

Research Essay

Food and the Expressive Culture of Death: Two Perspectives

By: Isaura Garcia and Sheila Bock

Abstract: This piece offers reflections, from the perspectives of a professor (Sheila Bock) and a student (Isaura Garcia), on the role that food played in facilitating teaching and learning in an undergraduate seminar on the “Expressive Culture of Death.” This was not a course *about* food or foodways, but rather a class where foodways served as a productive entry point into students’ understandings of how people create and communicate meaning about not only death, but also life in their social and cultural worlds. Highlighting the student perspective in the larger consideration of edible pedagogies offered by this special issue, we hope to make visible the ways in which student learning and engagement can both draw upon and extend beyond the carefully curated plans of the professor in wonderfully generative ways.

Keywords: foodways, expressive culture, death, student perspective

This piece offers reflections, from the perspectives of a professor (Sheila Bock) and a student (Isaura Garcia), on the role that food played in facilitating teaching and learning in an undergraduate seminar on the “Expressive Culture of Death.” This was not a course *about* food or foodways, but rather a class where foodways served as a productive entry point into students’ understandings of how people create and communicate meaning about not only death, but also life in their social and cultural worlds (in both planned and unplanned ways). The piece will begin with the perspective of Sheila Bock, an associate professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who will describe her goals for the course and the explicit attention she gave to the topic of food in its design. It will then shift to the perspective of undergraduate student Isaura Garcia, who shares some of the work she did for one of the class assignments and offers her own reflections on why she found the topic of food to be so compelling within the context of this course. Highlighting the student perspective in the larger consideration of edible pedagogies offered by this special issue, we hope to make visible the ways in which student learning and engagement can both draw upon and extend beyond the carefully curated plans of the professor in wonderfully generative ways.

A Professor’s Perspective

At the (virtual) American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in the fall of 2020, I (Sheila Bock) attended a virtual Death Café organized by Willow Mullins, where several of my folklorist colleagues shared their research and personal reflections at the intersections of folklore and death. Listening to the insights of my colleagues helped me find useful frameworks to make sense of my own heightened attention to the topic of death amidst the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and other events happening in the U.S. and world. Very much inspired by that Death Café, I began to put together a syllabus for a class called “The Expressive Culture of Death,” which I taught as an Honors Seminar at the University of

Nevada, Las Vegas the following year during the Fall 2021 semester, and then again in Fall 2022.

A foundational premise of this class is that, while death is a topic that is often hidden from view and not talked about explicitly in U.S. American contexts (due to a range of historical factors including professionalization and medicalization), death is nevertheless a part of life and a phenomenon that *does* capture the attention of the living. Building on this foundational premise, I designed the syllabus with these questions in mind: How do we create meaning in the face of death? What kinds of expressive culture does death inspire? What insights can expressive culture offer into social and cultural understandings of death more broadly? How does the expressive culture of death create opportunities for reflection, critique, community-building, and political action?

All of the students who have taken this class are unfamiliar with the field of folklore, so both times I have taught it, I have spent a good deal of time early on in this 15-week course explaining what I mean when I use the term “expressive culture.” Specifically, I explain that I am using this term to reference how social and cultural beliefs and perspectives take tangible form in the things people say, make, and do. I explain that since I am a folklorist, I am most interested in the types of expressive culture that are both *informal*—outside of (though often interacting with) official, institutional culture—and *traditional*—shared or repeated within a social group (indicating that it carries meaning to people in that group).

To help the students begin identifying some informal, traditional examples of what they have seen people say, make, or do in response to death, I turn to foodways for one of my introductory examples. Specifically, I ask students what they have observed community members do for the surviving family members of an individual who has died, and both times I have taught it, more than one of the students has answered, “Bring them food.” This opens up a discussion of what functions this act (or custom) serves. For example, students note that the act of bringing food is a break from the “ordinary,” marking the family as being in a state of grieving. It is also a way for others in the community to show that they care for the bereaved family, affirming broader community ties. As part of this discussion, I encourage them to think about how we can find meaning not only in the *act* of sharing food, but in the *form and content* of the food itself. For example, while the specific dishes differ based on regional and cultural traditions, most often the food that is shared is a meal, not the chocolates or the elaborately decorated cookies that might be brought as a Christmas gift (with holidays being another break from the “ordinary”). The foods shared in the immediate aftermath of someone’s death are typically not “fancy,” but rather utilitarian and comforting – they are meant to nourish and sustain those who are grieving without the expectation of recognition for one’s artistry or skill in the kitchen. These meals are also typically created and shared with an explicit mindfulness of the disruption this kind of grief can bring to daily schedules. There is no expectation that they will be eaten immediately, and ease of preparation is a key component of the meal. And very often these meals are homemade rather than ordered from a restaurant, functioning to help community members feel that they are contributing something not just tangible but more meaningful by putting in both the care and the work to provide a home-cooked meal.

One key recurring concept in the course is the *liminality* of death, and we give a great deal of attention to how funerary rituals and customs serve as rites of passage that facilitate the transition from one status to another. Drawing on ideas introduced in Candi K. Cann's introduction to the edited volume *Dying to Eat: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife* (2018), we consider how death inspires two such transitions: 1) the transition of the people who remain alive, who must transition to a life without the deceased, and 2) the transition of the deceased from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. In the process, I turn to foodways to help illustrate people's engagement with these transitions. For example, we consider how the deceased can be kept socially alive through the incorporation of specific dishes or recipes clearly associated with them. We also talk about how communal meals served and consumed at funerals strengthen the social bonds of the living, and how familiar foods reinforce communal identities. An example one Filipina student shared from her own experiences is how it is common among the Filipino families she knows to have a funeral feast served buffet style, and her own grandfather's funeral was no exception, with "normal Filipino party food" including pancit, lumpia, and BBQ chicken and pork skewers. Beyond reinforcing social bonds and communal identities, she noted that having a feast and spending money on food is a sign of respect for the deceased.

In thinking about the transition of the deceased from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, we also consider the role of food in *caring for the dead* (an idea that emerges in particular in our consideration of Día de los Muertos, which Isaura Garcia addresses in more detail below). Drawing from the work of death studies scholar Tony Walker, Candi K. Cann describes caring for the dead as "a renegotiation of the status of the deceased person while allowing the living to retain an active and participatory relationship with the dead in their new state" (2018: 4). The same student who described the feast of "normal Filipino party food" served at her grandfather's funeral also offered an example of the role food plays in this renegotiation in her own family's traditions, noting that in the days following or on the anniversaries of someone's death, sometimes her family would cook and serve a plate next to a photograph of the deceased family member.

Finally, as part of our exploration of liminality, we also consider how the ephemeral materiality of food offers a useful way to mediate the "betwixt and between-ness" of the corpse. I present the students with this excerpt from the work of anthropologist Jung Eun Sophia Park:

Food operates as a dialectic revealing the tension that exists between the "clean" purity of the organic life-giving force and the "messy" nature of inevitable decay. Food provides great pleasure and necessary energy, but it also includes dirt. Food forever threatens contamination and bodily impurity, but it is necessary for survival and is a source of pleasure. As Deborah Lupton incisively states, "Food is a metonym of the mortality of human flesh, the inevitable entropy of living matter." (Park 2018: 47)

Drawing these connections, in turn, opens up productive avenues to think about the ways in which the body of the dead straddles the border between the familiar and the

threatening, and must be properly “prepared” for culturally sanctioned forms of “consumption.”

One of my key goals as an educator is to help my students build a critical lens for looking at the different forms of expressive culture they encounter in their everyday lives. To these ends, I aim to create space for students to draw connections to their own experiences and observations, both during in-person discussions and through informal written responses to our class meetings on the online discussion board. I also design more formal assignments with these pedagogical goals in mind. One assignment, for example, asks students to create a slidecast (i.e., a recorded slideshow of images accompanied by audio narration) that documents and contextualizes their own personal engagement with the expressive culture of death. I keep the assignment intentionally open-ended in terms of topics or genres they might focus on, though the assignment guidelines ask them to do the following:

- Describe your own relationship to this form of expressive culture (e.g., as an observer, an active participant, an intended audience member, an unintended audience member, a creator, a consumer, a guide for others’ engagement) and (if applicable) how this has changed over time.
- Offer some examples of your specific engagement with this form of expressive culture, reflecting on the functions this engagement served for you personally.
- Offer background information about this form of expressive culture based on course materials and additional research
- Articulate how reflecting on your personal engagement with/participation in this tradition offers insight into the significance of this form of expressive culture more broadly.

Students have chosen to focus on a wide array of topics for this assignment, including, for example, their participation in death-related humor, their consumption of true crime media, their experiences visiting (and in one case working at) sites of dark tourism, the stories they tell about their experiences of hauntings, how their family has used the space of a local cemetery over the years, and how they reconfigured traditional rituals of grief and remembrance in a virtual format. Isaura Garcia, whose perspective is presented below, put together a beautiful presentation focused on the relationship between transformation, consumption, death, and food.

Upon seeing the call for submissions for this special issue on “Edible Pedagogies,” I immediately thought back to Isaura’s slidecast and her thoughtful personal reflections on the intersections between food and death. I recognized it as an important opportunity to engage with the theme of this special issue from a student’s perspective. In what follows, you will find the written script for Isaura’s slidecast assignment with select images from the original presentation. After that, we turn attention to Isaura’s perspective as she offers some valuable insights into how and why food caught her attention as a form of expressive culture in the context of this specific course.

Written Script for Isaura Garcia’s Slidecast Presentation

Transformative Aspects of Consumption in Relation to Death

As much as we like to avoid thinking about it, death is an integral part of life. One aspect of death that we tend to turn a blind eye to is the consumption of the dead. Hearing that, you might think I'm referring to cannibalism—which, yes, is a form of consuming the dead—but that is not necessarily the focus of this video.



Image 1. Recreation of “The Last Supper” by Leonardo Da Vinci painted onto a plate that hangs above the dining table of the home of the Garcia Family. Text reads “give us today our daily bread” in Spanish. Photo courtesy of Isaura Garcia.

These first few images depict some of my earliest experiences of consuming the dead—the Eucharist. The Eucharist, also known as the holy communion, is a religious tradition that I practiced during my time as a Roman Catholic. I symbolically consumed the body and blood of Jesus Christ. I did this as a way to transform from a sinner into a devout Catholic. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, holy communion is a way to strengthen the community, strengthen one's relationship with Jesus Christ, and focus on the coming glory of heaven (Petruzello: 2021).



Image 2. Photograph of Isaura Garcia's first holy communion, taken by Isaura Valerio, October 31, 2015. Permission granted November 29, 2021.

While my early experience consuming the dead was symbolic, there are many instances where humans literally consumed the dead. One historical example of cultural cannibalism can be found with the Aztecs. The Aztecs were an ancient Latin American civilization with a cyclical notion of life and death. Mark Cartwright suggests the idea that human sacrifice was a method of repayment; it was a necessity to survive and thank the gods for the original sacrifice that resulted in the existence of humanity. According to Red from Overly Sarcastic Productions, the Earth itself was created from the undead remains of the god Cipactli and Quetzalcóatl stole bones from the Underworld to make the first humans, thus making sacrifice a necessary apology to the gods (Red 2020).

Moreover, the patterned nature of the sacrificial rituals was what kept the cycle of life and death going; the sacrifices nourished the gods, the land, and the community as a whole (Maestri 2019). According to Dave Roos, the ritual act of cannibalism in this context was the highest honor, a way to commune with the gods, perhaps even becoming more holy (Roos 2018). From these two examples, we learn that consumption is part of our expressive culture of transformation and socialization.

These themes began appearing later in my life as I reconnected with my Mexican roots and began researching my family's traditions. One of these is the widely known celebration of putting up an altar for el Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead), complete with offerings of fruit, food, and *pan de muerto* for my departed loved ones. Food consumption, especially in social situations, is thought to produce unity, closeness, and trust within a community, and this principle is applied to bringing one closer to the dead.

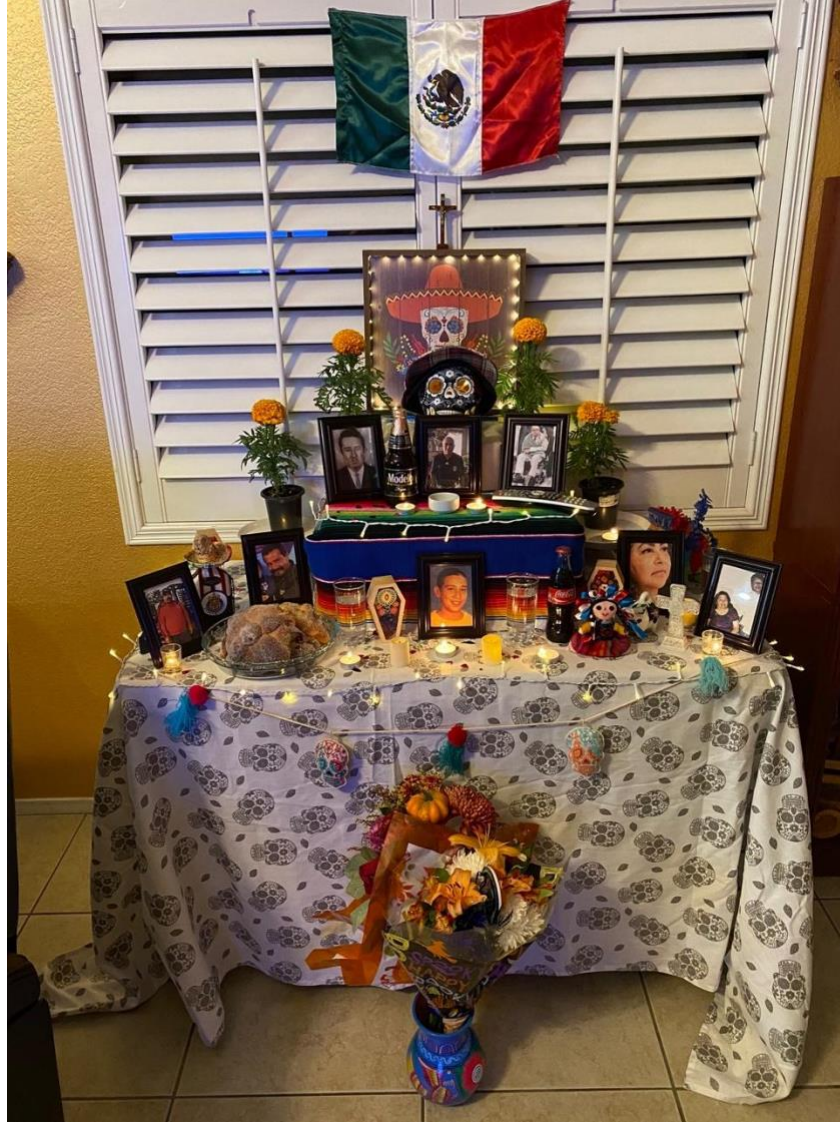


Image 3. Día de Los Muertos ofrenda showcasing images and favorite items of deceased Garcia-Valerio family members. Ofrenda by Isaura Garcia, November 1, 2019. Photo courtesy Isaura Garcia.

Pan de muerto is a primarily symbolic food for Día de Los Muertos, whose round shape symbolizes the circle of life and death (Nabor 2019). The little ball of bread represents a skull, a heart, or teardrops (depending on who you ask), and the cross-shaped pieces on the bread represent the bones of the dead. In Puebla, my family's home state in Mexico, pan de Muerto is infused with orange blossom essence to express the memories of the deceased (Martinez 2020). We both eat this bread and leave it for our family; in a way, we consume them and their memory. We also create and consume sugar skulls, representative of our dead.



Image 4. Close up of homemade pan de muerto on the ofrenda. Photo courtesy of Isaura Garcia.

When I visited the *museo de las momias* (Museum of Mummies) in Guanajuato, I was greeted by dozens of street vendors selling *charamuscas* (caramel figurines representing the mummies) which were thoroughly enjoyable. In other areas of Mexico, people enjoy *capirotada*, a bread pudding dish eaten around the time of Ash Wednesday and Lent, a time of religious penitence and prayer (Marquez 2021). This dish is representative of the corpse of Christ and incorporates cinnamon sticks symbolizing the crucifix, cloves as the nails, and syrup as the blood of Christ. It is all covered in a layer of cheese, representing the shroud that covers the body of Christ (Marquez 2021). Of course, Mexico is not the only place where food is used as an expressive culture to reinforce spiritual connections.

Another example can be found in nineteenth-century Sweden, where mourners were given Swedish funeral confections whose color, fringes, and images told them something about the deceased (Troop 2017). According to Sarah Troop, long and black meant they lived a long life, and if the fringes were white and short, they probably died in childhood (2017). The images on the candies were also symbolic: they could be lambs representing innocence and were often associated with children, or they could include a variety of images depicting or representing death (Troop 2017).

In England, during the nineteenth century, corpses would have small bread placed on their chest, which was thought to absorb the deceased's sins. The family in mourning would then hire a sin eater to eat the bread off of the corpse and cleanse the dead of their sins, leaving them renewed for heaven (Doughty 2020; Hensey 2019). Moreover, according to Lisa Rogak, some tribes in Bali use the same water used to wash a corpse to craft a rice pudding dish shaped to look like a corpse and served to mourners at a funeral, thus increasing the physical connection between the mourners and the deceased (Doughty 2020).

All of the previous examples I've given are instances of a recurring theme in the expressive culture of death, where we find that the consumption surrounding death, in some way, mirrors the transformative cycle of life and death. Life grows out of death, and healing comes after grief. The living die, decompose, and nourish the land that will then feed the still living. People and the relationships we have with them transform us and our lives. I first became interested in the transformative nature of the consumption of death to explain my fascination with cannibalism and how I believe it connects to daily life in more ways than simply consuming flesh. To me, the idea of cannibalizing people and things stems from a need to cope with the overwhelming feelings of grief that come with loss.

Alas, our time and bodies are borrowed in this world. However, like Icarus, humans are defiant creatures. We are emotional creatures, and we continuously build connections with those around us. When we lose them, we refuse to let them go. Our grief consumes us; our memories consume us. We do not exist solely in the current moment, for time is relative. We live in fragmented moments. The past, present, and future exist concurrently, so we cannot easily comprehend loss. In this act of defiance, we consume them and their memories and create memorials or food expressing our grief, sorrow, and love for others to consume them too. In this way, we immortalize them and essentially defy death. I am an amalgamation of moments and memories of people I love. I keep these people and memories alive by consuming and reproducing them—they shape me, and I shape them in the transformative circle of life and death.

A Student's Perspective

In the fall of 2019, I (Isaura Garcia) was a bright and curious incoming Honors College freshman at UNLV (University of Nevada at Las Vegas), eager to learn and apply whatever knowledge I could gather to make the world a better place. The people around me would describe me as cheery and optimistic, a ray of sunshine. I generally agree with this assessment from an etic perspective, but until this point, I had experienced my fair share of hardships. Like other high-achieving students, I struggled to cope with the stress of balancing school with extracurriculars, sports, and maintaining a social life. In myself, this stress manifested itself in the form of depression, suicidal ideation, and eating disorders.

Due to my struggles with mental illness, I have a complicated relationship with death and all things morbid. I never made a hard-stop attempt, but the idea of “flirting with death” stuck with me well into my formative years, especially as a way to give meaning to life. I never wanted to die necessarily, but instead, I came to view death as a tool or framework that contextualizes life and thus gives it meaning. Since then, I've been fascinated with everything related to death, though it was an interest I viewed as more of an unfortunate

inconvenience that I tried to hide away. I felt the uncomfortable ugliness of morbidity creeping out of my peripherals at the start of 2020. This paralyzing turmoil culminated during the lockdown period in March 2020, in which isolation forced me to stew in my thoughts and the COVID-19 news cycle and come to terms with my troubles and mortality. A year later, I was still grappling with this revelatory experience when I came across the class titled “The Expressive Culture of Death.”

My interest in the class was piqued partly because I was becoming more open to the idea of engaging with taboo subjects. I imagine many other honors students felt the same way. However, I am also an anthropology student, fascinated by different and diverse cultures, largely thanks to my experiences growing up in a Mexican-American household. Though death in America is primarily spoken about through whispers, Americans often tend to culturally appropriate the Mexican cultural holiday, Día de Los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, a vibrant celebration of life, death, and remembrance. The contrast between the vivacity of Día de Los Muertos and the overall eerie and hushed attitude toward death in the United States raised questions about how death is conceptualized and approached in different cultures. I love expressing and exploring my Mexican heritage, and part of that is participating in Día de Los Muertos celebrations. My cultural background and personal history combined to incite a general curiosity about cultures and death. This course was the perfect opportunity to study both of my interests in an incorporated manner, so I jumped at the chance to take it.

Like my interest in death, my interest in food is deeply rooted in my personal and cultural background. As I previously mentioned, I’ve had a sour relationship with food that culminated in a continuous struggle with various eating disorders. Though eating disorders are not always about food (often being more about control than anything else), they still kickstarted my obsession with food. During the Fall 2021 semester (the semester in which I took the course), I was severely struggling with my eating disorders but was aware of it and making a conscious effort to improve my relationship with food. Part of my personal healing effort was to engage with my cultural foods. The idea was to turn my focus away from calories and macros and emphasize tradition, history, and meaning associated with tasty cultural dishes. And our explorations of the different forms of expressive culture in this class helped me think about food in more nuanced ways. Sustenance, at the most basic level, is a way of warding off death. But food is not simply a way to provide sustenance and keep us alive; instead, it is a tradition. Food can be artistic; it can be historical; it can be expressive. It is often a material form of communication. Cultural dishes, in particular, go beyond nutrition. They are not merely functional aspects of human societies; they are cultural and behavioral phenomena that should be studied to understand and contextualize a culture.

Luckily for me, the course was flexible and encouraged discussion among the students, often veering toward whatever topic the students felt inclined to explore that week. In these discussions, my mind often wandered to food, and I thought that I could understand larger concepts when I viewed them through the lens of food or vice versa. At first, I thought it was strange, but as I shared my connections and gauged my peers’ responses, I grew more interested in utilizing food to explore and understand various forms of the

expressive culture of death. I found that most of the concepts discussed in class could be connected to food in one way or another, and once I figured it out, it was all I could see. Of course, one prime example is *pan de muerto* (a staple food for Día de Los Muertos celebrations), but other rituals or traditions are associated with food. Like all of the *charamuscas* (caramel mummies) sold by street vendors in Guanajuato, home of the Museo de las Momias (museum of mummies). Or the tradition of holding a *kermés*, a type of fundraising event where the families of a deceased loved one sell food to raise money to pay for funeral costs. With this context in mind, my connections to food in a class examining the expressive culture of death make more sense. Already armed with a heightened interest in food and culture, I constantly looked for ways to tie the expressive culture of death to cultural traditions surrounding death rituals and food.

Incidentally, during one of the discussion posts for the course, where we talked about funeral foods and cemeteries, I mentioned the idea of cannibalism. Cannibalism is one of the biggest taboos in cultures worldwide. Still, I began to notice that many cultural foods and food-related rituals related to death focused on the symbolic consumption of people or memories of people. There are some cultures where food is made to look like corpses or shaped like bones to represent the dead, like *pan de muerto*. Bringing up the notion of cannibalism understandably shocked a few of my classmates, but others engaged with my ideas and provided examples of food rituals that could be viewed as symbolic cannibalism. From this point on, I began to think of cannibalism as a way of mourning—a type of consumption of the person and everything they represented.

When it came time to pick a topic for the slidecast presentation, I immediately knew I wanted to do something related to food or symbolic cannibalism. By this point in the semester, I had regularly been making connections between whatever topics we were discussing that week and something related to cannibalism or food. It was almost like a personal challenge to see how often I could make connections between food and death, especially since, at the time, the two concepts seemed completely distant. Through my discussions of food and death in this course, I was interested not only in exploring my thoughts on how food and death are related but also in how others conceptualized and interacted with this connection.

The slidecast presentation was not simply about presenting a topic related to death; it was also about exploring how you personally engage with a form of expressive culture related to death. Since I already knew I wanted to incorporate the idea of cannibalism into my project, I found it difficult to connect to the topic. However, when I looked at expressive culture regarding food, I realized that symbolic cannibalism has always been a part of my life and culture. Growing up in a Catholic household, I was accustomed to regularly going to church and taking the holy communion, a symbolic representation of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. For Día de Los Muertos, I regularly made and consumed sugar skulls and *pan de muerto*, which I made in memory of my deceased family members. Without ever really thinking about it, I had been engaging in a dimorphic expression of grief and commemoration by consuming these religiously and culturally significant foods. Eating cultural foods symbolic of life and death is a form of reincorporation, of reinforcing social

bonds through communal meals, asserting collective identity, and keeping the deceased socially alive by maintaining their memory through the dishes we consume.

With this revelation in mind, I set out to create a slidecast that explained my interactions with food and death and challenged my peers to explore the roles that food may play in their lifelong experiences with death. Instead of focusing on cannibalism, I opted to focus on the transformative aspects of consumption. The concept of consumption is mainly about physical foods, but it also refers to how people engage with and “consume” the memories and lives of their loved ones through the consumption of specific foods. Food is thought to produce unity, closeness, and trust within a community—all of which holds true when the food in question is related to death. The widespread expressive culture of consumption surrounding death mirrors the transformative cycle of life and death.

Since taking the class in Fall 2021, I’ve found that it has contributed to the ways in which I observe and interact with my day-to-day life. The course taught me how to identify and analyze different forms of expressive culture, which are not necessarily related to death but I find most vivid when in the context of food. After all, food is one of the biggest dividers between life and death, so it makes sense why it is so culturally prominent concerning both realms. Historically, food is a significant way to build and reinforce community through its preparation, how it’s served, and how it’s eaten. Incidentally, I got a job as a baker in a well-respected Italian bakery, where I became responsible for preparing, presenting, and distributing food. Finding myself in an environment focused on preserving Italian food experiences and traditions has allowed me to continue engaging with and exploring the importance of food as a form of expressive culture.

I never intended to pursue a career in the culinary sector. I simply took the bakery job to help pay for my education. As I mentioned, I am studying anthropology with a focus on cultural anthropology. With this background and the analytical skills I gained in this class, I became more aware of the ties between food and expressive forms of culture. I recognize how a specific cultural group’s relationship with food parallels a culture’s ideals. For instance, the Italian bakery I work at strives to preserve the cultural ambiance of Italy, in which the meal period is valued and cherished as a time for refreshment and strengthening social bonds. This is in contrast to my observations of typical American ideals surrounding food in which meals are often seen as a chore that must be done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Previously, I’d planned to move to Mexico for a year to study different cultural practices. However, after taking the course and working in a culinary environment, I’ve begun to look into food anthropology and death studies. Compared to the United States, Mexico has a more vibrant and open cultural dialogue surrounding death. Death is present in everything from popular *corridos* (stories being told in song form) and *jaripeos* (Mexican events involving bull riding and dances) to the globally iconic Día de Los Muertos. I am interested in studying the function of food in perpetuating cultural norms and ways of conceptualizing death. For instance, *pan de muerto* is a cultural icon representative of Día de Los Muertos. It helps emphasize the cyclical nature of life and death as well as the duality of the body and soul through its symbolic shape. Additionally, there is an entire genre of songs in Mexico,

typically in the style of *corridos*, which revolve around death and parties, and typically discuss alcohol as a tool for transcending liminal spaces to connect with the dead. Songs like “Mi Ultima Caravana” (“My last Caravan”), for example, discuss the singer’s desire to be celebrated in his death and have his loved ones share one last drink with him to remember him by, while other songs like “A Traves Del Vaso” (“Through the Glass”) discuss the darker sides of alcoholism, in which it acts as a way for a grieving person to enter the liminal space and “see” their deceased loved one.

Coincidentally, shortly after beginning to write this piece in January of 2023, I had a last minute-opportunity to travel to Puebla, Mexico, to visit my dad’s family and explore some of the local universities that I am considering attending. During my ten-day visit there, I worked with a distant relative of mine who runs a small artisanal bakery near the heart of Chiautla de Tapia, Puebla. There, I learned how to make a variety of local bread from scratch, including my all-time favorite bread, a puffed-up round sweet bread with melted red sugar on top known as a *colorada* (colored) for its bright red tint. I knew of these from my first trip to my dad’s hometown and immediately became obsessed, but they are not well known outside of the area. Even within local Mexican stores and swap meets in the United States, not many people know of the *coloradas*, so I was ecstatic to have the chance to learn how to make them in the traditional way. Working in the bakery, I discovered that *coloradas* do not always have to take the form of a circle, but they can be made in the relative shape of a person. In this form, they are called *muertitos* (little dead people). They are made to order for those that maintain their familial *ofrendas* year round, each *muertito* a physical representation of a deceased loved one. It is worth noting that people tend to ascribe human qualities to foods, another substance that withers away like the individuals they symbolize.



Images 5 and 6. Photos of freshly baked *coloradas* and *muertitos* taken by Isaura Garcia, January 12, 2023.

In conclusion, I find that looking back, death and food have been integral to my life and culture. Even something as simple as my favorite childhood bread holds a significant connection to life and death. Yet, until taking the class on “The Expressive Culture of Death,” these concepts existed in the periphery of my mind. Learning how to identify and analyze expressive cultures in this class allowed me to view food as a tool for learning about and examining how we make and communicate meaning in our lives. Perhaps I could have had a similar revelation without the aid of this class but without it, I doubt that the connections I made between food and death would be nearly as strong and clear in my mind as they are now. From this revelatory learning experience, I’ve shifted my goals to focus on studying the powerful link of food as a way to create and perpetuate meaning, particularly (though certainly not exclusively) in the context of death.

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