

WHEN WE DIE, WE BECOME *MUERTOS*: CHILDREN'S PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH IN TIANGUISTENGO, HIDALGO

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I explore the philosophies of death and dying presented by preschool and kindergarten-aged children in a pre-college philosophy class in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo before, during and after the Xantolo celebrations in the region. I describe, and then analyze philosophically, how some Tianguistengan children described death as “convertirse en un muerto,” or “becoming, transforming and converting into a *muerto*.” While *muertos* transcend the boundaries of the realm of the living, they are nevertheless concrete, material beings that living humans perceive in various ways. I argue that Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death also emphasize the silliness of death, as well as the significance of non-human animal deaths. Their philosophical views inspire, I contend, fresh ideas about death that people of all ages should consider carefully.

Keywords: Death, pre-college philosophy, philosophy for children (P4C), Aztec philosophies, animal ethics, standpoint epistemology, childhoods

RESUMEN: En este ensayo, exploro las ideas filosóficas de la muerte, y del proceso de morir, presentadas por niñas y niños de la edad preescolar en una clase de filosofía infantil que fue llevada a cabo en Tianguistengo, Hidalgo antes, durante, y después de las celebraciones de Xantolo de la región. Describo, y después analizo filosóficamente, como algunas niñas y algunos niños de Tianguistengo describieron la muerte como “convertirse en un muerto.” Aunque estos “muertos” trascienden las fronteras del plano de los vivos, siguen siendo seres concretos y materiales que las y los humanos percibimos de maneras diferentes. Argumento que las filosofías infantiles tianguistenguenses de la muerte también enfatizan los aspectos cómicos de la muerte, y también la importancia de las muertes de las y los animales- no-humanos. Argumento, finalmente, que sus perspectivas filosóficas inspiran ideas frescas sobre la muerte que las personas de todas las edades deberíamos considerar cuidadosamente.

Palabras Clave: Muerte, filosofía infantil, filosofía para niños, filosofías aztecas, ética de los animales, epistemología del punto de vista, infancias

I. Introduction

My daughter's preschool teacher in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo asked me to devote next week's pre-college philosophy session in her classroom to the philosophical topic of death. As she made the request, I was helping her move the classroom chairs back to their desks from the "philosophy circle" in which I had positioned them for today's discussion of some complexities of language. The group of three, four, and five-year-old children and I had just read and analyzed a Spanish translation of Mo Willems' picture book *Knuffle Bunny*, a story in which a toddler struggles to communicate to her dad that he accidentally left her beloved stuffed rabbit in a laundromat washing machine. I glanced out the window, a new habit of mine. Outside grey clouds cloaked the sky and heaved water onto the village below. It was the tail end of the rainiest season of the year in Hidalgo's Sierra Alta region, however, and people seemed to barely notice that everything was drenched. My four-year-old daughter, who was still getting used to her mother's status as a philosophy teacher in *her* classroom, tugged at my sleeve, eager to walk home with me despite the unrelenting downpour.

"The children should understand *why* we do the things that we do," the teacher said, in Spanish, picking some errant paper scraps off the floor. "They shouldn't just do them *porque sí*."

I stopped shifting chairs for a moment. Not only was I thrilled that the teacher was open to exploring with her young students the challenging philosophical topic of death, I also considered it a personal victory that she had joined my cause of encouraging the children to avoid saying "porque sí"—or "just because" (a not-so-distant cousin of the English-language appeal to authority *because I said so*)—in response to the philosophical challenges with which they were presented. Additionally, I was eager to explore death in the festive classroom setting she had created for the holiday season. It was November, the season of Day of the Dead, or, as it is often called in Mexico's Huasteca region and surrounding areas (including Tianguistengo), *Xantolo*. "Xantolo" is a Nahuatl term in which "xan" is a derivative of the Spanish word "santo," or saint, and "olo" means "abundance." Xantolo, then, is the season of saints, and of the dead, and of their relations with the living. I felt honored by the request to explore death philosophically with local children during these Tianguistengan celebrations, even though I had only arrived in the village three months ago.

In this essay, I explore the philosophies of death and dying presented by children in one of my pre-college philosophy classes held in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo before, during and after the Xantolo celebrations in the region.

Specifically, I describe, and then analyze philosophically, how some Tianguistengan children described death as “convertirse en un muerto,” or “becoming, transforming, or converting into a *muerto*.”¹ While *muertos* transcend the boundaries of the realm of the living, they are nevertheless concrete, material beings that living humans perceive in various ways. As we shall see, Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death also emphasize the silliness of death, and the significance of non-human animal deaths. Their philosophical views inspire fresh ideas about death that people of all ages would do well to consider carefully.

In Section II, I further describe the sociocultural context in which my class was situated, including the Nahuatl and Indigenous histories of the region. I acknowledge, in brief, my own positionality as a pre-college philosophy instructor and “cultural outsider” in Tianguistengo. My goals for Section III are two-fold. *First*, I narrate, both from memory and my pedagogical notes, the philosophical dialogue in which this understanding of death was articulated. *Second*, I contextualize this view of *death-as-becoming-muerto* by exploring possible relationships between this view of death and Nahuatl/Aztec philosophies of death that existed before, and persisted despite, Spanish colonization.

It would be an adult-centric disservice to the young philosophers in question, however, to simply present this philosophical view as a childish extension of adult ideas and rituals. As decades of Philosophy for Children scholarship and practice has shown, children are talented, natural philosophers who frequently offer unique philosophical views that may contrast those of adults (including in their own communities). Thus, in Section IV I employ Gareth Matthews’s notion of “children’s philosophy” to analyze Tianguistengan children’s views on death on their own terms. What are the virtues of considering death in terms of *becoming a muerto/a/x*? How might adopting such a view change one’s position on life itself? Finally, how can we transform our pre-college philosophy pedagogy through an analysis of children’s philosophy?

Prior to beginning, some clarificatory notes are in order. *First*, I wish to position this piece in terms of Mexican philosophy and Aztec/Nahua philosophies. I aim to contribute to these bodies of scholarship by foregrounding the voices and philosophical perspectives of Mexican (and, particularly, Tianguistengan) children. I also wish to stipulate that I am not attempting to represent the perspectives of all children of Tianguistengo—just as those working in Mexican or Nahuatl philosophy (for example) do not claim to represent the perspectives of all

¹ I am grateful to James Maffie for helpful discussion of this point.

Mexican and Nahuatl peoples. Furthermore, I recognize that any attempt to describe the philosophical views of “others” falls into a problem of representation, or of “speaking for others” as argued by Linda Martín Alcoff (Alcoff 1991-1992; see also Elicor 2020) This ethical challenge is especially difficult when writing about children, given their comparative lack of sociopolitical power. In response, I want to make clear that this article is not the “final word” on Tianguistengan children’s philosophy: it is, instead, an attempt to demonstrate that these young people *have a philosophy* that adults ought to learn from, and ought to consider seriously (ideally by giving their voices an influential public platform). I also position this piece within the Philosophy for Children (P4C) tradition, which often analyses the pedagogical practice of pre-college philosophy. In this vein, I will explore the pedagogical practice and context from which Tianguistengan children’s philosophical claims emerged, engaging P4C scholarship in the process.

Finally, some clarifications about language and identity. In this paper I will use terminology that reflects both my preferred terms and those that are more recognizable for readers. Specifically, I will use the terms “pre-college philosophy” and “Philosophy for Children” to describe my pedagogical approach to philosophizing with children. I will also use the terms “Nahuatl/Nahua” and “Aztec” to refer to the Indigenous philosophical traditions within which I contextualize some of the children’s philosophical claims. Note that not all the children in the classroom self-identified as Indigenous, and that for various reasons I did not inquire about the children’s ethnoracial identities. I refer here, instead, to the importance of Nahua/Aztec philosophies and traditions in Tianguistengo, where the children live and philosophize.

II. The Road to Pre-College Philosophy in Tianguistengo

To get to Tianguistengo’s *cabecera municipal*, or municipal headquarters, where I taught pre-college philosophy classes, one must drive along a narrow, winding road known as the Zacualtipán-Tianguistengo highway. Driving down this road, one is struck by the spectacular vegetation of Tianguistengo’s Sierra Alta region, which the German Baron Alexander von Humbolt once deemed The Mexican Andes (Mercado Escudero 1993: 25). One loops through tough bundles of pine and oak trees—once home to monkeys and mountain lions until deforestation became a serious local problem—that on clear days break away to astounding views of emerald mountains, bright grazing pastures, and mossy hillocks surrounding the many small villages of which greater Tianguistengo is comprised. On overcast days, which are far more common, one drives along the road with mild

trepidation, for the endless fog conceals not only the jaw-dropping views, but also, the other cars winding down the road. Situated 667 meters above sea level, Tianguistengo is a basin for fog, as its cool, salt-laden airs are outspread by the steady winds hailing from the Gulf of Mexico.

The name “Tianguistengo” is Nahuatl, and it can be roughly translated as “next to the market”: “tianguis” means “market,” and “tengo” means “next to,” or “on the bank of.” Since 1860, the Tianguistengo’s *cabecera municipal* has designated its Thursdays as market or “tianguis” days, with vendors from across the region setting up shop in the parking lot in front of the local church to sell fragrant foods and various household items. Tianguistengo was once part of the Señorío de Metztlán, which in 1380 was consolidated by Techotlala, the King of Texcoco and grandfather of legendary Aztec philosopher Netzahualcoyotl. In 1486, the “serranos aliados a Metztlán” were invited to the inauguration of the famous Templo Mayor, or Teocalli, upon its dedication to the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli.

In 1530, the Señorío Independiente of Metztlán was taken by the Spaniards, and Tianguistengo came under the control of the Spanish crown. Augustine evangelists arrived that same year a part of Spain’s colonizing mission, and they began constructing the Santa Ana de Tianguistengo church in 1540. Soon after, settlers from Extremadura, Spain began to arrive in the region, and evidence of this colonial history is to be found in the Extremaduran architecture characteristic of the *cabecera municipal*, featuring “techos a dos aguas,” or gabled roofs, the sloping sides of which are helpful in regions with significant rainfall.

While there is no published work (at least to my knowledge) that chronicles the colonial violence inflicted upon Tianguistengo in particular, the region undoubtably experienced, and continues to experience, the full battery of colonial harms outlined by Aníbal Quijano and other decolonial philosophers (Quijano and Ennis 2000). A town elder once told me in casual conversation that during his youth, mestiza/o Tianguistegans were called “gente de razón,” or reasonable people, while Indigenous Tianguistengans were called “gente sin razón,” or unreasonable people. Still, Indigenous residents of Tianguistengo have resisted colonial forces through the preservation of their language and customs, many which have been skilfully (albeit forcefully) adapted to Spanish and *mestizo* sociopolitical domination in the region. As of 2020, in the broader municipality of Tianguistengo, the population was 14,340, of which about 6,000 speak an Indigenous language (primarily Nahuatl) (Data Mexico 2022). Indigenous customs with pre-colonial histories are still proudly practiced, such as Xantolo, la Danza del Palo Volador—which is practiced in many Nahuatl communities

through Mexico and is emblematic of Nahuatl metaphysics—and the dance of the Tirilrosde Oxplanta.

Still, enduring coloniality and other structural injustices have plagued Indigenous and non-Indigenous Tianguistengans, though Indigenous peoples are at heightened risk. As recently as 1996, only 70 percent of homes in the municipality had running water, and a mere 35 percent of households had electricity (Escudero 1993: 21-29). In 2020, 28.8 percent of the population lived in “severe poverty,” and 52.8 percent of the population lived in “moderate poverty.” Only four percent of the population has internet connectivity at home; however, about 65 percent of the population has a cell phone, and many Tianguistengans get some internet access on their phones. The majority of adults do not finish grade school, and approximately 21 percent of the population is illiterate, with women constituting about 57 percent of that group.

I came to Tianguistengo with the goal of helping a local Escuela Normal, or Normal School, develop a pre-college philosophy program for the region. During the remote learning period of the COVID-19 pandemic, they had invited me to give an online keynote presentation about pre-college philosophy pedagogy for their annual conference, and I was inspired to learn of their interest in bringing opportunities for philosophical dialogue to the young people they serve. Thus, in collaboration with the school, I developed a plan to establish pre-college philosophy opportunities in Tianguistengo. As it usually happens, however, my philosophical outreach with children provided me with new perspectives on philosophical questions: once again, I was more learner than teacher. Thus, the ensuing analysis does not focus on my planned program development, but rather, on the exciting philosophical ideas produced by Tianguistengan children in a philosophy class facilitated by an enthusiastic—yet very “new”—cultural outsider.

III. On Becoming a Muerto

A. Philosophy for Children in Tianguistengo

I entered the pre-school classroom prepared to talk to the children about death. I found them sitting at their desks making *pan de muerto*: a doughy, citrusy Mexican pastry topped with bread-based skull and crossbones representing the bones of the dead (though there are considerable regional differences in how the bread is adorned). Once prepared, *pan de muerto* is placed upon the altars constructed for *los muertos*, serving as a delicious treat to guide them home, or elsewhere on their journeys. The children in the class, including my daughter, seemed absolutely delighted by the messy activity. Still, when the teacher announced that the

philosophy class was about to begin, they finished sculpting their bread buns and went outside to wash their hands in a tall bucket of cold water. As I waited for them to return, I surveyed the classroom, which was decorated with numerous paper *Catrina* skeletons that were both serenading and being serenaded in glistening mariachi uniforms. I moved the chairs into a “philosophy circle.”

My lesson plan involved starting with a traditional Community of Inquiry (CoI): a term of art in Philosophy for Children that refers to a pedagogical practice in which children sit in a circle and listen to their facilitator read them a philosophically suggestive story (for further discussion on CoI, see Lipman 2003: 36). Upon finishing the story, children are asked to quietly reflect on philosophical questions the story inspires for them. Then, the facilitator asks them to share their questions with the group. The questions are written down by the facilitator, who then reads the list aloud. Subsequently, the group of children is asked to vote for the question that they find most interesting, and the rest of the COI is devoted to collective exploration of and response to the selected philosophical question. In such pedagogical practice, the philosophical questions, and, indeed, the philosophy itself, should come from the children. The (adult) facilitator should avoid, as much as possible, directing the philosophical discussion with their preconceived philosophical views.

My plan was to follow the guidelines for a CoI as much as I could, at least at the very beginning. I had selected the story book *Death, Duck and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch (translated to Spanish as *El Pato y La Muerte*)—a favorite of pre-college philosophy practitioners who want to explore death. Erlbruch tells the story of Duck, who finds that Death—personified as a kind of feminine skeleton wearing a long tweed coat over a checkered dress and carrying a solitary tulip—is suddenly always around him. He voices concern about this, but comes to form emotional attachment to Death, who is by his side as he begins to die. Death does not answer Duck’s philosophical questions about the nature of death, but shows him considerable kindness as the story develops. At the end of the story, Death floats Duck’s corpse on a river and pushes the body away. Death is sad, and misses Duck, but observes that death is a part of life.²

² I should note that I had considered using some of the wonderful story books about death that were recently published by Mexican authors, having just picked up several such books at Mexico City’s annual book fair. For instance, *Un Huipil Para La Muerte* (A Huipil—or hand-embroidered Indigenous Blouse—for Death), by Claudia Esmeralda Ríos Rodríguez, depicts Death as Catrina-like skeleton who is saddened by the fact that everyone is frightened of her appearance. She enlists the help of a Tzotzil girl, who does not fear her, and the girl weaves a beautiful huipil for her, and thus changes the relationship between the dead and the dead and the living. The message, of course, is that we ought not fear death—instead, we should view as life’s counterpart, and thus a part of life.

My first step, then, was to read this book in accordance with the recommended steps of a CoI. Then, I would ask the children to raise the philosophical questions that the book inspired for them. However, I also expected to diverge from a CoI, as I was working with very young children who are still developing the self-confidence necessary to audibly formulate questions in front of an audience of listeners. They had made significant progress in this vein since the start of the school year, but, in my view, it would have been pedagogically foolhardy to depend solely on their questions for the entirety of the philosophical dialogue. As explored by Karen Emmerman, pre-college philosophy practitioners often experience tensions when trying to simultaneously “democratize the classroom” (by allowing children to articulate and select their own questions) *and* build philosophical skills (by delving deeply into questions that inspire robust philosophical discussion and debate—questions that children themselves do not always ask) (Emmerman 2021; see also Mohr Lone 2014). Darren Chetty has also warned against depending on children of color to raise questions about racism in pre-college philosophy classes (Chetty 2014) While today’s intended topic was not racism *per se*, I believe that Chetty’s argument should inspire caution in terms of relying exclusively on a CoI and children’s questions in philosophy classes on any sensitive topic.

Thus, I would open the floor to children’s questions after reading the book, and then spend some time answering them as a group. I would then break students into small groups, each one with its own adult facilitator (I was joined in the classroom by the main teacher, a student teacher, and my husband, who was helping me that day as a volunteer in our daughter’s classroom). In those groups, we would ask the children the following questions: *what is death? What happens when we die? Should we be afraid of death?* And finally: *why do we celebrate Xantolo?* This was what Karen Emmerman has called a “middle ground approach,” in which children are encouraged to select their own questions in an effort to democratize the classroom, but are also presented with philosophical challenges pre-prepared by the instructor.

I opted for *Death, Duck and the Tulip* for this particular class because, as a pre-college philosophy facilitator, I wanted a book that did not present readers with such a clear ethical vision of death (though I do believe that *Un Huipil para La Muerte* would be an excellent Spanish-language book to use in a philosophy class focused on the question of whether we ought to fear death, among others). In response to the teacher’s challenge—that I encourage children to encourage why they participated in Xantolo traditions, and not just participate *porque sí*—I wanted to momentarily “step away” from traditional Mexican and Xantolo depictions of death as a Catrina to create space for a broader philosophical dialogue. Finally, *Un Huipil para La Muerte* is likely more suited for older children given its style and length.

As the children filed back into the classroom, hands washed, they sat in the philosophy circle and we read *Death, Duck, and the Tulip*. They listened with apparent interest. I then asked them to reflect quietly on a philosophical question about the book. Following a brief silence, one child asked: *why did the duck die?* As several the other children indicated immediate interest in the question both verbally and through body language, I decided to let the conversation flow in that direction. In response, the children began to respond in what might be regarded as scientific terms, which does not mean that the conversation was not philosophical (after all, the question of *why* someone dies cannot solely be addressed in empirical terms, though scientific “answers” are often important pieces of the puzzle). One child pointed out that the duck was very cold. Another suggested that the duck had not been eating his vegetables. Finally, a child replied that the duck’s feathers must have fallen off, and that is what caused his death.

After the children had finished answering this question to their satisfaction, they seemed eager for a change, so I divided them into small groups. The other teachers and volunteers in the classroom were, at this point, familiar with the goals of pre-college philosophy pedagogy, and they were prepared to ask the children the aforementioned philosophical questions while granting them space in which to speak. The classroom became a bit loud—the children had a great deal to say on this topic—but we were nevertheless able to hear and learn from one another.

In my small group of four children, I first raised the question of what happens to us after we die. Immediately, a four-year-old girl issued the reply that is the subject of this paper: *when we die, we become muertos*. The other children in my group nodded in agreement. Fascinated, I began to explore what a *muerto* is—and in so doing, I abandoned my “lesson plan” for this stage of the class in order to explore the philosophical response to the question the girl, and the group, had generated. This supports, I submit, Emmerman’s argument for a “middle ground approach” to Philosophy for Children, especially when working with young children: I was able to work toward the goal of democratizing the classroom even after I asked the children my own philosophical question, as my question encouraged a child to articulate her unique philosophical position that then became our collective point of focus. I told the children in my group to talk to each other about what it means to be a *muerto* and went to check in on how the other groups were fairing in the exercise.

First, I walked over to the group for which the main classroom teacher was now acting as philosophy facilitator. I found them engrossed in a lively conversation involving lots of physical movement. After listening for a few minutes, I learned

that they, too, were talking about *muertos* and describing them as material beings. Specifically, they were talking about *muertos* coming out of their graves and singing and dancing. *Vienen bailando*—“they come dancing”—the children were saying, and they, themselves, started dancing like *muertos*. Their specific claim that the *muertos* “come dancing” was likely inspired by the song and dance they were practicing in school for an upcoming Xantolo celebration in the town square. The song—which I now know well, as my daughter took part in this activity and sang the song regularly at home—is called “Calaverita de Azucar,” and one of the verses is as follows:

Vengo bailando desde el otro mundo (I come dancing from the other world)
Y es que mi casa está más allá (and my house is far away/ “In the great beyond”
Busco un alma que me de un dulce nombre (I look for a soul that will give me a sweet name)
¡No quiero espantar, solo quiero bailar! (I don’t want to frighten anyone, I just want to dance!)

A bit later, children in the two neighboring group also began to talk about the *muertos* that “come dancing” and exit their graves. One group started debating whether this was scary.

Feeling convinced that the other groups did not need my pedagogical support, I returned to my own group to ask them more about what it means to *become a muerto*. I found the children engrossed in debate over whether people eat our bodies when we die, which may or may not have been inspired by the fact that they were making edible *pan de muerto* with skulls and crossbones right before class. Two of the children believed that our bodies are eaten by the living after we die, and two believed that they are not. The group then pivoted to discussion of whether *death* is a person. As explored previously, in reference to the Catrinas the teacher has set up in the classroom, death is often portrayed as a skeleton-woman in Mexican culture: she is sometimes called La Flaca and La Huesuda (The Skinny One, and The Bony One). Half of the children said yes, death is a person, and half said no—which shows that while the children’s views are, indeed, shaped by the cultural context in which they are positioned, they nevertheless approach their social *milieu* and associated philosophical ideas with a critical gaze.

In the final ten minutes of our session (with pre-schoolers, my sessions tend to last for 30-40 minutes), I posed the question of what (else) happens to us after we

die. I was responding to their interest in the debate of whether dead bodies are eaten by the living after death; I wanted to expand upon that question. Interestingly, a four-year-old boy then replied that when we die, people drink hot chocolate (a beverage traditionally consumed during Xantolo). The children then began discussing the last time that they had consumed delicious hot chocolate. I found it interesting that when asked what happens to *us* (i.e. dead people) when we die, they decided to focus on what the *living* do in response to “our” deaths. In their view (I infer), what the living do to mourn, celebrate, and connect with us after we die—and also, what they fail or neglect to do—are vital parts of what happens to us when we die.

Finally, the children chose to move beyond a human-centered response to the questions under exploration by discussing animals that had died (note that Xantolo, and Día de Muertos, involves specific rituals and times for honoring dead animals). One boy said, with apparent sadness, that he saw one of his family’s cows die. The girl who had originally stated that when we die, we become *muertos* said that a neighbor had poisoned her aunt’s cat, and that the cat had died. She began to cry when she told the story, and the other kids and I tried to console her. At this point, the class session was over: parents were coming to the door to take their children home under giant umbrellas. So, while I would have loved exploring the children’s questions/statements about animal deaths, I reluctantly ended that day’s session.

B. Nahuatl Philosophies of Death

Why did a four-year-old girl in my classroom say that when we die, we become *muertos*? *Why* was the image of *muertos* dancing out of their graves such an important part of literally all the philosophical discussions the groups of children were having? As I explore in the next and final section of this paper, when we study children’s philosophy, we generally cannot look to published books and articles to answer our questions. Due to the structural position of children in our social world, it can also be difficult to comfortably ask kids direct follow-up questions. One way to flesh out (so to speak) the idea that death is *becoming-a-muerto* is through appealing to Nahua/Aztec conceptions of death that have long influenced the Tianguistengan social world in which the children are situated. Thus, in this section, I explore possible connections between this conception of death, and Nahua understandings of death and the afterlife.

To begin with, note that many Aztec/Nahuatl conceptions of death emphasize, at least in part, what I shall call the material components of death—that is, not

simply the idea of an imperceptible soul, but also, the material bodies and bodily activities it entails, including travel to concrete places that are described in rich detail. When I say that Aztec/Nahua conceptions of death were/are “material,” I also mean to say that they refer to real bodies and things, like skeletons animated by the *yolia*—or personal identity-granting life-force—located in the *yoyotl*, or the heart(s) of the living. On this view, with death, the *yolia* may leave the human body, travel to the underworld, and occupy the body of a dead relative, or it may come back to the realm of the living to occupy the body of a newborn or other individual (McKeever First 1995) Note that in other Aztec/Nahua conceptions of death, dead human souls—especially those of children—are believed to reincarnate as (real) colorful birds and butterflies. Furthermore, though the *muerto* is dissimilar to the human body that its *yolia* once inhabited, it nevertheless eats, dances, and does “body-like things.” Thus, though *muertos* are, as Miguel León-Portilla maintains, “fleshless,” they are also, in many other respects, material. However, as León-Portilla cautions, this does not mean that Nahuatl (or Aztec) beliefs about death and the afterlife do not involve souls. Still, these philosophies of death often involve material components that are strikingly different from, for instance, Christian philosophies of death in which the soul is to imagined as fundamentally disconnected from, and utterly dissimilar to, human and animal bodies.

Nahua philosophies of death are, then, both bodily/material and immaterial— involving both bodies, physicality, and souls. Upon death, a significant part of our total life-force, or life-energy, persists, despite the fact that the soul leaves the body and becomes, as León-Portilla maintains, fleshless. It is this sacred life energy that enables the *muerto* to achieve certain forms of embodiment, and engage in physical activities (León-Portilla 1990) In Aztec philosophy, death is life’s counterpart—just one example of what James Maffie has called “agonistic inamic unity” in Aztec metaphysics, in which two things that are opposite from one another are paired and “both interdependent and mutually competitive or agonistic” (2014: 137) Maffie explains that these pairs or “unities” are, in fact, *energetic processes* that are partially constitutive of Teotl, a “continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy” (2014: 21-22). Maffie further explains that in all such dualities, neither component “is morally or metaphysically superior to the other” (137). Maffie also describes Teotl as an artist, and the cosmos as Teotl’s energetic performance. Perhaps *muertos* themselves are also artists engaged in the energetic performance of Teotl.

The agonistic inamic unity of the life-death duality is beautifully exemplified in the Aztec origin story of people. León-Portilla tells the story of Quetzalcoatl’s

descent to Mictlán, which brought about the existence of human beings. At this time, the Fifth Age—in which we are now—had been established, and the sun had been created. The Aztec gods gathered in Teotihuacan, and decided that Quetzalcoatl—the “feathered serpent” and a primary Aztec god—should descend to Mictlán, the underworld (soon to be described in greater detail) to get human bones to form people that would reinhabit the Earth (León-Portilla 1990: 107-109). Quetzalcoatl is forced to undergo a series of trials in Mictlán—he even dies and comes back to life—but is ultimately successful, and he ascends from the underworld with the bones that are then used to form the first man and the first woman. Here, we see that life itself comes from death: both the material bones of the dead, and Quetzalcoatl’s own death in Mictlán.

The materiality of death—that is, the ways in which *muertos* take on varied physical forms and engage in physical activities, like dancing, traveling to concrete places, avoiding danger, and consuming foodstuffs on Xantolo—is also present in Aztec/Nahuatl understandings of what happens to humans after we die. After dying, the *yolia* of humans may go to one of four “dwelling-places”: where one goes depends not on one’s conduct during the entirety of one’s life, as we find in Christianity and some other religions, but in terms of the nature of one’s death. What León-Portilla describes as the “first region of the dead” is aforementioned Mictlán, which Quetzalcoatl visited as part of his mission to create the first human beings of the Fifth Age. Mictlán is the dwelling place of people who die of most illnesses, and of old age—for this reason, it is the dwelling place of most of the dead. More than just a “dwelling place,” however, it is a challenging site in which the dead must overcome a series of obstacles during a period of four years. With the help of a guide dog, believed to be the soul of a god in dog-form, the dead are required to journey through the nine levels of Mictlán before arriving at Chiconamatlan, the final resting place and region of the dead.

Whether Chiconamatlan is an agreeable or “neutral” resting place, or more akin to a miserable hell described in many variations of Christianity, is a subject of some scholarly dispute. While León-Portilla describes Mictlán as cold and dark, he seems to present 16th century Aztecs as generally at peace with the afterlife that likely awaited them, regarding it as “asunto de los dioses” (a “matter of the gods”). Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, meanwhile, argues that the Aztecs’ discriminatory conception of death—in which the majority went to a terrible Mictlán, and a minority went to paradise (described below)—caused existential and psychological unrest among the Aztecs (Luz Ruhillier 1963: 253)

A second “dwelling place” in Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death is Tlalocan: an “earthly paradise” (León-Portilla 1990: 125). Those who are sent to Tlalocan were chosen by Tlaloc, the Nahuatl god of rain. These individuals died in ways that were associated with water, such as drowning in floods and other bodies of water. Tlalocan is described as featuring fresh air, a beautiful landscape, and limitless fresh foods. The dead who go to Tlalocan need not undergo trials, like those sent to Mictlán, by some scholars suggest that children sent to Tlalocan also underwent a four-year period of transition that might remind Christians of the notion of purgatory.

The third dwelling-place is for breast-feeding children who die “before the age of reason.” It is called Chichihuacuauhco, or a “wet nurse tree” (or “tree of our flesh”). Drops of milk from the leaves of this tree nourished the young children, who one can also envision as being warmed and nurtured by the “flesh” of her bark. Finally, warriors who died in battle, and women/pregnant people who died during childbirth, were sent to the dwelling place of the sun, located in the West, called *Tonatiuhiluícac*. This dwelling place was considered to be the most glorious of all, as its male inhabitants would accompany the sun from dawn until noon, while its female inhabitants would accompany from noon until dusk. After this period of four years, the inhabitants of this dwelling place were turned into birds—various “plumed creatures” of different, beautiful colors who would nourish themselves from earthly and heavenly flowers.

We have seen that Aztec/Nahuatl understandings of death emphasize the materiality of death: concrete places, bodies, and things alongside immaterial souls. One’s final resting place depends upon the metaphysical fact of how one died: whether one drowned, died in childbirth, died of illness, etc. The various dwelling places are described in rich detail: the West of the sun, *Tonatiuhiluícac*, a tree that gives milk to breast-feeding children, an earthly paradise filled with good food and fresh air, and a dark, cold underworld consisting of nine distinct layers. Furthermore, we find considerable exploration of the dead—the *muertos*—who are creatures who cannot be understood simply in terms of souls, or of beings who are no longer alive (this particular point is perhaps similar to Western understandings of ghosts). In Mictlán, it is the *muerto* who, as soul with a particular embodiment, must undergo a difficult, four-year journey through nine layers of underworld only *before* they reach their final resting place. Those *muertos* who die as warriors who go proudly to the sun act for four years *before* they attain their final forms as plumed creatures. Additionally, those *muertos* who are young children maintain, in many respects, their earthly forms—we are to think of them as children in need

of milk, warmth, and maternal love. Note that many of these *muertos* become things: voyagers, birds, orphans, extensions of the sun.

Such a conception of death—which emphasizes being and *becoming-a-muerto* and the material aspects of death—stands in contrast to ideas of death that either depict the dead as disembodied souls, or assume that one’s entire existence ends upon one’s demise. One such articulation of death can be found in Plato’s *The Apology*, in which Socrates, who is on trial and facing execution, famously tells the jurors who will eventually condemn him that he is not afraid to die. Socrates argues that death can entail one of two things: “either the dead man wholly ceases to be, and loses all sensation; or, according to the common belief, it is a change or a migration of the soul to another place” (Plato in Church, etc., 2020: 76). Notably, both of these after-life “possibilities” identified by Socrates differ from Nahuatl understandings, which give comparatively vivid depictions of what the dead look like (i.e., like human warriors, birds, breast-feeding children, or “fleshless” creatures accompanied by guide dogs) and where they may be found (i.e., to the West of the sun, in a dark, cold underworld, by a tree dripping nourishing milk, or in an earthly paradise where food is harvested).

This distinctive vision of death is also evinced in Xantolo and Día de Muertos celebrations in Hidalgo and throughout Mexico. When families construct altars filled with pictures of the dead and their favorite foods, it is to guide the dead—*los muertos*—either on their journeys to their final resting places, if the loved one recently died, or to the homes in which the altar is placed for a visit, if they have been deceased for years.³ In the context of such celebrations, the dead seem to assume a somewhat distinctive metaphysical status: they are neither living, fleshy human beings nor “mere souls” utterly disconnected from their previously inhabited bodily forms. During Xantolo, these *muertos* are driven by what Westerners sometimes call “bodily urges”—the smells and tastes of their favorite foods, the pleasure of their favorite books, and, for children, the joy of a preferred toy. The *muertos* are the living dead who consume the essence of the foodstuffs left by the living who remember and love them.⁴

It is in this context in which a child in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo told me that when we die, we become *muertos*. Moreover, Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death and associated cultural practices can help us both to unravel and ponder this

³ Prior to Spanish colonization, the exclusive goal of the Día de Muertos altars was to guide the dead on their journeys to their final dwelling places. The belief that the altars can guide our loved ones back to us for a visit was developed under Spanish and Catholic influences.

⁴ To think of these urges merely as “bodily” would, however, support a mind-body dualism that the Mexica denied. My point, however, is that these are not disembodied processes for *muertos*.

philosophical claim, for we can draw out the following connections between Tianguistengan children's philosophies of death and their Aztec/Nahuatl counterparts.

First, recall that in Aztec/Nahuatl metaphysics, death is life's counterpart in what Maffie calls an "agonistic inamic unity." We saw that Tianguistengan children, in their discussion of death, acknowledged its necessary connection to life by referencing the ways in which death depend on the living in the form of foodstuffs, song and dance. *Second*, the children said that when we die, we become *muertos*—the embodied, living dead. As explored previously, in Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death (and life) the figure of a *muerto*, also understood in terms of a "becoming," figures prominently. *Third*, recall that the children talked about how the *muertos* we dancing—*vienen bailando*—as they emerged from their graves, and that the children physically danced as they described this. This seems to echo Maffie's claim that Teotl is an artist, and the cosmos an energy-infused, artistic creation. What better way to acknowledge the cosmos-as-art than through dance and song?

In sum, in this section I have explored the following. First, I surveyed how Tianguistengan children in a Philosophy for Children classroom posited an understanding of death as *becoming-a-muerto*. Second, in an effort to flesh out this claim, I identified several possible connections between this theory of death, and Aztec/Nahuatl philosophical ideals that have long influenced many aspects of social life in Tianguistengo. This is not to say, however, that the children were simply parroting philosophical ideas of the adult world. In the next section, I argue that we should approach their philosophical claims as Tianugistengan *children's philosophy*, and adjust our philosophical pedagogy accordingly.

IV. Tianguistengan Children's Philosophy of Death

As mentioned in the introduction, a great deal of scholarship in the field of Philosophy for Children has focused on the question of whether children are capable of doing philosophy in the face of widespread societal beliefs that they cannot. The philosopher Gareth Matthews has compellingly argued that they can, stating that:

...Many young children naturally raise questions, make comments, and even engage in reasoning that professional philosophers can recognize as philosophical. Not only do they do philosophy naturally, they do it with a freshness of perspective and a sensitivity to puzzlement and conceptual

mismatch that are hard for adults to achieve. The adult must cultivate the naiveté that is required for doing philosophy well; for the child such naiveté is entirely natural (Matthews 1992: 122)

Though I am in full agreement with Matthews—if not, I would not be a practitioner of pre-college philosophy—I want to take the notion of children-as-philosophers a bit further. Rather than arguing that children are capable of doing philosophy (which they are), I shall argue, based upon the preceding reflections, that both children and adults should explore children’s philosophical contributions in pre-college philosophy classrooms as “*children’s philosophy*.” I make this argument by listing several unique features of Tianguistengan children’s philosophy of death, which serves as an example of a children’s philosophy that ought to be given series consideration as a set of *philosophical ideas*, and not merely as evidence of children’s philosophical precociousness.

Interestingly, though Matthews briefly addresses the question of whether “children’s philosophy” may exist as part of a broader project on the philosophy of childhood, he more rigorously pursues the questions of what “children’s art” is and how we should appreciate it. Still, I believe that his reflections on children’s art can help us to engage Tianguistengan children’s remarks on death as children’s philosophy. In his discussion, Matthews narrates a failed attempt to convince a Boston art museum curator to host an exhibit on children’s art. The curator was amused by the idea but said that he would only feature “first-rate” art in his museum. The implication, of course, was that children’s art cannot be first-rate art, and it therefore cannot be featured in a serious art museum.

Mathews admits that it would be hard for a curator to characterize children’s art in terms of a particular stylistic “period,” which is often how curators organize their exhibits. Furthermore, he recognizes that children’s art is perhaps more stylistically immature. However, he suggests that Andy Warhol’s collection of soup cans hardly counts as “mature” art, and yet it has been featured in “first-rate museums,” raising questions about whether artistic “maturity” should be an operative principle in making decisions about what art to feature in museums.

Contra the Boston curator’s skepticism, Matthews argues that there should, indeed, be a place for children’s art in museums. He says that children’s art should be appreciated for the same reasons that we appreciate children’s philosophy—for in both cases, such children’s work “exhibits a freshness, an urgency, and a naturalness ... that asks to be celebrated for itself.” While he explicitly proposes that children’s art be featured in museums, he does not provide such specific

recommendations for how we ought to appreciate children's philosophy. Though it is beyond the burden of this paper to provide a complete account of how children's philosophy ought to be appreciated, I will now outline below several unique features of Tianguistengan children's philosophies of death that emerged in a Philosophy of Children class. I aim to show two things: (1) that Tianguistengan children have a philosophy of death; and (2) that children's philosophy can be appreciated, at least in part, through serious analysis of the philosophical claims that children make in pre-college philosophy class.

Note, first, that instead of regarding these philosophical ideas as "immature" because they were not presented in the same way that adults present their philosophical ideas—i.e., in papers and books, during seminars, and during fancy dinners following departmental colloquia—we should regard them as both different in their presentation and deeply philosophical. Children, particularly very young children like those with whom I worked in Tianguistengo, are unlikely to write lengthy academic articles to be sent out for peer review or give invited presentations at colloquia. Furthermore, their participation in pre-college philosophy classes is very different from that of philosophy students in graduate seminars. Philosophy for Children classes are often extremely energetic, and feature young people jumping, dancing, running around, crying, hiding their faces under their sweaters to avoid getting called on, and, all the while, philosophizing. To avoid adult-centric biases, we should take seriously all of their verbal and physical contributions to their philosophy classes, rather than dismiss them simply because they do not resemble those of adults.

With this in mind, let us now consider several important features of Tianguistengan children's philosophy of death, which I previously contextualized in terms of Aztec/Nahuatl philosophical ideas. *First*, I have explored the children's emphasis, in our philosophical discussion, on "becoming a *muerto*." I've attempted to explain this emphasis in terms of Aztec/Nahuatl understandings of death, which involve not only people becoming *muertos*, but *muertos* becoming different kinds of beings on their journeys to, and within, various dwelling-places. While contextualizing the children's claims about "becoming a *muerto*" can enable us to understand and appreciate them better, I submit that there is something especially fascinating and child-like about emphasizing *what we become* when we die. While leading accounts of Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death emphasize where the dead go and why, Tianguistengan children emphasized personal growth and physical transition as part of this process.

This makes sense, as children are themselves in a state of near-constant growth, change, and physical transition. Children tend to eagerly anticipate their birthdays and the rights, responsibilities and capabilities that come with each passing year. They are aware that they are on their way to becoming semi-distinct beings called adults, whose bodies, brains, and lives are different from those of kids. Thus, from the perspective of Tianguistengan children philosophizing about death during the season of Xantolo, it is understandable that becoming a *muerto* would emerge as the salient, frightening, and exciting feature for philosophical analysis. We saw, furthermore, that in our conversation the children were not primarily interested in where *muertos* eventually rest. They were curious about the bodies of the *muertos*, and what they can do, and how they exist in relations to others. In Matthews's words, seems to exemplify a freshness of perspective that is often hard for adults to achieve, even if the children's claims developed within an adult-dominant philosophical context.

In approaching and assessing Tianguistengan children's philosophies of death, adults would do well to carefully consider death as a kind of becoming. What if we viewed death not in terms of the end of something—or in terms of the final destination of a disembodied soul—but rather, as an act of becoming a metaphysically distinct kind of being? This would inspire additional questions such as: what being would that be? What would our bodies look like, and what would our powers be? How would others treat us in our new state? I propose that to think productively with Tianguistengan children on this point, adults should try to remember what it is like to be a child looking forward to their next birthday, or to their adolescence or adulthood. From such a perspective, is becoming a *muerto* more or less exciting and frightening than becoming an adult? And what can this teach us about both death and life?

A second notable feature of Tianguistengan children's philosophy of death is that it is significantly less speciesist than many other, human-centered accounts. Recall that when asked whether they knew someone who died, the children immediately discussed, at length, the deaths of animals that were dear to them, and did so prior to discussing human deaths. Indeed, most of our conversation on this topic focused on one child's aunt's poisoned cat, and another child's family's deceased cow. This appears to coincide with empirical evidence demonstrating that children are generally less speciesist than adults (See Wilks et al 2021 and McGuire et al. 2022). It is also understandable in the context of Xantolo/Día de los Muertos, in which a special day—usually October 27th—is reserved for constructing an altar for one's deceased pets. In Catholicism, October 4th is devoted to the

blessing of pets as part of the Feast of St. Francis de Assisi, the patron saint of animals. Furthermore, we have seen that in Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death, a dog accompanies the dead on their journeys through Mictlán.

Thinking with Tianguistengan children's philosophy, then, we might take inspiration from their emphasis on, and concern for, the deaths of non-human animals. What if we considered the existential and moral challenges of death, first and foremost, in relation to the deaths of non-human animals? From an ethical perspective, there are good reasons to shift our emphasis in this way—after all, humans make up a mere 0.1 percent of all life on Earth (but have “destroyed” 83 percent of all wild mammals) (Carrington 2018). Perhaps, then, a philosophical focus on non-human deaths, exemplified by Tianguistengan children, would better enable us to connect our existential qualms about death to major ethical and political challenges articulated within the fields of environmental and animal ethics.

I submit that this also opens the door to philosophical reflection on death that does not automatically “center” the notion of a human soul whose afterlife journey depends on whether one was “good” or “bad” during one's life—and in so doing, it generates space for non-Western perspectives on death. What does a non-human animal soul look like, and sound like? (See also Chao et al 2022). Can a non-human animal become a (material) *muerto*? How should humans and non-humans mourn the lost animals? And, finally, what can this teach us about human deaths?

A third and final element of Tianguistengan children's philosophies of death that I shall highlight here is their tacit acknowledgement of the silliness of death. Recall that in the very same conversations in which we explored sad elements of death—a child literally cried about her aunt's poisoned cat, and a boy mourned his family's deceased cow—the children danced, sang, laughed, and jumped about *muertos* dancing their way out of their graves (*vienen bailando*). It is scary, and also rather fun, to imagine *muertos* emerging from their graves—not because they want to frighten us, as the aforementioned song goes, but because they want to dance. We might describe this as a form of philosophical play, in which death, and becoming a *muerto*, is pondered through the unstructured performance of roles that was supported by Tianguistengan teachers preparing for the annual Xantolo school performance in the town center (for further discussion on children's philosophical play, see Stanley and Lyle 2016)

This can also be contextualized in terms of Day of the Dead celebrations throughout Mexico, in which Mexicans are known to “laugh at death,” and “play with death” (certain Halloween traditions—which are often eschewed by

Tianguistengan adults despite, and because of, their growing popularity in Mexico—also involve a sort of playing with death). Tianguistengan children perhaps take this one step further, by literally dancing and singing about death in the context of a philosophical conversation that also involved tears and mourning. Their philosophical approach to death is just as silly as it is profound, and for the children in question, there is not contradiction here.

Thinking with Tianguistengan children about death, we might pursue some taboo questions. Is there anything funny, and/or fun, about the idea of death? How might the living play at being *muertos*? What is more serious, life or death? Should we fear *muertos*, or, as the song goes, should we acknowledge that they really just want to dance? It also raises questions about whether ancient philosophical traditions may have had humoristic understandings of death that may be lost on contemporary readers. Thus, with humor and silliness in mind, we might revisit philosophies of death with which we feel familiar to see what we might learn (Did Socrates think death was funny? Did Nezahuacóyotl?).

I hope to have shown, in this section and throughout this paper, that Tianguistengan children have a unique philosophy of death from which both adults and children can learn a great deal if they consider it with care. Not only are the children in question *capable* of doing philosophy, as Philosophy for Children practitioners have long maintained, but they *have a philosophy* for others to analyze and study. Tianguistengan children's philosophies of death stipulate that when we die, we *become muertos*—a frightening, exciting metaphysical transition that may even be a type of personal growth. Such death is also silly, and funny, and it is not limited to humans. Tianguistengan children's philosophy can be helpfully contextualized by considering possible connections to Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death that are influential in the region, but the children do more than simply parrot the philosophical views of adults. Children, *qua* children, have a unique philosophical perspective that can be at least partially grasped by adults through Philosophy for Children pedagogy—though problems of interpretation stemming from social hierarchies and other epistemic difficulties will also render adult interpretations (such as this one) contested and incomplete.

I also hope to have contributed, in this paper, to Mexican philosophy by analyzing and foregrounding Tianguistengan children's unique philosophical views on death, thus adding to collective understanding of Mexican philosophical approaches to life's most important questions. Furthermore, I hope to contribute to Philosophy for Children scholarship by arguing that children not only do, but also have, philosophy. On a pedagogical level, we can adjust our pre-college

philosophy “teaching” by recognizing that a *children’s philosophy* may emerge in the Philosophy for Children classroom, and anticipating and celebrating this in our lesson plans. Following Emmerman’s aforementioned call for a “middle ground” approach to pre-college philosophical pedagogy, I believe that we can study children’s philosophy not only by allowing children to select philosophical questions, but also, by carefully attending to the way in which they answer—or choose not to answer—the philosophical questions that adults pose.

Most importantly, while I certainly cannot claim to successfully represent the views of all Tianguistengan children—or even those in my class—I hope to have shown that children’s perspectives on life’s most important questions ought to be taken far more seriously. Children are not simply capable of showing off their philosophical skills to grownups; they actually have important things to teach us, and they can help us transform our world for the better. As I have explored in this paper, Tianguistengan children’s views on death are potentially transformative on existential, aesthetic and political levels, and if adults ignore them, it is also our loss.⁵

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