volume. In "The Death of the Monarch as Colonial Sacrament", Flaks provides a detailed description of the public commemorations of the death of Prince don Baltasar Carlos, a seventeen-year old member of the royal family. While he never actually ruled, political and religious authorities in Mexico City still accorded him all the appropriate funeral rites of a royal leader, a performance, Flaks argues, of colonial subservience to the imperial center and the institution of kingship that sustained it. These rites physically marked the city's landscape with the construction of an elaborate royal tomb in Mexico City's plaza mayor, complete with the prince's symbolic corpse, and extravagant public performances of funeral orations and rites with participants from key sectors of colonial society.

In contrast, Schaposchnik investigates the contours of bad death in her chapter, "Exemplary Punishment in Colonial Lima". Basing her study on a 1639 *Auto de Fé* that took place in Lima found in the 1640 chronicle written by Fernando de Montesinos, she catalogues the final stages of the Inquisition's investigation, trial, and punishment of close to 100 people for a range of crimes, especially the crime of heresy of Crypto-Judaism among the city's merchant class. The Inquisition's public display of humiliation and punishment that took place on an elaborate stage at the center of the capital culminated in a public burning of eleven convicted heretics at the stake. Even though executions for heresy were relatively rare in the colonial period, what mattered more than the number, Schaposchnik argues, was the graphic public display of religious authority to root out the crime, and the power to punish it by meting out a bad death.

Andrew Redden's chapter, "Angelic Death and Sacrifice in Early Modern Hispanic America", returns to the theme of Pre-Hispanic death rites with Catholic death rites, this time from the perspective of intersections with cult of the Saints narratives from Mesoamerica, the Andes, and New Granada. This thoughtful and provocative chapter interlinks contemporary indigenous oral histories with their echoes in the historical record, especially sources such as Inquisition records and campaigns against idolatry that described the ways indigenous rituals of human sacrifice intersected symbolically and narratively with Eucharistic liturgy. By probing the pre- and post-conquest meanings of sacrifice, and locating indigenous spaces of ritual activities in traditional sacred landscapes of caves and rugged mountains, Redden argues for cross cultural understandings of pre-Columbian and Catholic ideas of children as sacrificial victims. These children bridged the mundane world and worked in heaven with deceased ancestors, concluding that, "If the pre-Hispanic Gods gave life by consuming the dead, the Hispanic God was perceived to give life while embracing the dead" (169).

Adam Warren's chapter, "Medicine of the Dead", concludes the volume with a fascinating exploration of conflicts over elite led burial reforms in Lima, and their ultimate failure during the first half of the nineteenth century. Lima's prominent medical physicians led the reform efforts, applying miasma theories of disease to underpin their calls for "hygienic" funerals and burials, culminating in the establishment of cemeteries out of city centers and parish churches to the outskirts of town. These medical ideas about disease causation from infectious smells of decaying bodies combined with Enlightenment push back against what many considered

baroque excesses of funerals and burials, arguing for more somber, restrained death commemorations. Warren mines the archival record for traces of the circulation of ideas in practice and in print media in support of these changes from, for example, one issue of *El Mercurio Peruano*, that contained advertisements for new inventions such as the "air machine" from England that reportedly removed miasmic smells of corporeal decomposition and other materials in churches with fresh healthful air. His evidence shows that these reforms were largely unsuccessful, however, because they conflicted with popular understandings and cultural practices of death. Thus, Warren argues for the "persistence of baroque notions of piety, the importance of the dead to the world of the living, and the limited power of Lima's medical reformers to refashion popular belief" (172).

Overall, I found *Death and Dying in Colonial Spanish America* to be well conceived, accessible, and thought-provoking analysis of cross-cultural conceptions of death and dying, and one that provides a good starting place for thinking through new historical research on death and dying in the Americas.