

# The Eye

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**October 2023**

**Issue 131**

**FREE**

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# Editor's Letter

**"After my death, the molecules of my being will return to the earth and sky. They came from the stars. I am of the stars."**

**Charles Lindbergh**

**H**ow much time do you have left and what are you going to do with it? We live in a self-important era, where every opinion must be weighed against the cultural mainstream. A time when every kid gets a trophy lest their ego gets bruised. I don't think there has ever been a moment in humanity when the majority has been so vocal about what they deserve. The "sanctity" of human life has people taking extraordinary measures to continue to survive, as though any of us will get out alive.

I fell in love with camping this year. Not "pile a bunch of stuff into the car" kind of camping. "Packing a bag as lightly as possible, walking through the woods alone for hours, letting the silence of nature envelop me as I decide where to pitch my tent, having a bear canister" kind of camping. Watching the sky come into focus surrounded by trees is a powerful way to be reminded of what we are. We are but a sliver living on the surface of a planet in a huge galaxy. We haven't even explored the deepest depths of the ocean. We are a species that does a lot of whining compared to the other life we share this planet with and if we are significant at all in the bigger picture, it is with the power and speed with which we destroy things.



Things that remind me how insignificant I am fuel my passion for the world around me. I am always bravest and more creative after earthquakes or a little airplane turbulence. To be reminded of the fleetingness of our time is a gift, we are but dust.

Accepting our mortality is something we will all have to face. Coming to terms with the inevitability of death can help teach us to live more fully in the here and now. Consciousness of our mortality can enable us to cherish every moment of the life we have. What would you do if you only had a year left, a month, a week, a day, an hour? Time is the true currency we are spending.

This month our writers explore Death and the Afterlife through the lens of ancient cultures, politics and medicine. There are so many varied attitudes and ways of celebrating and honoring life/ death. There is no sense in arguing whose world view is correct, we will all find out eventually.

Make it count!

See you next month,

**Jane**



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# TO AIRBNB OR NOT TO AIRBNB - THAT IS THE QUESTION

What a wonderful world we live in today where travelers want to invest in the leap we took to become second home owners in paradise. If we chose the right property, we will have reached beyond just “covering costs” to discover a new income stream.

No doubt this holds great appeal but the question is, should you self-represent on AirBNB or is it worth using a professional rental management agency? Afterall, how hard can it be??

The concept of vacation rentals has been ingeniously oversimplified by the marketing powerhouse AirBNB. According to them, you take a few photos (iphone works fine), write a description (500 characters or less), be available to communicate with guests (24/7), make sure your home is in good repair and you're all set! Sounds easy enough.

In 2022, the global vacation rental market was estimated at over \$80B USD with the expectation that it would exceed \$110B USD in 2023. Today there are as many vacation rental rooms as traditional hotels and resort rooms around the world.

As this industry has grown so too have guest expectations, resulting in a continued battle between professionalization and the Do-It-Yourself approach.

Top agencies around the world, like those represented by The One Hundred Collection's Michelin-style guide employ teams of experts in hospitality, revenue management, marketing, sales, and accounting to service the skills required to compete on the global hospitality stage.

Borrowing from Malcolm Gladwell, it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert. If you're an owner looking to maximize the ROI on your vacation home, are you willing to invest the required time to understand this complex, multi-billion dollar industry, or will you put your trust behind those who have carved the path forward in this ever-evolving world of hospitality?

The following series will offer insights into the difference between the Do-It-Yourself approach and Professional Management by diving into topics such as commission structures, earning potential, guest experience management, and regulatory compliance.

Stay tuned for the second article in this series in the next edition of The Eye

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# Old Age No Longer Cause of Death

By Kary Vannice

In August of 2022, the World Health Organization took “old age” off the list of official causes of death. The council that reviews the International Classification of Diseases now recognizes the term, “aging-associated biological decline in intrinsic capacity,” in lieu of “old age.” There were various factors contributing to this reclassification, primary among them was that “old age” could be classified as “agism.”

## Vitality, Life, Death

So, while many of the considerations in this debate were sociopolitical, the new terminology is actually more accurate from a physiological and medical standpoint. The true cause of death in cases such as these is indeed biological decline, the loss of vitality from the body's organs and cells.

The word “vitality” is not something we give much thought to until we start getting older and experience loss of it. But what does “vitality” actually mean? The word vitality has its roots in Latin and means “vital life force,” or as others might define it, “energy,” something the modern western medical system doesn't often consider when treating biological decline.

Western medicine is fantastic at diagnosing and treating the symptoms of illness and disease, but mostly fails to consider the energetic root cause. Alternative medicine, on the other hand, looks beyond the symptoms to identify and treat energetic imbalances that lead to the expression of symptoms.

## Energy and Vibrational Therapy

Vibrational therapies are founded on the fundamental belief that the human body is not merely a collection of biological systems but a dynamic, interconnected matrix of energy and consciousness. From this perspective, health is seen as a state of balance and harmony within this energetic framework. When the body's energy flows smoothly and harmoniously through its various pathways and centers, it is better equipped to combat illness and maintain vitality.

Vibrational medicine acknowledges the intricate interplay of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects in an individual's well-being and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting better health and wellbeing.

And because energy practitioners delve beyond surface symptoms, into the unique energy patterns and imbalances of each person, they may offer more personalized care. This tailored approach not only fosters a deeper connection between the practitioner and the patient but also leads to more effective treatment plans that consider the individual's specific needs.

And it's no secret that many medical interventions come with a host of side effects. Vibrational therapies, on the other hand, offer a more non-invasive and low-risk approach, making them suitable options for individuals who seek treatments with fewer adverse effects or who may not respond favorably to conventional medical approaches.

## The Eye 6



Beyond merely addressing ailments, vibrational therapies aim to enhance overall well-being. Patients often report notable improvements in their energy levels, reduced stress, and a heightened sense of inner peace. This holistic well-being perspective resonates with those seeking more than just symptom relief but rather a deeper and more harmonious connection with their own vitality.

## Extending the Range of Healing

Alternative therapies serve as a vital bridge between conventional and holistic healthcare approaches, providing patients with a more extensive range of healing modalities. With an understanding that physical health is deeply intertwined with energetic balance, embracing the concept of overall vitality and holistic well-being paves the way for exploring the diverse alternative healing options available in the Costa Chica of Oaxaca. In next month's issue, I'll be sharing several alternative healing options that are available in various communities along the picturesque Oaxacan coast.

***Kary Vannice is an energetic healer who practices a form of vibrational medicine called **The Body Code** which restores balance, energetic flow, and well-being to the body. Find out more on her website - <https://bookme.name/KaryVannice/>***

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# The Entrance to the Underworld Is Here in Oaxaca

By Brooke O'Connor

The entrance to the underworld is here in Oaxaca, and now we can prove it!

## The Mitla Ruins: Home to Multiple Cultures

Approximately an hour's drive from Oaxaca City is Mitla. The name Mitla comes from the Nahuatl word *Mictlan*, which means “underworld” or “place of rest” in Zapotec, a Nahuatl language still spoken widely in the region. The Zapotecs emerged from the agricultural communities of the central valleys of Oaxaca, building their capital at Monte Alban (approximately where the state capital, Oaxaca de Juárez, is now); the Zapotec civilization flourished at Monte Alban from about 500 BCE to 900 CE.

At that time, perhaps driven out by their neighbors to the west, the Mixtec, the Zapotecs created a new capital at Mitla. Mitla dates to about 100 CE, but may be much earlier; its earliest extant buildings are from about 450 CE. Its ruins are perfect examples of geometric stone architecture that tell stories of a culture steeped in tradition.

Mitla is considered the main religious center of pre-Hispanic culture in the area; both Zapotecs and Mixtecs frequented this “religious metropolis.” John M.D. Pohl, an archeologist at Cal State at LA, has written extensively on the paintings on doorway lintels at Mitla. His analysis has identified the creation tales of three distinct cultures: the eastern Nahuatl, the Mixtecs from Apoala, and the Zapotecs from Zaachila.

Eventually these cultures weakened in influence and came under the rule of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma. When the Spanish arrived in 1520, Moctezuma welcomed them to Tenochtitlan (Mexico City), only to see virtually all of Mexico conquered and colonized within a year.

## Mitla and the Spanish

Here's where the plot thickens.

In 1552, after the conquest, Mitla was ordered to be destroyed, as were many indigenous religious centers. In 1590, Dominican missionaries began building the church of San Pablo Apóstol (St. Paul the Apostle) atop a platform left by the earlier demolition. They documented how, during construction, they had sealed off the entrances of a labyrinth beneath it.

Francisco de Burgoa, born in Oaxaca around 1600, had joined the Dominican order in 1629; he became a “chronicler,” or historian; in 1674 he wrote about Mitla in a broad-ranging geography that included the “*Sito astronómico de esta Provincia de Predicadores de Antequera, Valle de Oaxaca*” – the astronomical site of the Province of Preachers of Antequera (Oaxaca de Juárez) in the Valley of Oaxaca.



He described an extensive cavity in the earth at Mitla. When the missionaries went to explore, they found that

such was the corruption and bad smell, the dampness of the floor, and a cold wind which extinguished the lights, that at the little distance, they had already penetrated ... they resolved to come out, and ordered this infernal gate to be

thoroughly closed with masonry.

The Dominicans sealed all entrances to the tunnel network; the Zapotecs had called the labyrinth *Lyobaa*, or “place of rest” – i.e., the underworld.

The royal Zapotecs were said to have been buried in Mitla in cruciform graves that were directly beneath the flooring, according to a legend passed down to the Spanish. The Spanish further reported the existence of a Zapotec priest who resembled the Catholic Pope. He was known as the *vuijatao*, or “Great Seer.” People would travel from all across Oaxaca Valley to consult with the *vuijatao*, seeking prophecies, judicial opinions, and contact with their departed relatives. The *vuijatao* lived in what is now called the Group of Columns, where the burial chambers for the highest levels of royalty were located. Families would bring their mummified monarchs to be buried among the columns, where the *vuijatao* could speak with them.

Mitla's multiethnic past demonstrates that holiness transcends cultural boundaries. What was formerly the residence of the Zapotec patron deities of death and the underworld is now the residence of twenty-one Catholic patron saints. Every year, the procession for Saint Paul begins within the ruins, with the bulk of the town present. Some locations never lose their sacred meaning.

## What's the Latest?

Now in late summer of 2023, we have some solid and scientific answers from *Proyecto Lyobaa: Estudio geofísico del subsuelo en Mitla, Oaxaca* (Project Lyobaa: Geophysical study of the subsoil at Mitla, Oaxaca). The project is a collaboration among the Mexican National Institute of History and Anthropology (INAH), the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and the Association for Archaeological Research and Exploration (ARX Project).

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Results from Stage 1 of Project Lyobaa have been released. An archeological team used ground penetrating radar, electrical resistive tomography, and seismic noise tomography for non-intrusive visualization; they combined these results to produce a three-dimensional model of the underground. They discovered extensive rooms and passageways 5 to 8 meters (a bit more in yards) underneath the church of San Pablo, along with evidence of an ancient temple and a giant cavern, right underneath the main altar of the Catholic church.

According to The ARX Project report on the 2022 season of Project Lyobaa,

These findings will help rewrite the history of the origins of Mitla and its development as an ancient site, as well as providing valuable information for the management and prevention of seismic and geological risk in the area.

Stage 2 of Project Lyobaa has already begun; the schedule includes more geophysical scans in other groups of structures. Researchers will work to confirm the existence of further subterranean rooms and passageways, as well as to provide information to mitigate structural risks to the Mitla ruins.

Whenever burial sites like this are rediscovered, uncovered, or tampered with, it opens the imagination to another Hollywood blockbuster. Let's hope the writers integrate modern Zapotecs and Mixtecs into not just the storyline for accuracy, but as the main actors in the movie.



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# The Afterlife and the Mexican Revolution

By Randy Jackson

Concepts of the afterlife have shaped culture and behavior throughout human history, from the building of the Pyramids of Egypt, to the celebration of Día de los Muertos today. Whatever we think the afterlife is “like,” including the materialist concept of no afterlife at all, influences our worldview and how we interact with other people.

## From Heaven and Hell to Spiritism

Western thought regarding the afterlife has evolved through time. The concepts of Heaven and Hell did not exist in early Christianity. Christian dogma evolved from the belief in an afterlife of deep sleep until the final judgment at the end of time. Over the centuries Heaven and Hell became eternal rewards or punishments based on the conduct of humans during their time on earth. This concept remained foundational through the centuries. Then in the late 1800's, a movement that became known as Spiritism (Spiritualism in the U.S.), arose first in Europe and spread throughout the world, particularly among the elite and educated classes. Spiritism held a belief that the afterlife was a continuity of individual consciousness, a concept similar to Eastern religious thought. Spiritism also held the concept that spirits in the afterlife could be communicated with.

One adherent of this view was Francisco Madero, the elected president of Mexico after the downfall of Porfirio Díaz. Madero may have channeled the spirit of Benito Juárez for advice in the early days of the Mexican Revolution.

## Madero and the Rise of Spiritism

For a variety of reasons, Spiritism flourished in popularity around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A turn away from the orthodoxy of mainstream religion was a particularly strong cause in the United States. New religions, such as Mormonism and the Seventh Day Adventist Church, were founded in this period, in what is known as the “Second Great Awakening,” a religious revival movement in the U.S. (c. 1795-1835). (The original “Great Awakening” was similar and started in Great Britain, flourishing in the colonies from the 1730s-1770s.)



Another factor that moved western thought towards a different view of the afterlife was the groundbreaking publication in 1859 of “The Origin of Species” by Charles Darwin. The acceptance that life arose on earth through a natural process rather than divine creation was an intellectual paradigm shift that is still reverberating today. Spiritism, fully embracing evolution as a concept, holds that evolution of individual consciousness continues in the afterlife.

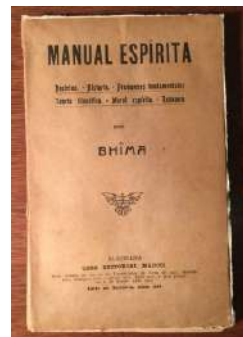
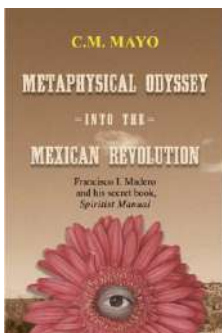
The spiritual beliefs of Francisco Madero were consistent with these concepts. Francisco Ignacio Madero González (1873-1913) was from one of the wealthiest Mexican families of the time. He was educated in France and the United States. In the international educated elite circles where Madero moved, the concepts of Spiritism were widely held. The Spiritist held that there were seven hierarchical realms in the afterlife; Spiritism postulated lower “hell-like” realms, up to realms very much like our physical realm, through to higher angelic realms, and ultimately a realm where individual consciousness (the soul) merged with the divine.

This afterlife view of Spiritism, in which individual consciousness can evolve to higher realms, is fundamentally intertwined with the concept of reincarnation. But reincarnation back into our physical realm wasn't seen as something that happened immediately. Rather, there is time between lives where spirits are believed to exist in the afterlife realm of their evolutionary attainment. This “between lives” period of the afterlife enables mediums to connect to the spirit of the deceased. In the case of Madero's mediumship, most of his initial contact, he believed, was with his younger brother Raul, who had died at age three.

In 2011 (paperback 2014), C.M. Mayo published [\*Metaphysical Odyssey into the Mexican Revolution: Francisco I. Madero and His Secret Book, Spiritist Manual\*](#). In numerous interviews about the work, she makes the point that Madero's spiritual beliefs are fundamental in understanding the motivations and actions of the person who is credited with initiating the Mexican Revolution.

## Madero's Spiritism and the Mexican Revolution

In 1908, Madero published *La sucesión presidencial en 1910*, after the long-serving president and dictator, Porfirio Díaz announced in an interview with American journalist James Creelman, that Mexico was ready for democracy and that he would retire in 1910. Díaz subsequently changed his mind, Madero organized the anti-reelection opposition, Díaz had Madero imprisoned, and proceeded to rig the election for yet another term. Madero escaped from prison and while residing in San Antonio, Texas, wrote a manifesto, the “Plan of San Luis Potosí,” considered the founding document of the Mexican Revolution. (Recall that the Mexican Revolution was more of a series of regional conflicts than a clear war; it might have ended in 1917, with the establishment of the Mexican Constitution, but fighting continued on for years.) Madero's writing led to the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz and Madero's winning the interim presidential election of 1911.



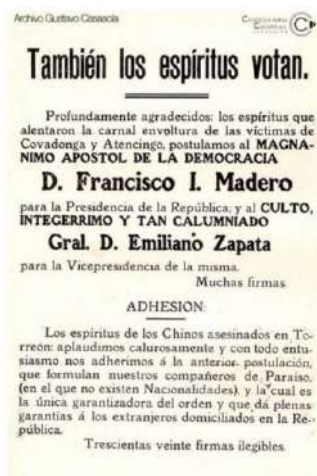


Historians have given Francisco Madero a couple of significant titles: “Apostle of Democracy” and “Father of the Revolution.” He has been frequently described as having been a decent and honest man. In 2013, Michael Benjamin Amoruso, a doctoral student at the University of Texas in Austin, published a paper for the American Academy of Religion annual meeting, “A Transcendental Mission: Spiritism and the Revolutionary Politics of Francisco I. Madero, 1900-1911.” (The author is now an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Occidental University in Los Angeles). Amoruso argued that Madero “understood his political action as the earthly component of spiritual struggle.” Madero expresses a

prescriptive Spiritist vision, in which democracy represents a triumph of human's "higher nature" over the "base, selfish passions" of Porfirio Díaz and his regime.

In his memoir, Madero wrote that beings in the afterlife instructed him in moral and spiritual matters. The political documents that launched the ousting of Porfirio Díaz were likely channeled from a source noted by Madero as “Jose.” Other journals from his channeled works were noted as being from “BJ,” considered by some to be Benito Juárez, the president of Mexico who preceded Porfirio Díaz.

Madero's beliefs and practices of Spiritism were not a secret in Mexican society of the time. There were cartoons in Mexico City newspapers lampooning the president performing seances; the press described Madero as a “*loco que se comunicaba con los muertos*” (a madman who talks with the dead). In 1913, a segment of the army rebelled against Madero, and General Victoriano Huerta joined them. Huerta had risen to General under Porfirio Díaz, and Madero apparently did not completely trust him but felt he needed him.



The rebellion resulted in a coup d'etat – aided by the U.S. – against Madero; Huerta had Madero and his Vice-President, José María Pino Suárez, murdered in an alley within the week. Madero was 39; Suárez 44. The New York weekly newspaper *The Sun* trumpeted huge headlines: “MADERO AND SUAREZ SHOT DEAD ON WAY TO PRISON.” Madero's overthrow and execution seemed to have nothing to do with his beliefs in the evolution of individuals across lifetimes towards a selfless growth in divine love. His fate was rather a raw power grab by Huerta.

I can't imagine that Madero and Huerta ended up in the same realm in anyone's version of the afterlife.

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# Day of the Dead and Sukkot: Dead Ringers?

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

When we first were in Mexico for Day of the Dead (an autumn more than 25 years ago), we had the feeling of *deja vu* or, more appropriately, *ya hemos visto*. No, not because of the superficial similarity with Halloween. As we were escorted around a cemetery by a proud local resident who explained Day of the Dead customs and told stories about the members of his family who were interred there, we were struck by the similarities with the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

Both Sukkot and Day of the Dead are autumn festivals. Both have been celebrated for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The celebration of Sukkot is described in the Torah, aka the Old Testament (OT), partial copies of which have been scientifically dated from around 500 BCE. Although Day of the Dead may not be quite as old, there's reportedly archeological evidence that the celebration occurred centuries before the Spanish began colonizing the Americas in 1493. Both holidays should actually be called holy days since there is a deeply spiritual significance for both practices – and these holy days (two days for Day of the Dead and eight for Sukkot) are synonymous with the practices in many ancient tribal cultures of providing thanks to divine beings for that autumn's agricultural harvest.

Both holy days involve building a relatively small temporary structure. The Day of the Dead altar, or *ofrenda*, has three distinct levels. The sukkah, or booth of Sukkot, is defined by three walls. The top level



of the *ofrenda* is an open arch and the top of the sukkah must be open to the sky. The building and decorating of both structures is commonly communal and cooperative. Flowers, especially marigolds in Mexico, are generally brought from individual and community gardens to beautify the *ofrenda* and sukkah.

Both structures are viewed as portals through which ancestors can visit the living, or at least the living can remember and honor the memory of deceased relatives. The *ofrenda*, as the name implies, provides a table for holding food and drink preferred by deceased relatives along with photos of the dearly departed. The sukkah walls are traditionally decorated with pictures of ancient ancestors – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah and Rachel – plus, in more modern times, photographs of more recent forebears. A table is set up in the sukkah where foods made from favorite recipes from previous generations are served.

Prayers and spiritual ceremonies are an important element of both Sukkot and Day of the Dead. Subsequent to the conversion to Catholicism of the indigenous people of Mexico by the Spanish conquerors, it is not surprising that Day of the Dead prayers ask for blessings on the souls of the departed in the name of Jesus Christ. But more ancient elemental spiritual Day of the Dead ceremonies focus on fire, water, earth and wind. Sukkot prayers and ceremonies also include these elements: fire in the form of candle lighting, water in prayers for rain, earth in the form of the branches of three plants (palm, myrtle, and willow) that are bound together to form a *lulav* and are held together with an *etrog* (citron), and wind created by shaking the *lulav* in all four directions plus up toward the heavens and down towards the earth.



At first glance, both observances appear to be grave in tenor. Day of the Dead ceremonies take place in cemeteries, both Holy Days take place at the time of year when flora and fauna are entering their dormant stage, days are growing shorter and darker, and the focus is on dead ancestors. But both Day of the Dead and Sukkot observances are joyous. In fact, Jews and everyone in their communities are literally commanded in the Torah (OT) to be happy. And, as part of the joy, both Holy Days involve storytelling, music and dancing.

Another shared practice is feasting with family and friends. Foods are distinctly ethnic but fundamentally similar. Bread is an essential component; aside from the addition of anise, *Pan de Muertos* (bread of the dead) resembles the challah served on Sukkot – they have virtually the same ingredients and much the same taste. At both holy feasts, it's common to serve seasonal fruits and vegetables seasoned with sweeteners, as well as stuffed ancestral foods: *kreplach* (little dumplings stuffed with seasoned chopped meat) for Sukkot and *tamales* for Day of the Dead. Children of both cultures enjoy candied apples – albeit decorated as skulls for Day of the Dead.

Perhaps these similarities are based on the core principle of both observances – the realization that life on Earth is temporary, that one day we will all join our ancestors. And the hope in both cultures is that just as we remember those who came before us, we in turn will be remembered for good by those who come after us.



# The Eye Lecture Series

We are very excited to be reintroducing our The Eye Lecture Series. These are in-person gatherings where we can discuss some of the topics we cover in the magazine as well as enjoy lectures by experts.

The lectures are held at Café Juanita in Tangolunda from 5pm-6:30pm on the first and third Wednesday of the month.

Wednesday, November 1,  
5pm-6:30pm

We will be exploring making tamales and an altar for Day of the Dead!

Wednesday, November 15,  
5pm-6:30pm  
TBA

Wednesday, December 6,  
5pm-6:30pm  
Birds of Oaxaca led by bird guide  
Cornelio

Wednesday, December 20,  
5pm-6:30pm  
Coffee- Mantoniebla coffee  
producers from Pluma

**These events are FREE and open to all!**

**Please reserve so that we know how many to expect.**

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**Fantastic day!!**

**Review: Seafood Cooking Class**

*This was something we wouldn't have gravitated to but through our stay and play we were provided the opportunity to take part in Jane's cooking class. We are so glad we did. Jane is incredibly friendly and relatable. She is warm and welcoming. She's a wealth of knowledge.*

**Guys loved this too !**

**Review: Street Food Class**

*We had a fantastic time with this class. We also learned a lot about the area culture through its food. Jane is a terrific host and teacher. I would say that all of the guys who got talked into joining the class ended up enjoying it just as much as the girls! I know I did!*

**Wonderful Oaxaca experience**

**Review: Mama's Kitchen**

*If you really want to learn about the wonderful tastes of Oaxaca, please do a cooking class with Jane. Not only do you get to make the most wonderful tasting food, you learn all the history around it. She picks you up from your hotel and whisks you off to her place of paradise. Her kitchen is spotless, all your ingredients are there, ready for you to prepare. I did the mole class, it was my second class with her. It was the highlight of my holiday. If you love to cook, which I do, you will gain knowledge. Or just go and eat wonderful food and drink the riches that you prepared under Jane's perfect instruction.*

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# Into The Stretch: Year-End 2023 Notable Novels

By Carole Reedy

Catch up on your reading now, because the last few months of this year are filled with new works from our favorite writers.

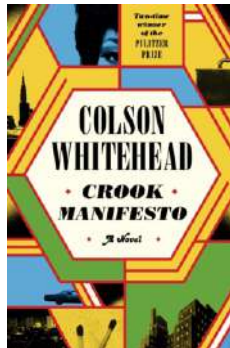
But who's missing? Donna Tartt fans are combing the web in search of her next book. It seems she publishes one every ten years: 1992, *The Secret History*; 2002, *The Little Friend*; 2013, *The Goldfinch*. 2023? Tartt's novels are long and lush with unforgettable plots that twist and turn. They always feature vivid characters and an imaginative writing style that captures the reader from the start. My search for her next work has been unsuccessful as of this writing.

In better news, here's a selection of new books that have been published or will soon be during the second half of 2023. This list includes some of my favorite writers and, judging from your messages to me, yours too.

Provocatively, there are three books of short stories on this list. I consider myself and readers of this column literary novel admirers, but these brilliant collections just may just have turned my head.

## [Crook Manifesto: A Novel, by Colson Whitehead](#) [Second book in the Harlem Trilogy](#)

This is Whitehead's second novel in his *Harlem Trilogy*. While you can enjoy *Crook Manifesto* on its own, for maximum pleasure take time to read *Harlem Shuffle* (2021) first. I like to call the *Trilogy* Whitehead's love story to Harlem. This second novel takes place in 1976 as the bicentennial celebrations are in full swing. However, it's business as usual for crooked politicians and the manipulation of the poor and disadvantaged by up-and-coming "wannabes."



Ray Carney, everyone's favorite furniture vendor, seems to find himself once again in the midst of the machinations of less-than-savory company, including a shady candidate for political office who is ironically actively supported by Ray's wife Elizabeth. Ray's family has a welcome presence in this second book, and we hope will again in the third.

Delightfully dark and mysterious characters, though tinted with affection, sprinkle the text. This is Whitehead's magic: he gives us the harsh reality of Harlem from the inside out. He goes to the heart of the city, as well as to the heart of his characters, offering a glimpse into the soul of the 'hood and the denizens who struggle there daily.

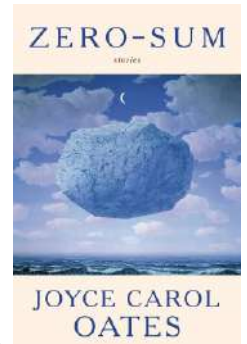
## [Zero-Sum: Stories, by Joyce Carol Oates](#)

Despite more than 100 extant novels, short story collections, nonfiction books, and essays, Oates delivers every year new creations to equal and even surpass her past successes.

Oates is audacious and intrepid, conveying that which often goes unsaid. Her latest collection does just that with a wide range of characters, emotions, and settings in place and time.

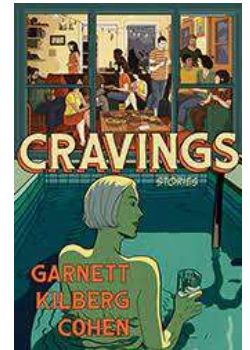
The most memorable of these is a story called "The Suicide," told from the point of view of the one attempting to commit it. He mesmerizes us with his confusion, determination, apprehension, and pain.

Three other stories especially will remain with us and even haunt our dreams. We who have experienced a pandemic now have visions of our future world. Oates delivers a triad of stories about the future years of our planet. Need I say more?



## [Cravings: Stories, by Garnett Kilberg Cohen](#)

Garnett Cohen popped into my life several years when a Chicago friend gifted me her novella, *How We Move the Air* (2010). A collection of seven linked stories, it was an unusual and stunning read in many ways, leaving me craving (no pun intended) more from this author. Since then I've religiously read Cohen's collections of short stories as well as her individual works published in a diverse range of magazines. I and my band of avid readers highly recommend her short story collection *Swarm to Glory* (2014).



Through the details of everyday life, Cohen opens up a character's world. The slightest phrase evokes a flood of emotions. At one point I felt, "This author knows me; I feel this way too." There is good variety in the selection of these stories: they'll make you laugh, cry, or just sigh. Like Joyce Carol Oates, she can be dauntless, an admirable and necessary quality in a writer.

Thoughts of Proust and involuntary memory come to mind when reading these stories. From the end of "Hors d'oeuvres," the first story: "Our memories travel with us over the years, popping up when least expected." As an avid traveler, I love to think of my memories traveling with me, at home and abroad.

I would have liked to point to my favorite story from the collection, but I can't. I admired them all, each in its own way.



### [Roman Stories, by Jhumpa Lahiri](#)

Many of us were crushed a few years ago when Lahiri announced she was moving to Italy to write and publish her future books in Italian. This endeavor proved successful, and we've now been rewarded for our patience. Lahiri has created an homage, a collection of short stories where the main personage is the magical city of Rome. She wrote these stories in Italian and translated them to English with Knopf editor Todd Portnowitz.



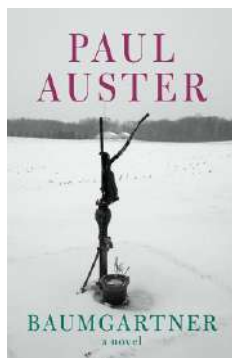
Kirkus gives the collection a starred review, praising this new work from a veteran writer: “A brilliant return to the short story by an author of protean accomplishments ... filled with intelligence and sorrow, these sharply drawn glimpses of Roman lives create an impressively unified effect.”

This is Lahiri's first short story collection since she published *Unaccustomed Earth* in 2008.

It's also appropriate to mention here Lahiri's first novel written in Italian, which she then translated into English. Called *Whereabouts* (2021), it consists of 46 chapters, or rather entries into a diary, that are one woman's reflections on her life. Highly praised by critics and a definite thumbs-up from me.

### [Baumgartener, by Paul Auster](#)

One never knows what to expect from this icon whose repertoire over 38 years always surprises and never disappoints. His range of subject matter is vast, as are the style and breadth of his 18 novels.



This newest asks, “Why do we remember certain moments in our lives and not others?” The protagonist is a soon-to-be retired philosophy professor and phenomenologist. Auster's prose takes us on a literary journey with characters Sy Baumgartner, his dead wife Anna, and his Polish-born father, a dressmaker and revolutionary.

This is his first novel since the extraordinary *4 3 2 1: A Novel* was published in 2017.

Recently, Siri Hustvedt, Auster's renowned philosopher/author wife, posted on Instagram that Auster is suffering from cancer and being treated with chemotherapy and infusions. As a fan since 1972, this news breaks my heart.

### [Day, by Michael Cunningham](#)

It's difficult to contemplate writer Michael Cunningham without conjuring up thoughts of an equally imposing author, the illustrious Virginia Woolf. Cunningham resurrected the memory of Virginia Woolf with his Pulitzer-winning novel *The Hours: A Novel* (2019). In *The Hours*, Cunningham relates moments in the life of Woolfe through three separate characters and stories. It is a tour de force that will haunt you long after you finish it.

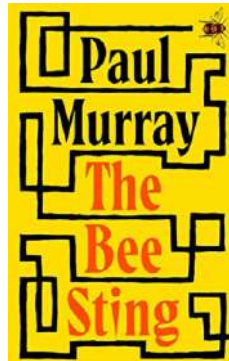


In his newest novel, Cunningham takes us through three days (April 5 in 2019, 2020, and 2021) in the lives of a New York family.

The highest praise comes from another famous writer, Colum McCann (*Let the Great World Spin*, 2009) “Michael Cunningham crafts a glorious sentence, and at the same time he tells an achingly compelling story that speaks precisely to the times we live in. And it all flows so damn gorgeously that at times you just want to suspend the sacred day itself and hold it close, never let it, or the characters, go.”

### [The Bee Sting: A Novel, by Paul Murray](#)

Rave reviews everywhere. Long waitlists at the library that include yours truly. The Los Angeles Times calls it a masterpiece, saying “it ought to cement Murray's already high standing...it's a triumph of realist fiction, a big, sprawling social novel in the vein of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. The agility with which Murray structures the narrative around the family at its heart is virtuosic and sure-footed, evidence of a writer at the height of his power deftly shifting perspectives, style and syntax to maximize emotional impact. Hilarious and sardonic, heartbreaking and beautiful.”

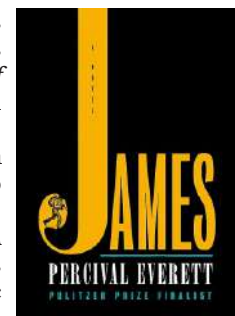


Plus a sneak preview ...

### **March 2024**

### [James, by Percival Everett](#)

Move over *Demon Copperhead*, *James* is coming. Everett reworks Mark Twain's classic novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884 in the UK, 1885 in the US) in this most anticipated novel. We'll be eager to see if he can accomplish what Barbara Kingsolver was able to achieve in her brilliant and award-winning novel *Demon Copperhead: A Novel* (2022), which possesses the bones and heart of the beloved Dickens classic *David Copperfield*.



Percival Everett's most recent books include *Dr. No: A Novel* (2022, finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award), *The Trees: A Novel* (2021, finalist for the Booker Prize and the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award), and *Telephone* (2021, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize).

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# 5 things @La Punta, Puerto Escondido

by Jane Bauer



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2. Morning Surf or Sunrise

3. Shop at Areca Home Design. This shop is a compilation of stunning pieces that showcase Mexican design. [@areca\\_homedesign](#)

4. Coffee at Malagua. There are loads of places to get a great cup of coffee but we like this one because they showcase coffee from Pluma Hidalgo and have a great space to sit and enjoy. [@malaguacafe](#)

5. Eat at Sommo- Sushi and Cocktails!  
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# We Are, Indeed, Stardust

By Julie Etra

We are stardust, we are golden  
We are billion-year-old carbon  
And we got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden.

— Joni Mitchell, chorus to the song “Woodstock” (1969)

We are stardust brought to life, then empowered by the universe  
to figure itself out—and we have only just begun.”

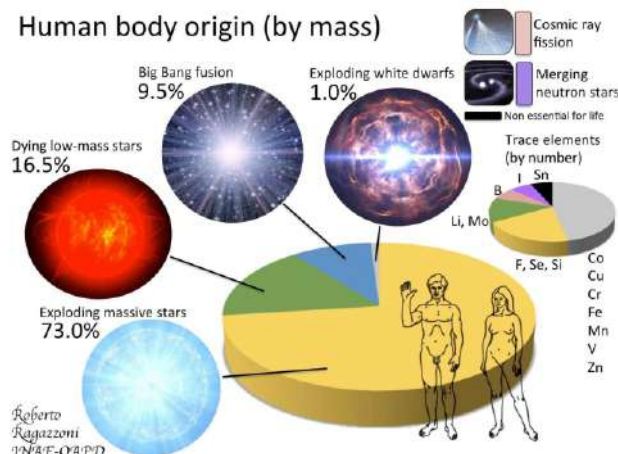
— Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* (2017)

It is totally 100% true: nearly all the elements in the human body  
were made in a star and many have come through several supernovas.

— Ashley J. King, Ph.D., planetary scientist at the Museum of Natural History, London

Most of the elements of our bodies were formed in stars over the course of billions of years and multiple star lifetimes. It's even possible that some of our hydrogen (which makes up roughly 9.5% of our bodies) and lithium, which our body contains in very tiny trace amounts (sorry, Elon, not cost effective), originated from the Big Bang. All this may be hard for some people to accept, the fact that we consist of elements of recycled stars. As visitors to or residents of Mexico, how do Mexicans think of this?

Human body origin (by mass)



In the Aztec civilization, centered around the capital of Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City), three basic types of pyramids existed: the Twin Stair Pyramid, the Single Stair Pyramid, and the Round Pyramid. Twin and Single Stair Pyramids were four-sided constructions with a single or double staircase on one side. This staircase always faced west, which the Aztecs believed was the place where the sun descended into the underworld. These pyramids comprised four main platforms and a final fifth level containing one or two temples.

## What did pre-Hispanic cultures think about the stars?

Numerous ancient (and not so ancient) cultures looked to the sky with wonder and perhaps puzzlement; the sky of course was the source of many origin stories: gods, goddesses, legends about the stars, what or who they were, and what they represented. In many ancient cultures, people believed that gods dwelt outside the realm of human experience, and that temples bridged the gap between the human and the divine, expediting access to their deities. This was true in Mexico, particularly among the Aztecs. In their architectural design, they mimicked what happened during the creation of the world as they knew it.

The Mayans had a sophisticated sacred calendar based on the stars. Days and months were represented by small glyphs ("the specific shape, design, or representation of a character") and drawings. Chichen Itza, one of the most famous Mayan communities, included an observatory perfectly oriented towards the stars, the planets, and the cosmos. They believed that the history of their people was cyclical and was repeated according to the position of the stars in the sky. The 260-day calendar sacred to the Maya was governed by the path of Venus.

The temples were set back from the stairs and impossible to see from ground level, creating an illusion that the temples resided in the heavens. They were enormous in order to be as close as possible to the gods residing in the heavens. The Nahua people, who included the Aztecs, Chichimecas, and Toltecs, believed that the heavens had 13 levels, usually called *topan* ("above us" or "the beyond"), with one to many gods living on any given level.

## Closer to home (Huatulco)

The Zapotec culture's preeminent population, agricultural, and religious center, Monte Alban, located in the Central Valleys on the outskirts of present-day Oaxaca City, was inhabited between 500 B.C.E. and approximately 900 C.E., when it was abandoned. At an elevation of 1940 m (6400 ft) above mean sea level, Monte Alban rises 400 m (1300 ft) from the valley floor. It was one of the first urban centers established in Mesoamerica. In the pre-Hispanic era, the three valleys were settled due to the rich soil and numerous productive rivers and intermittent drainages descending from the mountains. The valleys and eventually the flanks of the man-made plateau of Monte Alban were cultivated to support the growing population. Eventually, an estimated peak population of 35,000 resided among the temples, residences, and ballcourts.



Last winter, we learned from our elderly and sage local guide, Nezahualcōyotl (named after the scholar/poet/engineer who appears on the 100-peso bill), there was also a medical facility. Nezahualcōyotl referred me to some supporting documentation that postulated that the figures known as the *danzantes* (dancers) were in fact patients at a clinic, and their antic postures represented various maladies.

The ancient city was built on a site conducive to observing the celestial heavens, innately tied to the culture, since agriculture and other activities of daily life depended on the study and understanding of the stars. In Oani Báa, (Zapotec for Monte Alban), one of the first buildings to be built in the main square was Building I, a Mesoamerican observatory, erected to follow the movement of the stars, the moon, and the sun. The majority of the temples faced east or west, aligning with the sun's path. The entire city was itself a great astronomical observatory, and for about 1400 years the population observed the constellations and planets and perfected their calendars.

The Zapotecs, particularly the priests or shamans, were aware of alternative "realities," discovered through the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs, particularly mushrooms, that allowed for communication with the gods. They were purported to practice "astral travel" and to be able to predict the future. The first time my husband and I visited the ruins in 2007, our guide explained (or hypothesized?) that priests would demonstrate their superhuman powers to the masses by disappearing through one of the underground tunnels and emerging on the opposite side of the temple. This would support the Zapotec belief that the sun, after hiding in the west, passed through the interior of the Earth and came out in the east, and thus the priests were able to follow or accompany the sun. (I have read several references to this "spectacle," and if true it would have helped ensure the commoner's awe of, and respect for, the ruling religious class.)

Around 1325 CE, the Mixtecs, coming from the north, invaded the valley of Oaxaca and re-occupied the site, along with the city of Mitla to the east.

Off topic, but interesting, the current conditions in the Central Valleys do not even vaguely resemble what it looked like in pre-Hispanic or post-Conquest/colonial time. Today the valley is somewhat denuded, and prominently marked by erosion; there are large stands of agave (mezcal or tequila, anyone?) and numerous large greenhouses.

When the Zapotec civilization emerged, although the climate was semi-arid as it is today, oak and pine woodlands covered the surrounding mountains (now decimated by logging). During the dry season from November until May, cultivation continued along the rivers, employing sophisticated systems of irrigation canals. It was through these systems, connecting to small streams, that water was provided to Monte Alban; archaeologists have found remains of a small irrigation system consisting of a dam and a canal on the south-eastern flank of the mountain. As there were no domesticated beasts of burden at that time, water and other supplies were most likely carried on the backs of peasants from the flanks of the mountain up to the city.

#### **A little about the Zapotec *inframundo* (underworld)**

A recent archaeological discovery about the underworld has been made in Mitla, a Zapotec religious center located east and south of present-day Oaxaca City (see Brooke O'Connor's article elsewhere in this issue). A consortium of researchers discovered an extensive labyrinth beneath a colonial Catholic church – the temple of Lyobaa (Zapotec for "place of rest"). This ancient underground site is thought to be what the Zapotecs knew as the entrance to the underworld.

The ARX Project, a member of the research consortium, issued a report on the first year of investigation (2022); the report contains a description written by Francisco de Burgoa, a Dominican historian, at the time the church was built atop the Mitla ruins, noting that the site was

a vast subterranean temple consisting of four interconnected chambers, containing the tombs of the high priests and the kings of Teozapotlán. From the last subterranean chamber, a stone door led into a deep cavern extending thirty leagues below ground. This cavern was intersected by other passages like streets, its roof supported by pillars.

Although it was sealed off by Spanish missionaries centuries ago as part of the conquest and efforts to eliminate perceived pagan practices, rumors of its existence persisted for centuries. Recent high-tech methods were used to re-discover this archaeologically significant site.

#### **An ancient legend of the stars**

Finally, as a bittersweet ending, I have translated a Zapotec legend about the stars and cosmos, *El Príncipe y la Estrella* (The Prince and the Star). The original appears on the website *Mexican Myths and Legends* maintained by anthropologist Sonia Iglesias of the Mexican government's General Directorate of Popular, Indigenous, and Urban Cultures (<https://www.mitos-mexicanos.com/tag/xtagabne>).

In the pre-Hispanic times of the Zapotec kingdom, there lived a warrior prince who was known for being very handsome and brave. His fame was not only known on Earth but also in Heaven. Alba (Dawn) learned of the extraordinary princely feats and related them to the daughters of the Lord of Heaven, who were actually stars.

The most beautiful of the goddess-daughter-stars fell madly in love with the warrior prince and descended to Earth, sitting patiently next to the river that flowed through Juchitán, waiting for the handsome young man to pass by. He arrived at the place where the star was waiting, and captivated by her beauty, immediately fell in love with her. Without thinking twice, he took her into his arms and swept her away to the royal residence.

Upon realizing the absence of one of his daughters, Heaven became very sad, the sky darkened, and the gray clouds rained tears. The divinities of Heaven, the stars, wanted at all costs to prevent their sister-star from marrying a mere mortal, no matter how brave he was, and they met to develop a plan to prevent the perceived disastrous romance. And so continues the story of the origin of the beautiful *xtaga be'nye*, the water lily.

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The wedding between the goddess-star and the prince was held with many accompanying grand celebrations. One of the stars transformed herself into a breeze, descending to the earth and attending one of the celebrations. Stealthily, she entered the bedroom intended for the newlyweds. Once inside, she abandoned her disguise and turned to the now-married goddess-star to relay to her what her father, the Lord of Heaven, had decided: Sister Star, because of what you have done, our father, Heaven, has decided that you will remain forever on Earth and become a flower that will float on the waters of the lagoon. Your petals will remain closed during the day so that humans cannot see you, but at night they will open so that you can receive a visit from your sisters, the stars!

The star goddess then disappeared with her sister star, and no one would see her again. Moments later, a blackish green flower with a beautiful, slender stem appeared in the Chivele lagoon, which people began to call *mudubina* (Zapotec for water lily).

The prince, upon realizing the disappearance of his wife, began going crazy with grief. His father, seeing him so desperate, summoned his *vinnigenda*, travelers from all the winds, to go look for the missing goddess-star. Despite the Zapotec Lord being extremely powerful, he could do nothing against the power of the Lord of Heaven. One of the oldest vinnigendas told the Zapotec Lord that it was not possible to defeat Heaven. Then the old vinnigenda, seeing the suffering of the young warrior, turned him into a flower as well. This new flower was named *xtaga be'nye*, the water lily (*nenúfar* in Spanish).

Thus, the two lovers were able to meet. The *mudubina* with its beautiful petals open only at night and with a red heart from the fire of her love, and the *xtaga be'nye* that lives by day and shows its yellow heart full of melancholy. They could never see each other, but perhaps one day, the Lord of Heaven will take pity on the lovers so that they can love each other again face to face, forever and ever.

Postscript for the botanically inclined. The plants have male and female parts making them “perfect.” When the flowers first open, the female parts dominate, and nectar pools in their centers. On the second and third day, the flowers produce pollen, the male parts. The Zapotecs gave the flower two different names depending on the flowering stage.

For an interesting read, check out this link:

<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20220928-mexicos-ancient-unknown-pyramids>

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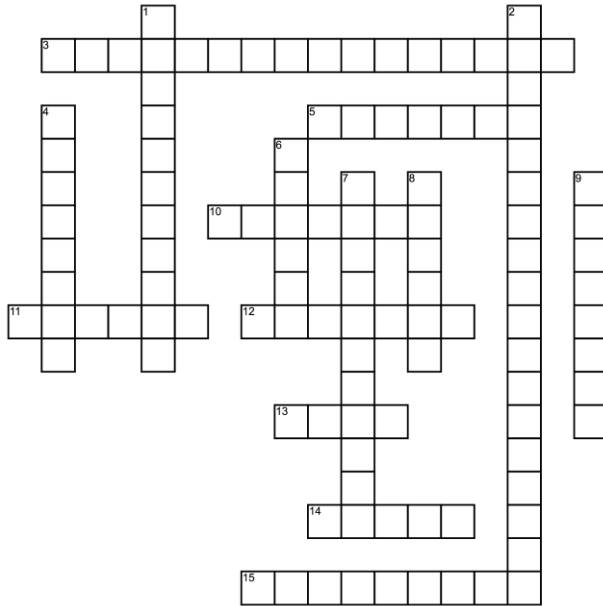
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# Spanish Lesson



## DAY OF THE DEAD CROSSWORD



### Across

- 3. the offering prepared for the deceased
- 5. Grave in Spanish
- 10. skull
- 11. Spanish word for cross
- 12. skeletal figures that represent death
- 13. the arch

- 14. what is the traditional color of mourning?

- 15. candies for day of the dead

### Down

- 1. special cooked sugar paste used to form skulls
- 2. what insect is believed to visit the visiting spirits?

- 4. offerings

- 6. Mexican slang word for skeleton

- 7. Mexican Marigold

- 8. masks worn to scare off the spirits

- 9. where do Mexicans go on all souls day?

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# This is Santa Muerte. Or Is It?

By Deborah Van Hoewyk

## Who Is She?

Santa Muerte – Saint, or Holy, Death – is all about death. She IS death, or maybe escaping death. The explanations of how Santa Muerte came to be, what she does, and who is devoted to her worship vary widely. Wielding a scythe, carrying a globe or an hour glass or the scales of justice, and accompanied by an owl, Santa Muerte makes a lot of people nervous.

She isn't supposed to be a particular person, with a beatified life, but those interested in the syncretism of indigenous and Catholic religion think she might be, or that she goes back to the Aztecs. She has nothing to do with Día de los Muertos, although lately, she's been showing up at the celebrations. She started out male and became female. Her cult is condemned by the Catholic Church, but it's the fastest-growing religion in Mexico, the US, and Canada; in 2017, the number of worshippers was estimated at 10 to 12 million, and the number "exploded" during the pandemic. ("Cult," when used in the religious sense, is not a negative, it simply means an unrecognized religious group.)

Is she the "complex, multifaceted folk spirit" described by Rebecca M. Bender, Associate Professor of Spanish literature and culture at Kansas State University? Or is she the narco-saint, a "strange hybrid of the Virgin Mary and the grim reaper" profiled by independent journalist Jake Flanigan in *The Atlantic*? Did she protect people from COVID-19, or, as the angel of death, send them straight to their graves?

## Where Did She Come From?

Anyone who has toured an ancient ruin in Mexico knows that death was an overarching theme – human sacrifice, dead warriors, tombs, maybe even the winning team in a ball game – the stories are painted and carved throughout.



While the cult of Santa Muerte emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century, and had mostly stayed out of sight until the 1990s, some anthropologists and archaeologists see its ancestry among the Aztecs. As noted in articles elsewhere in this issue, the Aztecs (in Oaxaca, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs) had an elaborate construction of life after death, including a 13-level heaven and a 9-level underworld. The god of death, Mictlāntēcutli, together with his consort Mictēcacihuātl, ruled Mictlān, the lowest level of the underworld.

The goddess Mictēcacihuātl is immortal and a shapeshifter – she can change her appearance at will, from benevolent to monstrous. Her charge is to guard the skeletons of the dead and govern the festivals honoring the dead; there is a direct line from Mictēcacihuātl to Día de los Muertos. Over time, Mictēcacihuātl

gradually became the personification of death itself, as well as the agent through whom the preserved bones of the dead provided the source of life for the next world – unlike their Christian conquerors, the Aztecs believed death was part of an endless cycle of life. Mictēcacihuātl thus develops a dual identity, associated with both death and life, which becomes healing – much like Santa Muerte. Aztecs appealed to her to promote their health and delay their deaths; the pair of them is shown overseeing scenes of sex, fertility, pregnancy and birth.

There are also those who argue that Santa Muerte derives from a 17<sup>th</sup>-century figure, Doña Sebastiana de

Caso y Paredes, who was the niece of a sainted "virgin penitent" in Ecuador, St. Mariana de Jesus of Quito (a virgin penitent consecrates her life to God, lives usually with her family, and refrains from relations with men).

Robert Nixon, a Benedictine friar from London, based his recent book, *The Venerable Doña Sebastiana de Caso: the Original Santa Muerte* (2022) on the work of Jacinto Morán de Butrón, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ecuadorian historian. According to Morán and Nixon, Sebastiana's father tried to force her into marriage, but she prayed to Death to rescue her; apparently Death responded, as Sebastiana contracted a fever and died. People began to venerate Sebastiana, who was born on August 15, the feast day of Santa Muerte; a society known as *La congregación de la buena muerte* sprang up in her honor.





## What Happened Next?

The Spanish Catholic conquerors were having none of the worship of death, the multitudinous native gods and goddesses – if they couldn't co-opt a ritual or belief, they suppressed it. Santa Muerte went underground. While this has led some to believe that Santa Muerte is a modern phenomenon, academic anthropologists use the theory of “bricolage” to explain the evolution of Santa Muerte (nowadays, they're more likely to use the more dignified term “syncretism”). Either way, it describes the blending of disparate cultural practices into something new.

Defined in 1960 by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, bricolage comes from the French word *bricoler*, or “tinker around.” Generally, you tinker around with unrelated bits and pieces of this and that (bric-a-brac) until you've combined them into something new and meaningful to you. “Meaning” is not fixed forever, but depends on your understanding of the bric-a-brac you've assembled. For example, when the Spanish arrived, they brought images of the Grim Reaper to “explain” death to the “natives.” ¡¡Listo!! Santa Muerte now carries a scythe.

Before the Spanish arrived, Mictēcacihuātl was the patron of a month (August) of celebrations of the dead. The Spanish arranged to have the Catholic Church exorcize Mictēcacihuātl, since she was obviously inflicting the power of Satan on her believers; they cut the commemorations to two days and moved them to coincide with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day (November 1-2), which we now know as the Days of the Dead (the first day for children who have died, the second for adults).

There is, however, no doubt that Santa Muerte went underground in the colonial period – failure to adopt Christianity precisely as the Spaniards ordered was a major cause of death at the time. Veneration of Santa Muerte continued under cover, though; records of the Spanish Inquisition (a joint state-church effort to “purify” Spanish Catholicism, 1478-1834 in Spain, 1571-1820 in Mexico) report Santa Muerte worship in Guanajuato in 1797. The Chichimeca

at night gather in their chapel to drink peyote until they lose their minds; they light upside-down candles, some of which are black; they dance with paper dolls; they whip Holy Crosses and also a figure of death that they call Santa Muerte, and they bind it with a wet rope threatening to whip and burn it if it does not perform a miracle.

In 1793, the Inquisition reported that indigenous people of what is now Querétaro worshipped – on the altar during mass, no less – “the figure of a complete human skeleton standing on top of a red surface, wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow.”

What with the War of Independence (1810-21), the Mexican-American War (1846-48), and the Mexican Revolution (1910-21), not to mention minor conflicts and political contretemps, Mexico was very busy for quite a while. Santa Muerte continued to stay underground.

## The 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Santa Muerte Returns

From the 1940s to the 1960s, anthropologists described Santa Muerte as a saint who could guide matters of the heart, a saint of love. By the 1980s, however, Santa Muerte had a wide repertoire of influence. She was soon appealed to for help with (or hindrance of) issues involved in education, business, legal affairs – pretty much the spectrum of modern life. She is the preferred saint of marginalized people, the destitute and desperate, those who feel are in danger because of who they are (based on their professions, private lives, or sexuality).

You can get an idea of Santa Muerte's versatility from *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, by R. Andrew Chesnut, Ph.D., professor of religion at Virginia Commonwealth University (2017 [2 ed]). The first book focused completely on Santa Muerte, *Devoted to Death* covers her history, her adoption of elements of Catholicism – the whole gamut. Chesnut explains her powers with seven chapters, each covering one of the colors of Santa Muerte's votive candles.

**Red** is the most popular single color, and accompanies petitions concerning passion and love. **White** represents purity and protection, while **black** is for black magic, and offers support for the “black” activities involved in narcotrafficking. **Gold** is for financial gain and overall prosperity, and **purple** represents miraculous healing. **Brown** is for learning and wisdom, and **green** offers advocacy to all followers for all reasons, no questions asked. There is also the best-selling seven-color candle, calling on all of Santa Muerte's powers.

Santa Muerte has kept up with the times, always open to providing new protections on the one hand, and new persecutions on the other hand. Perhaps the most interesting area to adopt Santa Muerte as its saint is narcotrafficking. This is the “black” part of Santa Muerte, and has given rise to her identity as the patron saint of the drug cartels. Santa Muerte can protect you from the narcos and kidnapers, or help the narcos wreak vengeance on their enemies and the kidnapers succeed in capturing their targets.

Even though the black candle apparently sells poorly, statues of Santa Muerte and black candles have been found at sites where narco violence has occurred. When DEA and Mexican police raid drug safe houses, they find altars to Santa Muerte.

Chesnut deplors the concentration on the “black,” violent, and amoral aspects of Santa Muerte the media seem to promote, and says “Most American and Mexican nonbelievers ... have little idea that the Skinny Lady [one of her many names] heals sickness, finds employment, and helps alcoholics and drug addicts in their struggles for sobriety.”

## The Future for Santa Muerte?

The Catholic Church is generally opposed to “folk saints” – those who, like Santa Muerte, arise from grass-roots veneration. The cult of Santa Muerte particularly offends the Catholic Church – in 2016, Pope Francis called it “satanic,” and explicitly linked it to narcotrafficking. In both the US and Mexico, the church issues warnings against the growing popularity of including Santa Muerte in the second (adult) Day of the Dead celebrations.

Notwithstanding Church opposition, adherents to Santa Muerte are often Christian, if not Catholic. They have no trouble believing in Jesus Christ, or the Trinity, or the Virgin Mary, but Santa Muerte seems to offer a more efficient way to get your prayers answered, regardless of who you are. Moreover, COVID-19 greatly increased the numbers of people, Mexicans especially, who appealed to Santa Muerte to protect them from “the plague.”

Given that life in Mexico can be, depending on where you are, increasingly insecure and violent, that Mexican politics continue to be unstable, corruption remains rampant, and narcotics have thoroughly infiltrated business and government, the need for a saint who can guarantee your safety, encourage your love life, and promote your health and wellbeing, can only grow.

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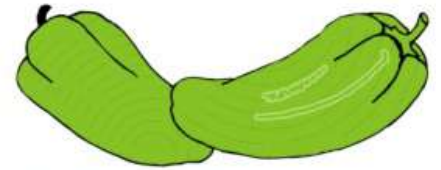
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