

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE | PEER REVIEWED

# Honoring Día de los Muertos as a Mexican American Music Therapist: Individual and Community-Based Experiences

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## Abstract

*Día de los Muertos* plays a significant role in Mexican American culture and has implications for how communities in the borderlands process experiences of death and dying. This article will describe the socio-historical context of this annual celebration, outline recommendations for establishing a community *ofrenda* in music therapy programs, and discuss culturally informed music experiences for individual and community-based music therapy treatment.

**Keywords:** Mexican American; music therapy; grief; Rio Grande Valley

*It is not true that we live, it is not true that we endure on earth. I must leave the beautiful flowers, I must go in search of the mysterious realm! Yet for a brief moment, let us make the fine songs ours.*

Anonymous Aztec poem, Chalco (Sayer, 1994)

## Introduction

*Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) plays an important role in Mexican American culture and has implications for how communities such as the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) along the southernmost border of Texas process death and dying. With cultural sensitivity, traditions surrounding this holiday can increase rapport with clients and create a cultural space for expression and healing. The purpose of this article is to highlight the cultural significance of traditions surrounding *Día de los Muertos* and to provide considerations for incorporating

these practices in the context of music therapy treatment. This article will address the socio-historical context of *Día de los Muertos*, outline recommendations for establishing a community *ofrenda* in music therapy programs and discuss various culture-centered music experiences for music therapy treatment.

Please note that these recommendations are not concrete, but rather a starting point for music therapists who are looking to provide this cultural space for their clients or community. It is also important to acknowledge that traditions surrounding this holiday vary depending on regions and cultural subgroups. These recommendations have been shaped through my work as a music therapist in the RGV at a private practice that is centered in culturally-informed music therapy and music-based community wellness. This framework has developed following seven years of work in my home community and has been molded by community engagement, shared cultural experiences, client interactions, experiences from mentorship in *curanderismo* practices, and reflections on my own clinical experiences. These recommendations are reflective of a predominately Mexican American community in the southernmost region of the Texas-Mexico border.

### Clinician's Perspective

I am a Mexican American music therapist living and working in the Southmost part of Texas. My family has lived in the RGV along the Texas-Mexico border for generations—long before *Tejas* was part of the United States. Manifest Destiny and the colonization of these borderlands have left a large imprint in our world. I've heard this region described as a world between the worlds. Sometimes it feels like the 956 (our area code) is its own world and we've adapted to its changes in order to survive. They tried to erase our language and they stole our lands. They forced assimilation to American culture but never fully accepted us into it. For generations, Mexican Americans were second class citizens.

Part of this process included the erasure of our cultural traditions and rituals. I learned about *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) when I took a Spanish class in junior high school. That year, our teacher collected one or two dimes from every student and then made the fifteen-mile round trip to cross the border and buy everyone a sugar skull for our class *ofrenda*. Nobody in my family had ever really talked about *Día de los Muertos* before, and it wasn't something we actively celebrated or acknowledged when I was growing up.

I am the youngest of my generation by many years, so I experienced loss frequently as a child. I never had the opportunity to meet my grandfather on my dad's side and his mother, my grandmother, passed away when I was only nine months old. When I was four years old, I lost my grandmother on my mother's side of the family as well as my great aunt and a close cousin who was only thirty at the time. Those are my earliest memories—my starting point to understanding the circle of life. I've lost many others along the way including *tías abuelas* and *tíos abuelos* (great-aunts and great-uncles), cousins, mentors, friends, and now clients. I found myself working in hospice early in my clinical journey. I am grateful for the music therapists who guided me in processing my own understanding of grief and who showed me how to provide the space for others experiencing loss. Those experiences have also led me here to this topic.

Since returning to the RGV to work as a music therapist in this community, I found myself initiating more socio-cultural conversations with my family members. Why haven't we celebrated these traditions? Why didn't we make an *altar*<sup>1</sup> and put up photos of the people we loved so dearly? A deep dive into my cultural history led me to understand how

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<sup>1</sup> Although altar is spelled the same in both English and Spanish, I italicize it throughout the article to distinguish my pronunciation in Spanish.

much was truly erased over the years. In many ways, it was easier for people in our community to survive if we left our traditions behind. It was safer. There were more opportunities if we spoke English and assimilated quickly or quietly into American culture. In other ways, cultural shifts are a natural part of life and as time goes on, changes in cultural traditions are an inevitable part of the human experience.

My parents remember how my grandparents visited the cemetery during *Día de los Muertos* to leave flowers at the gravesites of our deceased relatives, but they had never personally put up an *altar* in our home. Their familial experiences were rooted in the Catholic church and traditions of All Saints Day and All Souls Day. However, within the last few years, I've witnessed a shift in our region—a reclaiming of our longstanding values and traditions. I feel the empowerment of our community within every community *ofrenda*, in every song that is sung, and through every loved one that is recognized. I am proud to honor my loved ones and share their stories through this sacred, cultural celebration of life. I've also been able to witness my parents reconnect with these traditions by setting up their own *ofrendas* and making this tradition a special part of their individual lives and spiritual communities.

Decorating and setting up the *ofrenda* is a deep, evocative experience—one that has given me the space to reclaim rituals that have been lost along the way and connect with my ancestors who are no longer with us. *Día de los Muertos* has become a tradition very close to my heart and I've had the honor and privilege of creating a community *ofrenda* at my private practice in the Rio Grande Valley each year for the last four years. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my cultural experiences in this space and I invite you along for the journey....

### ***Día de los Muertos* Among the Borderlands**

It was November 1st. The presence of our loved ones filled the room. Copal incense lingered in the air. Candle lights flickered behind the photos of our family members. Some were familiar faces who left us many years ago. Some were faces I never imagined would be on the *ofrenda* for the first time this year. But I knew they were here with us. My eyes wandered up and down the tiered stand, each layer filled with *cempasúchil* (orange marigolds), *calaveras* (skulls), incense, and *alebrijes* (figurines). I sat in front of the *ofrenda* for a moment and closed my eyes. Suddenly, I was surrounded with the spirit of my community. In the weeks leading up to this moment, our team of music therapists and recreational therapists had carefully prepared the *altar*. Therapists, clients, and community members were invited to submit photos and share stories of their loved ones. As I sat in our lobby, my mind was filled with their memories and my heart was full of appreciation. My eyes flooded with tears as *Amor Eterno* played in the background. At this moment, I was reunited with all of them. I thanked them for visiting and wished them well in their journey, wherever that has led them....

### **History and Cultural Context**

*Día de los Muertos* is a sacred tradition that has been a part of Mexican culture for thousands of years and dates back to the indigenous, *Mexica* people now commonly referred to as the Aztecs (Murray, 2014). Like many aspects of Mexican culture, *Día de los Muertos* is a blending of pre-Columbian indigenous, Roman Catholic, and Spanish traditions (Marchi, 2009). It was initially a month-long celebration that was deeply rooted in the honoring of ancestors; however, it was later changed by Christian missionaries to align with the Catholic holidays All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day after attempts to erase these traditions were unsuccessful (Marchi, 2009). These traditions are embedded into our history and

culture, and they have shaped Mexican American perspectives on life and death for centuries. Although *Día de los Muertos* is commonly associated with Mexican customs, it is now celebrated by Latine cultures across Central America, South America, and in Chicane communities across the United States (Marchi, 2009). Vargas (2019) describes the process of these traditions:

Day of the Dead helps us to feel closer to our loved ones, both living and deceased. It is a powerful tradition of life embracing death, in which we deeply reflect on our own lives. We come to the realization that we must live life to the fullest, with utmost compassion and love for one another. We realize that it is not death we should fear, but rather the unlived life. (p. 149)

Escalante (2015) recognized the importance of *Día de los Muertos* for migrants and immigrants living in the US as means of staying connected to their cultural heritage and homelands. In the RGV, *Día de los Muertos* is recognized as a major holiday and is celebrated throughout various social contexts including local festivals, restaurants, academic programs, community settings, museums, and at home with family. *Día de los Muertos* takes place every year on November 1st and 2nd and is known for its themes of celebration and remembrance. In the 1700s, *Día de los Muertos* was said to have generated the largest annual market in Mexico City and recently, the holiday gained popularity leading to increased commercialization (Sandoval, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative that these traditions are integrated into therapeutic spaces with respect, education, and cultural humility.

### **Music Therapy, Grief, and Bereavement**

Music therapy has been utilized with clients experiencing grief and bereavement through songwriting (Dalton & Krout, 2006; Roberts & McFerran, 2013), legacy projects (Love et al., 2022), grief choirs (DiMaio, 2019), and vocal psychotherapy with imaginal dialogue (Iliya, 2015). Grief-specific music therapy assists clients in acceptance of their loss, emotional expression, adjustment to life without their deceased loved one, and finding a connection to their deceased loved one (Iliya, 2015). The therapeutic relationship plays an important role in helping clients process their grief (Iliya, 2015); and more specifically, a culturally-informed therapeutic alliance that incorporates cultural traditions can further strengthen Latine clients' experiences during traditions such as *Día de los Muertos* (de León, 2023).

### **Decolonizing Xicanx Ancestral Connections**

Before we move into the traditions surrounding *Día de los Muertos*, I feel that it's important to provide context to the term "ancestors," as they are a central focus during this time. In the context of Xicanx culture, ancestors are defined as "anyone who has ever been incarnated here on Earth or elsewhere who we want to honor as our ancestor" (Buenaflores, 2023, p. 3). Ancestors are not always associated with direct blood relatives and rather seen as an intuitive selection process that expands to honor soul connections with cultural legends, deceased mentors, and sacred lands. Ancestors were honored and invoked during rituals for guidance, protection, aid, social cohesion, and to provide connection to social identity (Buenaflores, 2023).

Over time and as a result of colonization, many Mexican Americans in Texas borderlands have lost touch with their ancestral and indigenous roots, a process that is said to cause a form of *susto* or traumatic soul loss in sociohistorical and spiritual contexts (Zavaleta & Salinas Jr, 2009). Tejanx and Xicanx indigenous communities center cultural reclamation

as healing for individuals who became detribalized and mislabeled as “Hispanic” (Indigenous Cultures Institute, 2024). Spaces such a *nepantla* spirituality have emerged in efforts to encompass the liminal space many experience in the borderlands, the “*ni de aquí, ni de allá.*” *Nepantla* “facilitates the bridging of and joining of these worlds through ritual transformation” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 28). Through the rituals of *Día de los Muertos*, we honor our loved ones who have completed their journey in the physical realm. We cherish their memory and keep their *cuentos* alive. We remember that their stories are medicine and provide context for who we are and where we have been. We bring healing into our *tonalli* and our collective hearts. We deepen our understanding of death and, in turn, our perspective of living. Medina (2019) says:

Decolonizing our relationship with death is central to living life. Our Indigenous ancestors knew that sustaining our relationships with our dead is central to our well-being and is a responsibility based on reciprocity. We remember the dead, and, in return, they renew the living. (p. 119–120)

Our ancestors are seen as a guiding force throughout the process of cultural reclamation as it relates to our inner, familial, cultural, and collective journeys. During *Día de los Muertos*, we have opportunities to sit in this space and with our loved ones. Buenaflores (2023) describes our ancestral connections in the context of *nepantla*:

In *Nepantla* spirituality, we are rooted by our ancestors. Our ancestors are the ones who anchor us with a feeling of belonging to something greater than us, something divine and beautiful. They guide us as we shape, reclaim, and define our path and purpose. They root us into a history that becomes a part of our beloved identities. In *Nepantla* spirituality, we are the healers, healing our ancestral lineage, being healed by our ancestors reclaiming our esteemed ancestors. (p. 1)

## Building a Community Ofrenda: The Essential Components

The *ofrenda*, also known as an *altar*, is one of the most important elements of *Día de los Muertos*. It is the vessel through which we connect with our loved ones and guide their spirits back to our home. Building a community *ofrenda* can be an evocative experience and should be prepared with careful considerations and respect. The following process is one that naturally unfolded at my private practice as we prepared for these traditions each year. It is important to note that these recommendations are not concrete, but rather, a collection of experiences that have been implemented in efforts to provide a culturally informed space for our community to connect, share, and participate with *Día de los Muertos* traditions. The basic structure of these traditions can be categorized into four components: education, preparation, individual and community experiences, and ceremony.

### Education

Musical multicultural competency is an integral part of music therapy practice (Hadley & Norris, 2016). Lee and Park (2013) suggest that all therapeutic interactions reflect cross-cultural and multicultural experiences. For this reason, we begin our celebrations with an educational workshop which provides all therapists in the program with a basic understanding of the sociocultural context of the traditions. This educational seminar is typically held the last week of September and focuses on the history, traditions, and significance of *Día de los Muertos*.

Many of the therapists on our team have a connection to this region. Some have been

born and raised here. Some have moved here and married into families with longstanding histories in the area. Others have found a home here through shared cultural experiences. Some identify with other cultures and are not familiar with Mexican American culture. This variation in cultural experiences within a single music therapy program can reflect various levels of identification in South Texas. Similarly, clients also experience varying levels of identification with cultural values, social expectations, and traditions (de León, 2023); therefore, providing therapists with education about these traditions can aid the therapist in understanding the worldview of the client and navigating cultural experiences in a way that is meaningful to the client.

For example, some clients may identify with this holiday as a literal experience, where the souls of loved ones are physically present at the *ofrenda* whereas other clients may identify with the rituals as a more symbolic expression of connecting with loved ones through reminiscence and community. Some may reject the traditions altogether. Others may associate it with negative spiritual forces. It is the role of the therapist, then, to be aware of the historical, cultural, and social aspects of this holiday and assess whether, when, and to what extent it's appropriate to incorporate these traditions into the therapeutic space. It also provides the therapist with context of the client's worldview to honor their individual experience in the therapeutic space.

Whitehead-Pleaux et al. (2017) describe considerations for culturally-competent music therapy assessment including the client's culture(s) of heritage, generation, location, identification, socioeconomic status, disability, religion, and survivor culture(s). Drawing from their expanded music therapy assessment, one might consider the following in the context of *Día de los Muertos*:

- What is the client's level of identification with *Día de los Muertos*?
- What is the client's relationship to traditions surrounding *Día de los Muertos*?
- What role do these traditions play in their perception of grief, death, dying and the holiday itself?
- What aspects of these traditions does the client resonate with?
- What aspects of these traditions does the client reject or choose not to identify with?
- Does the client feel comfortable incorporating musical or nonmusical aspects of these traditions into the therapeutic space?
- Does the client have familial connections associated with these traditions?
- To what degree is the client willing to engage in these traditions? Would individual or community-based experiences be appropriate for this client?
- Does the client have spiritual preconceptions surrounding these traditions?

This is not an all-encompassing list, but a starting point for clinicians to consider when and if it is appropriate to introduce these traditions into the therapeutic space. It is also important to, again, acknowledge the wide variation in these practices between cultural subgroups and regions. Incorporating client-led and client-centered experiences can minimize countertransference or appropriation and promote cultural authenticity for clients who resonate with experiences surrounding this celebration. Similarly, therapists may ask themselves these very questions to assess any potential bias or other beliefs that may shape their approach or presence in the session during this time of the year in Mexican American communities.

The educational presentation provided to therapists on our team typically includes the history of *Día de los Muertos*, current practices in the RGV surrounding *Día de los Muertos*, elements of the *ofrenda*, culturally informed music experiences, song recommendations, assessment techniques, and examples of regional events and community festivities. Together, these components promote cultural sensitivity to navigate upcoming clinical experiences.

## Preparation

At our private practice, preparation for *Día de los Muertos* typically begins the first week of October and commences with the preparation of the *ofrenda*. It is also common for personal *ofrendas* to be built on October 30th or October 31st; however, we typically begin our preparations early to give our clients and fellow therapists multiple opportunities to engage with and decorate the *ofrenda*. Our team, comprised of both music therapists and recreational therapists, comes together to set up and decorate the *ofrenda* with culturally significant items. Mirroring our culture's collective nature, the team is encouraged to take part in this together. Team members gather materials from all over the RGV as well as neighboring border cities in northern Mexico. Therapists are invited to bring photos of their loved ones and are given a space to share memories or stories as they place items on the *altar*. It's a shared experience of culture, ritual, family, and admiration. It can also be an opportunity for therapists to set an intention for themselves or their community in this sacred space.

There is much variation in the structure of the *altar* itself. In some traditions, *ofrendas* are a single tier with elements placed on the same level. In other traditions, the *ofrenda* may have three levels to symbolize heaven, earth, and the underworld (The Grace Museum, n.d.). Significant items associated with *Día de los Muertos* are placed on the *ofrenda* with cultural and/or spiritual intention. Some of the items placed on or around the *ofrenda* may include, but are not limited to:

- food (often the preferred foods of loved ones) and water to replenish loved ones after their journey (Arredondo & Capistrán-López, 2017)
- salt (sometimes shaped as a crucifix) to purify the souls of loved ones (Nalewicki, 2019)
- candles (one for each loved one) or lanterns which create pathways to guide spirits to their loved ones (Arredondo & Capistrán-López, 2017)
- photos of deceased loved ones to attract the spirits and guide them home (Nalewicki, 2019)
- religious artifacts (Arredondo & Capistrán-López, 2017)
- *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), a circular sweet bread with a bone-shaped cross pattern on the top of the bread (Nalewicki, 2019)
- copal incense (from the Nahuatl word for incense, *copalli*) to purify and protect the space. It is also said to symbolize a transformative experience as the incense moves from a physical state to an energetic smoke (The Grace Museum, n.d.).
- *xoloitzcuintli* figurines, an ancient breed of dogs, and *alebrijes* which are said to guide spirits along their journey (The Grace Museum, n.d.)
- colorful displays of *papel picado* (perforated paper), often decorated with designs of skulls, flowers, etc. to symbolize the "fragility of life" and incorporate the wind element (Nalewicki, 2019)
- *calaveras* and *catrinas* (Marchi 2009)
- *cempasúchil* (orange marigolds) whose scent attracts spirits to the *ofrenda* (Nalewicki, 2019)
- monarch butterflies to represent the spirits of deceased loved ones. Their migrational patterns align with the time of these traditions (The Grace Museum, n.d.)

## Individual, Familial, and Community Experiences

Throughout the remainder of October, our focus shifts from preparing the *ofrenda* to active participation with the *ofrenda* on both an individual and community level. Throughout

this time, we invite clients to participate in music experiences in their individual sessions and we offer opportunities for clients to engage with the community *ofrenda*. It is important to also note that clients may host their own traditions and rituals in their home and that the music experiences within this section can also be provided in conjunction with the client's personal and/or familial traditions. Some clients may select to keep their pictures at their home *ofrenda* but choose to create paper crafts to place on the community *ofrenda*. Some therapists may not create a personal *ofrenda* at home and engage solely with the community *ofrenda*. It's important to honor all participants' experiences and respect the meaning of a client's unique, individualized engagement.

Music is a conduit for expression, passion, and connection. Regional music tells the story of our people by sharing the experiences of Mexican Americans over the last century (Peña, 1999). Music therapists are then in a unique position to honor this culture from an intimate space through a modality that centers music as means for healing. Through the sociohistorical lens of music, clients are able to share memories of their ancestors as the music itself is a symbolic representation of the journey our loved ones faced. Much has been found along this journey—pain, hardship, love, triumph—all in the name of survival in this country. This journey has been woven into song lyrics, melodies, musical styles, and regional genres.

Music therapy has the ability to create a safe space for experiences where cultural values, specifically family-centered values (*familismo*) can be honored within the therapeutic relationship (de León, 2023). With music as a centering vehicle, the experience of *Día de los Muertos* can be shared, processed, and honored in a clinical context for clients who identify with this cultural tradition. Music therapists can welcome aspects of these traditions into their clinical practice through recreative, improvisation, composition, and receptive experiences.

Recreative experiences in music therapy are described as a process where “the client learns, sings, plays, or performs precomposed music or reproduces any kind of musical form presented as a model” (Bruscia, 2014, p. 131). There is much potential in the use of recreative experiences throughout this cultural celebration including:

- singing or playing of client-preferred songs, family-preferred songs, or loved-one preferred songs
- singing or playing of songs with themes of loss, grief, family, culture, or ancestry
- performing of songs related to *Día de los Muertos* for loved ones or at the *ofrenda* (shown in Table 1); or
- therapeutic music lessons incorporating the above themes

**Table 1.** Songs for *Día de los Muertos*.

Song Title	Artist(s)	Year
Amor Eterno	Rocío Dúrcal	1948
Calaverita	La Santa Cecilia	2015
Cempasúchil	Monsieur Periné	2015
Cien Años	Pedro Infante	1953
El Reloj	Los Tres Caballeros	1957
La Barca de Oro	Pedro Infante	1978
La Llorona	Chavela Vargas	1961
Mis Muertos	Julieta Venegas	2019
Proud Corazón	Anthony Gonzalez	2017
Remember Me (Lullaby)	Gabriella Flores, Gael García Bernal, and Libertad García Fonzi	2017



Song Title	Artist(s)	Year
Seguiré Viva	Julieta Venegas	2019
Sin Ti	Los Panchos	1947

Clients may also connect to this holiday through receptive experiences, where “the client listens to music and responds to the experience silently, verbally, or in another modality” (Bruscia, 2014, p. 134). Within the context of *Día de los Muertos*, the music therapy space may include:

- client-preferred songs
- family-preferred songs
- loved-one preferred songs
- songs with themes of loss, grief, family, culture, or ancestry
- guided imagery experiences related to the rituals, traditions, or *Día de los Muertos* celebrations
- relaxation experiences
- incorporation of sensory elements from these rituals (i.e., incense, marigold flowers, foods)
- songs for reminiscence
- music-guided storytelling
- music-guided art experiences
  - listening to cultural music while creating decorations for the *ofrenda* (*papel picado*, paper marigolds, decorating picture frames, preparing food items)
  - listening to cultural music while scrapbooking or creating/reviewing photo albums
  - legacy projects
- songs for regression
- music for relaxation or meditation

Within these recreative experiences, clients are given the opportunity to reconnect with loved ones through song. Some clients may have spent time separated from family members on the other side of the border. In the music, they can relive positive memories with their family and restore a connection to their loved ones. Some clients may have lost parts of their culture due to generations of assimilation or acculturation. Familiar, cultural music and rituals can then serve as means of reclaiming their cultural identity, rekindling sacred traditions, and expressing parts of themselves that were once perceived as lost or distant.

In improvisatory experiences, “the client makes up music while playing or singing, extemporaneously creating a melody, rhythm, song, or instrumental piece” (Bruscia, 2014, p. 130). During this time, clients may benefit from an instrumental or vocal improvisation to process:

- feelings, thoughts, experiences, or memories related to deceased loved ones
- feelings, thoughts, experiences, or memories related to the ritual, tradition, or holiday
- related themes of loss, grief, family, culture, or ancestry
- song improvisation using melodies or accompaniment from cultural music; or
- feelings, thoughts, experiences related to death and dying

Compositional experiences refer to the process of writing a song or instrumental piece in music therapy (Bruscia, 2014). These experiences can serve as a vehicle for clients to speak directly with loved ones through song and communicate their regrets, wishes, memories, appreciation, adoration, and connection. This can include:

- songs created from letters written to loved ones
- musical poems written on related themes of loss, grief, family, culture, or ancestry
- song parodies using familiar, client-preferred, or loved one-preferred songs
- instrumental compositions that incorporate themes found in these traditions
- song collages using cultural music

## Ceremonies

All these experiences throughout the month of October lead us to November 1–2. During these two days, the veil between both the spiritual world and the physical world is said to become very thin so that loved ones are able to return to visit their family members. Celebrations held throughout the RGV include music, *serenatas*, food, and community *ofrendas*. Clients and their families may visit the burial sites of loved ones or spend time at their personal *ofrendas*. Mariachis may also visit cemeteries to sing songs for loved ones. In some traditions, there may be days designated for pets, children and adults. Experiences held within the therapeutic space may serve as a way for clients to share the stories of their loved ones and connect with others through shared music experiences (i.e., drumming, singing, sharing of preferred songs). During this time, it is common for individuals to interact with the elements of the *ofrenda* by burning incense, displaying prepared food, or lighting candles.

## Final Reflection – The Path

To close this space, I would like to share a poem that I wrote to reflect upon my personal experiences of death and life as well as my experiences celebrating *Día de los Muertos* over the last few years:

There is a mysterious path we have all traveled –  
a road hidden in the depths of our memory.  
It carries our Being from journey to journey, spirit to form, thought to creation, consciousness to life, life to death.  
We may not remember its name, nor its building blocks,  
but its essence remains with us always.  
It is buried in our collective consciousness.  
It is home to the passage of life.  
It led us here into existence and one day,  
we will walk through it again to return to our spiritual world.

As we move through time and space in this lifetime,  
we face many challenges.  
Our people were not welcomed with open arms in the new world.  
We crossed many borders and  
have been forced to abandon our values and our traditions.  
We were stripped of our culture and subsequently,  
our direct connection to whom we have always been.  
This hurt has been passed down from generation to generation in our entire Being,  
reverberating through our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls,  
causing a thick fog to form over what was once a clear path.

Many have traveled down this road –  
ancestors, friends, fellow travelers.  
They dwell in the sacred lands now,

gently awaiting their next steps,  
encompassed in the Infinite.  
From where they are, they can guide us and inspire us.  
There may appear to be a great distance between us,  
but when we connect with our deepest Self, they are with us.  
They are always with us and for a few hours every year,  
they can once again walk beside us.  
We can smile in their midst,  
cry in their presence,  
and dance with their spirit.  
They are alive in our memory.  
They live on in our hearts.  
We are connected in our souls.

This road is inevitable.  
We must all walk along it.  
As we begin to heal, the fog becomes more transparent.  
The more of the road we can see,  
the less we fear the unknown.  
Until suddenly, everything is visible.

## Conclusion

Traditions surrounding *Día de los Muertos* are significant in Mexican American culture and have an impact on therapeutic experiences in music therapy in the RGV. Therapists practicing in this region must have a basic understanding of the history and social context of *Día de los Muertos* to facilitate various types of clinical interventions including culturally informed improvisation, song re-creation, composition, and receptive experiences. As we continue to decolonize music therapy practices in the borderlands, it is important that we learn about the history of our traditions and how they may impact the healing process for our community.

## About the Author

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