

Body Politics and the figure of Pancho Villa: From National Exclusion to Regional Resurrection/ Políticas del cuerpo y la figura de Pancho Villa: Desde la exclusión nacional a la resurrección regional

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Long excluded from the official pantheon of national heroes, Pancho Villa's remains were finally moved to the Monumento a la Revolución in 1976. However, in 1994 the state of Chihuahua began an annual celebration, las Jornadas Villistas, which place Parral, Chihuahua as the center of Villa's death cult. This study examines the regional reappropriation of Villa's body and legacy through popular celebration and the placement of las Jornadas Villistas within the larger context of the politics surrounding the treatment of the general's remains since the time of his 1923 assassination.

KEYWORDS: Pancho Villa; Las Jornadas Villistas; Body Politics; Mexican Popular Celebrations.

Oficialmente excluidos del panteón de los héroes nacionales, los restos de Pancho Villa fueron trasladados, finalmente, al Monumento a la Revolución en 1976. Sin embargo, en 1994, el Estado de Chihuahua inauguró una celebración anual, las "Jornadas Villistas", que considera a Parral como el centro de culto a la muerte de Villa. Este artículo examina la reapropiación regional del cuerpo de este dirigente y de su legado, mediante las celebraciones públicas y la ubicación de las "Jornadas Villistas", dentro del contexto político relacionado con el tratamiento y emplazamiento de los restos de Villa desde su asesinato en 1923.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pancho Villa; Las jornadas villistas; Celebraciones populares mexicanas.

Pancho Villa is one of the most well-known, and yet polemic figures in Mexican history. Popularly regarded by some as a national hero, and as a violent bandit by others, his contribution to the Revolution was not officially recognized by the central state until 1966,¹ and his remains were not transferred to the national *Monumento a la Revolución* in Mexico City until 1976. Until that time, his body, like his legacy, was excluded from the official pantheon of national heroes despite his national popularity. Thus, the general's remains were marginalized to the community of Parral, Chihuahua, the site of his 1923 assassination, for over half a century. Although the federal government met with few objections to the 1976 removal of Villa's remains, today the community of Parral popularly claims that the general's body, like his spirit, never left local soil. In fact, in 1994 the state of Chihuahua, together with local municipal authorities, initiated an annual celebration of *Villismo*, known as "*las Jornadas Villistas*," which clearly place Parral as the center of the general's death cult and the true location of his final resting place, and revolutionary legacy. While not denying Villa's national importance, the organizers of the event thus focus on the general's significance to the cultural identity of the region in question.² In fact, throughout *las Jornadas* the *Instituto Chihuahuense de Cultura* (ICHICULT) travels to municipalities throughout Southern Chihuahua where it presents a diverse program of artistic and cultural activities, including performances of regional dance, music, theatre, and children's workshops, which are meant to reinforce regional identity, while promoting cultural tourism around the "*Ruta de Villa*." While these performances are reminiscent of the central state's cultural missions of the postrevolutionary period, here the goal is to promote regional, not national interests and cultural identity.

The primary focus of this study is the final days of *las Jornadas Villistas* (July 19-21) in Parral which include numerous performances of *Villismo* that allow for the temporary, corporal resurrection of a long dead revolutionary hero. On July 19th, three thousand mounted *Villistas* descend upon Parral in the *Gran Cabalgata Villista*. Then, on July 20th thousands of tourists and locals flock to the scene of the general's assassination in order to witness the spectacle of his violent end. The celebration culminates with

1 While some mark 1965 as the year of Villa's official recognition, it was not "official" until November 23, 1966 when the *Cámara de Diputados* published a decree in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* that called for Villa's name to be inscribed in the walls of the congressional chamber.

2 ICHICULT, 2005.

the general's wake (July 20), funeral procession, and burial (July 21) where spectator-participants pay their last respects to the departed hero. Although "officially" Villa's remains are located in the nation's capital, these performances directly challenge this placement as they allow the region to effectively reclaim the general's body and memory for its own use. The central government may possess his bones, but in Parral, Chihuahua, Pancho Villa escapes the confines of his grave and speaks to his people. Promotional materials for *las Jornadas* even feature Villa verbally espousing his eternal devotion to the community: "Parral me gusta hasta pa' morirme." In this way, local authorities are able to utilize performance in order to recuperate and reaffirm a regional identity of their own creation. What is more, by participating in the spectacle, either as a spectator or as an actor, the individual is transformed into a new brand of *villista*. Thus, performance serves as an alternative means of preserving, rewriting, and managing regional cultural identity. Yet, apart from the obvious economic benefit of increased tourism, why would the state government of Chihuahua wish to promote Villismo in its southern peripheral communities? By closely examining *las Jornadas Villistas*, I will explore how this complex, government-sponsored resurgence of regionalism³ reflects the region's attempt to contend with the threats of globalization. After all, Villa is heralded as the only *caudillo* of the Revolution to simultaneously confront the forces of both the United States and Mexico. Thus, he defended his *patria chica* against the same external and internal forces that continue to threaten the cultural, economic, and political autonomy of the region. In order to examine this modern-day regional resurrection of Villa, however, it is first necessary to place *las Jornadas Villistas* within the larger context of the politics surrounding the treatment and location of the general's remains since the time of his 1923 assassination.

Villa and the Politics of Postrevolutionary Mexico

During the second phase of the Revolution (1913-1914), Pancho Villa emerged as the leader of the revolutionary forces of Chihuahua and

³ Parra, 2005, p. 7; I find Max Parra's definition of regionalism as "a self-conscious, cultural, political, and emotional attachment to a specific territorial homeland within the space of the nation, sometimes called the '*patria chica*'" particularly useful; however, the *patria chica* (regionalism) can also constitute an alternative space or vantage point from which one can resist, or in a limited manner, escape from the defining grasp of the nation from within, especially as globalization increasingly weakens nationalism.

Durango, the fabled *División del Norte*, that in less than a year became the “undisputed masters of the country.”⁴ At the height of its power, this grassroots popular rebellion, *Villismo*, united between 30,000 and 50,000 soldiers against a common enemy. According to Ilene O’Malley, it was this popularity that led to the general’s exclusion from the postrevolutionary regime’s project,⁵ especially during the period known as the *Maximato* (1925-1935).⁶ The new ruling elite, composed of Villa’s former enemies, was reluctant to rehabilitate the general’s image so soon after the final, divisive years of the Revolution (1916-1920). Thus, while other revolutionary figures were co-opted by the central state and incorporated into national discourse, Villa’s military accomplishments were officially downplayed and silenced. This exclusion was pervasive, as eminent Villa scholar, Friedrich Katz notes: “His [Villa’s] name was scarcely mentioned during commemorations of the Mexican Revolution, no monument to him was set up for many years, and neither the date of his birth nor the date of his death was ever commemorated by official Mexico.”⁷ This absence reflected the central state’s effort to minimize the importance of Villa’s revolutionary legacy and represented a strategic policy to compete with his overwhelming presence in popular culture. In fact, the *caudillo*’s adventures as a bandit and revolutionary were preserved in oral culture through legends, *corridos*, and popular myths, and he remained a favorite topic of the print media well after his death.⁸ According to Ilene O’Malley, the official silencing of Villa’s legacy represented the regime’s “only means to counteract his fame.”⁹ This policy, however, only contributed to Villa’s immense popularity, and ultimately, to his utility as a rebellious figure. Unlike “official” heroes who were largely controlled by the central state, Villa was and is a highly malleable figure whose legacy was open to debate and appropriation, as in the case of *las Jornadas Villistas*.

While Villa’s fame in both Mexico and abroad was undoubtedly a factor in his exclusion from the federal revolutionary project, it is a bit simplistic to label it as the primary cause of the official silencing of his legacy. After all, the state had little trouble incorporating other charismatic figures

4 *Ibidem*, p. 1.

5 O’Malley, 1986, p. 98.

6 The *Maximato* refers to the period in which General Plutarco Elías Calles controlled Mexico as President, or as its de facto leader.

7 Katz, 1998, p. 790.

8 O’Malley, 1986, p. 95.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 98.

into its program. While O'Malley is correct in focusing on the general's notoriety among the popular masses, his absence from political discourse was also directly related to his regional following and the anticentrist politics of Villismo which were incompatible with the economic and political necessities of the central Mexican state during the national reconstruction of the postrevolutionary period.¹⁰ Although the armed phase of the Revolution officially concluded in 1920, rebellions, which threatened national unity, continued throughout the republic's territory. The federal government dealt with such threats through a politics of incorporation, exclusion, and when necessary, repression. For example, the Calles' administration used political appointments and other concessions to neutralize regional *caudillos*, and, at times, resorted to violence.¹¹ Thus, the incorporation of regional populations into the national project was a principal goal of the federation's cultural and political programs. Despite his national military success and popularity, however, Pancho Villa closely identified with his *patria chica* and viewed defending his regional homeland as an expression of his Mexican patriotism.¹² *Villismo* itself incarnated the bellicose, frontier culture of Northern Mexico and was thus based on anticentrist politics that were irreconcilable with the goals of the centrist postrevolutionary regime. As a popular figure that could potentially inspire further uprisings (even posthumously), it was in the central state's interest to reject the image of Villa as a heroic revolutionary general, and officially label him as a bandit. What is more, the postrevolutionary federal government was eager to reestablish its political and economic relationship with the United States. Given Villa's 1916 invasion of Columbus, New Mexico, and the failure of the U.S. Punitive Expedition to capture him, incorporating the famed rebel into its political project would have been imprudent for an administration still seeking the official recognition of its neighbor to the North.¹³ Clearly, a number of factors contributed to the absence of the figure of Villa from postrevolutionary politics. If, as O'Malley argues, the general's popularity among the nation's lower classes heavily influenced

10 While O'Malley outlines Villa's popularity with the "popular classes," she does not discuss his regional following.

11 The two most notable cases of this violence are the central state's suppression of the *Cristero* movement (1926-1928) and the ongoing conflicts with the independent labor movement during this period.

12 For a discussion of Villa's political project see Katz, 1990, pp. 289-294.

13 The U.S. officially recognized the new revolutionary government shortly after the assassination of Villa in 1923.

his official silencing, than it is more specifically his fame within his specific *patria chica*, that is the bellicose frontier culture of the North, and his unpopularity in the U.S. that made Villa and *Villismo* potential threats to the legitimacy of the central state.

Nowhere is the Republic's attempt to marginalize Villa's legacy clearer than in the circumstances surrounding his death and burial.¹⁴ From the moment of his assassination, the treatment of Villa's body was inherently linked to efforts, by both state and federal authorities, to minimize the potential threat of militant Northern regionalism. In fact, in 1923 the governor of the state of Chihuahua, General Ignacio C. Enríquez, did not allow Villa's corpse to be buried in the state capital, despite the fact that the *caudillo* had previously constructed an ornate mausoleum in that city. Later, authorities even blocked his widow's (Luz Corral) attempt to have his remains relocated to this crypt.¹⁵ By failing to recognize the deceased's wishes, Enríquez reaffirmed the federal government's official characterization of Villa as a murderous bandit who did not deserve to be enshrined in such a manner. According to José Socorro Salcido Gómez, the governor also reacted out of fear: "Ignacio C. Enríquez (enemigo de Villa) tuvo temor de traer el cadáver de Villa en procesión de Parral a Chihuahua, por las represalias de los villistas y suscitar más aclaraciones y comentarios a la prensa."¹⁶ Clearly, neither local nor federal authorities wanted the general's remains, or the manner of his death, to receive any unnecessary, and potentially dangerous attention from either the media or the region's population. In Mexico, funerary practice and the remembrance of the dead have long been used as political tools by both the government and the opposition.¹⁷ Transporting Villa's bullet-ridden corpse across the countryside to the state capital, and then through the streets of the city on route to burial in an elegant mausoleum, after a funerary Mass in Chihuahua's cathedral, would have legitimized *Villismo* at a time when the central state was still attempting to consolidate national identity. The performance of such highly meaningful mortuary rituals would have also opened up a space for possible opposition to the national project in Chihuahua's state capital. Thus,

14 Although this discussion focuses on Villa's remains, the manner of his death is also inherently political and linked to the regional/national dynamic; see Lomnitz, 2005, p. 389.

15 Villa left several official and unofficial "widows." Doña Luz Corral was the most active in promoting Villa's memory.

16 Salcido Gómez, 1999, p. 173.

17 See Lomnitz, 2005.

Governor Enríquez's actions were prudent, especially when one considers the region's reaction to the execution of Villa's trusted advisor, general Felipe Angeles, in 1919.¹⁸ When Angeles was transported by rail to Ciudad Chihuahua supporters crowded the stations along the route, and a few days later over 5,000 Chihuahuans participated in his funeral procession. Following Villa's death, authorities did not want a repeat performance of this outpouring of pro-villista support, especially as it could inspire violent reprisals, as *villista* troops had massacred federal troops garrisoned at Santa Rosalia in direct retaliation of Angeles's execution. By murdering and burying Villa in a relatively isolated community in Southern Chihuahua, both Villa and *Villismo* were physically and symbolically marginalized from the center, thus minimizing the potential impact of the general's death and burial. Furthermore, the central state was able to reaffirm its authority over the *patria chica* through the violent acts enacted against Villa's body, as ultimately "the management of death, and indeed the ability to kill, are cornerstones of state sovereignty."¹⁹ In this way, controlling the "management" of Villa's death, that is, the funeral, remembrance, and location of his remains was/is key to national sovereignty. However, the center's ability to "manage" Villa's death, and hence his legacy, has been incomplete. In 1926, the *caudillo's* grave was desecrated by unknown perpetrators who decapitated and stole the general's head. This type of post-mortem vandalism is not without precedent in the Mexican context, especially during times of political fragmentation or national crisis when the center's control of the dead and of historical memory is far from absolute. Villa's decapitation, however, did not diminish the importance of his remains, and in fact only contributed to the significant proliferation of his body in popular culture, as a plethora of theories and myths developed in relation to this macabre event.²⁰ Thus, as local and federal authorities lost control of the *caudillo's* body, his missing head became particularly important, and through oral tradition was turned into a significant regional relic, representative of a haunting or misplaced *Villismo* waiting to be rediscovered by the area's population, that is, the body. Just as Villa survived banishment from the official politics of the postrevolutionary federal state, so to did his remains.

18 For a more detailed description of Angeles's capture, trial, and execution see Katz, 1998, pp. 709-715.

19 Lomnitz, 2005, p. 58.

20 For more on the theories surrounding Villa's decapitation see Braddy, 1960; Vilanova Fuentes, 2003; Singer, 1989; Salcido Gómez, 1999.

Villa and National Reconciliation

Clearly, Pancho Villa and his body became useful symbols of popular resistance following his assassination in 1923. In many ways the revolutionary potential of his memory was perceived as a threat to national integration. While Obregón and Calles dealt with this prospective danger by marginalizing Villa, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) attempted to integrate both Villa and *Villismo*, into the national project in an effort to unify the country, and defuse any possible challenges to the central state's sovereignty.²¹ Thus, Cárdenas called on Mexicans to look past Villa's defects and focus on his contributions to the revolutionary cause. Ultimately, however, the inclusion of *Villismo* and its leader into official revolutionary discourse was left incomplete and largely unfinished during the Cárdenas administration. According to Max Parra, the failure of the government's policy of national reconciliation was inherently linked to poor timing. While Cárdenas may have appreciated the postmortem, political utility of the figure of Pancho Villa, it was simply too soon for the general's former enemies and the sector of the population that had suffered at the hands of the *Villistas* to forgive and forget the *caudillo's* controversial actions during the final years of the Revolution.²² While this may explain the limited success of Cárdenas's change in policy during his presidency, it does not fully account for the general's continued exclusion which lasted well into the 1960s. It is my argument that once again, the (re)evaluation of Villa was (and is) closely related to economic and political realities.

During his administration, Cárdenas utilized widespread agrarian reform, economic nationalism, and revolutionary discourse to consolidate power and unify the country. Regional identities and their symbols were thus valued by the central state only insofar as they facilitated national integration. Once the primary goals of this process of national reconstruction were achieved, Villa and *Villismo* were no longer needed by the central state to legitimize its project. Ultimately, however, the inclusion of *Villismo* and its leader into official revolutionary discourse was left unfinished due to a radical turnaround in the central state's political and economic project which was not compatible with Villa's revolutionary legacy. After 1940, the *Cardenista* plan of development was significantly scaled back and a

²¹ This change was also reflected in the period's literary production, especially in Martín Luis Guzmán's *Memorias de Pancho Villa*. See Parra, 2005, pp. 120-136.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 136.

new, less socially progressive era began, as outlined by Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer:

When General Avila Camacho assumed the presidency, it was clear to many people that the construction of a “Mexican socialism” had ended. The idea that with the end of the Cárdenas administration the Revolution had ended gained acceptance with the passing of years.²³

This marks the beginning of a period known as the “Mexican Miracle” in which the central government adopted conservative policies on issues of social justice and focused on industrializing the country through a policy of import-substitution.²⁴ While under Cardenismo the main goal was to establish a more just society consistent with the Revolution, subsequent administrations focused on the accumulation of capital. As the “Revolution had ended”, there was suddenly little room in the national project for the incorporation of a yet to be domesticated *Villismo*.²⁵

Villa’s body was also relatively “silent” throughout this period. Following the 1926 desecration of his grave, the general’s cadaver (minus the missing head) was supposedly returned to its original resting place and remained there, undisturbed for decades.²⁶ The first commemoration of Villa’s death did not occur until 1959, and it was not organized by state or federal authorities, but rather by a civic group, the *Comité Pro-monumento al C. General de División Francisco Villa*, in Parral. Clearly, while Villa’s body was officially marginalized, it remained significant to the popular sector. Moreover, the simple act of possessing and remembering Villa represented an act of popular defiance to the national project, as according to José Socorro Salcido Gómez, who financially supported these “*ceremonias luctuosas*,” it was still unacceptable to be a *villista* at this time.²⁷ Thus, the precursors to *las Jornadas* were popular commemorations, unsanctioned by state and federal authorities, through which the region’s population reaffirmed the tenets of *Villismo*. However, in 1976 the central state preempted these celebrations as President Luis Echeverría decided that Villa’s remains should be relocated to the national *Monumento a la Revolución* in Mexico

23 Aguilar Camín and Meyer, 1993, p. 158.

24 The “Mexican Miracle” roughly corresponds to the 1940s and 1950s. Most cite the social unrest of the 1960s, most notably the 1968 massacre of Tlatelolco, as the end of the “miracle.”

25 Aguilar Camín and Meyer, 1993, p. 159.

26 In Chihuahua it is popularly believed that Villa’s remains were hidden and replaced with the bones of an anonymous woman.

27 Salcido Gómez, 1999, p. 202.

City, and the date of the *caudillo's* assassination was officially added to the local civic calendar. Hence, some fifty-three years after his assassination, this popular martyr joined the ranks of the “nationalized” dead, as the central state took possession of his bones. On November 18, 1976, the remains of the Centaur of the North were disinterred yet again, and later reburied in the federal capital amid much pomp and circumstance; Villa was finally given the official state funeral he was denied in 1923.²⁸ While this transfer was a consequence of Villa’s official recognition in 1966 and seemed to be the culmination of Cardenismo’s policy of national reconciliation, once again the politics surrounding the location of the general’s body reflected the changing political and economic needs of the central state. In fact, the administration of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) officially recognized Villa in 1966 in order to divert attention from its growing authoritarianism and the clear inconsistencies of the “Mexican Miracle.”²⁹ By co-opting Villa, and claiming to be the heir of *Villismo*, the federal government could confront claims that it was no longer “revolutionary.” While the relocation of Villa’s remains was a result of this policy, it was also part of the political and economic fallout of the 1968 student movement and the Tlatelolco massacre. In an effort to regain legitimacy, the Echeverría administration (1970-1976) cloaked itself in populist rhetoric and opened up the system to self-criticism and dialogue. Yet, by 1976 the Mexican economy was in crisis and the regime attempted to create a new national consensus by updating the revolutionary project through a revision of “its ideological baggage” and a revitalization of “the institutions and the discourse of the Mexican Revolution.”³⁰ Given Villa’s continued popularity, it is not surprising that his reevaluation was included in this effort. This explains why suddenly Villa’s body was included, rather than excluded, from the national pantheon of revolutionary heroes.

The Resurrection of Villa through Performance

From the time of his assassination, Pancho Villa’s body has been a significant object and subject of the struggle between regional and national identities in modern Mexico. According to Friedrich Katz, this corpse

28 Katz, 1998, p. 789.

29 Parra, 2005, p. 164.

30 Aguilar Camín and Meyer, 1993, p. 159.

“seems to have found as little rest in death as it had found in life.”³¹ This is reflected both in the number of times that his remains have been exhumed or displaced (and mutilated) and in the symbolic proliferation of his body through popular myth, public monuments, and performance. As Villa represents the physical incarnation of his *patria chica*, his bones, like his legacy, have continually escaped the central state’s defining grasp. Even the iconic *Monumento a la Revolución* has proved insufficient in containing the general’s corporal presence, as in the early 1990s, José Socorro Salcido Gómez, the attorney and politician who financed the original *ceremonias luctuosas*, claimed that in 1976 federal authorities mistakenly disinterred and memorialized the remains of an anonymous woman that had been placed in the general’s crypt after his 1926 decapitation.³² Ironically, in this alternate regional *historia*, local efforts to protect the general’s corpse from further profanation in the postrevolutionary period thwarted the central government’s plan to memorialize him in 1976. Supported by popular belief and oral tradition, this theory became public just as the state of Chihuahua officially established an elaborate celebration of Villismo, that is, *las Jornadas Villistas*, in 1994. As this annual celebration is organized around the anniversary of Villa’s death, and culminates in the historical reenactment/performance of his assassination, and subsequent wake and burial in Parral, the sudden “discovery” that the general’s body never left the community of Parral seems a bit convenient. In actuality, little has been done to locate the general’s remains, or to test the authenticity of those housed in the *Monumento a la Revolución*. It seems that not knowing the true location of Villa’s remains, which allows for their simultaneous presence in both Parral and Mexico City, serves the immediate interests of all involved.

In many ways, the actual presence of the general’s body is unnecessary as the performances and public spectacles associated with *las Jornadas* allow the region, and the community of Parral in particular, to effectively reclaim the general’s body and memory for its own use. In late July, Villa walks the streets of communities throughout southern Chihuahua and rides his trusted mare “*Siete Leguas*” in a 300 kilometer pilgrimage from Ciudad Chihuahua to Parral. Locals and tourists alike can dress in *villista* regalia, ride in the *Gran Cabalgata*, witness the general’s

31 Katz, 1998, p. 788.

32 For a more complete discussion of this theory see Salcido Gómez, 1999.

murder, and even honor the fallen hero by participating as mourners in a series of public spectacles centered on his death. While this performance of death and the reenactment of funerary ritual may seem unusual, funerals represent a point of contact between the living and the dead; a funeral is a space where past and present briefly coexist, and can be reconciled. What is more, performance allows the past to be “transmitted live,” that is, recreated and experienced in the present as present.³³ It is this transmission or movement of the past to the space of the present through performance that makes Villa’s corporal resurrection possible. Thus, the resurrected Villa of *las Jornadas Villistas* escapes the confines of the past and briefly returns, not to revolutionary Mexico, but rather, to a modern day Parral. In this instance performance allows the spectator and the performer (Villa) to physically coexist and interact. Thus, these performances serve as what Diana Taylor describes as “vital acts of transfer,” that is, performances that allow for the transmission of “social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” from one group or one time to another.³⁴ Thus, the staging of the *Cabalgata*, Villa’s murder, and his burial permit the “transfer” of *Villismo* from the revolutionary past to the present and from one generation to another. During such performances, spectators are transformed into participants, as Diana Taylor explains in her discussion of the spectacles centered on the death of Princess Diana in 1997:

In this particular staging, “the people” are not only consumers but also the constructed of this death. The spectacle of the specter makes the spectator. Instead of mourning, the undifferentiated multitudes consume grief—the recipients, not the agents, of an emotion that is not their own.³⁵

While the events following the death of Princess Diana seem unrelated to *las Jornadas Villistas*, both are performances of death and funerary ritual whose spectators are consumer-participants, constructed and defined by their participation in a complex social drama. Although their similarities are purely formal, a comparison of the two events is revealing. As people around the world were drawn into the press coverage of Diana’s death, and the spectacle of her funeral, they were temporarily cast as mourners of the fallen princess regardless of their particular identities or national affiliations. Just as performance converted non-British subjects into mourners of

³³ Taylor, 2003, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

the “people’s princess,” *las Jornadas Villistas* transform the attendee into a new brand of *villista*. Nowhere is this more evident than during the representation of the general’s murder in the streets of Parral. Moments after Villa is gunned down, a lone woman rushes frantically onto the scene, incessantly screaming: “¡Mi general! ¡NO!” While at first the woman’s ear-piercing wails seem exaggerated, her shock and grief, which befit the violence of the representation, quickly overwhelm the spectator; her grief becomes our grief. And as her anger grows, and she unsuccessfully tries to kill the man who delivered Villa’s *tiro de gracia*, we also desire vengeance. In this way, audience members, regardless of their background, are temporarily unified by this shared experience, as the line between spectator and performer are blurred. Hence, even an outsider can become one of “the people” or “*la gente de Villa*” who simultaneously mourn and celebrate his passing.

Yet, just as the foreign observer can forget that she doesn’t belong, these “vital acts of transfer,” that is, the corporal resurrection of Villa and the performance of *Villismo*, depend upon historical erasure or “forgetting.” Thus, performance allows the *patria chica* to “forget” Villa’s placement in the *Monumento a la Revolución*, as according to Joseph Roach, performance is as much about forgetting as about remembering.³⁶ Each year as Villa’s empty coffin is paraded through the streets of Parral and ceremonies are held at his tomb in *el Panteón Dolores* no mention is made of the general’s other resting place. What is more, the performances of *las Jornadas Villistas* do not recreate a violent, murderous Villa, but rather a martyr who was gunned down in a town he loved. The performances ignore, or more accurately, erase the “unpleasant” aspects of Villa’s legacy, and focus on his victories, veneration, and death cult. For example, the *Gran Cabalgata Villista* recalls the years of the Revolution when Villa lead thousands of *Chihuahuenses* in campaigns across the state, but effectively silences the period when *villistas* were unwelcome in Parral and the general’s former men joined *defensas sociales* to protect themselves from the general turned bandit. What is more, *las Jornadas Villistas* allow Parral to “forget” its historical placement, not as the center of *Villismo*, but rather as the site of its destruction. Once again, this recalls Taylor’s discussion of Princess Diana’s funeral, which she describes as “an act of national conflict and resolution, an act of remembering one Diana by forgetting the others.”³⁷ In this way,

36 Roach, 1996.

37 Taylor, 2003, p. 150.

Taylor explains how the staging of her funeral allowed for the erasure of one Diana, that is the rebellious, transgressive princess, and the creation of another, holier and maternal Diana who took her place in the public imaginary.³⁸ In the same way, performance allows the state of Chihuahua to safely resurrect and remember a Villa of its own creation. If the ritual of a funeral is meant to control and channel the potentially violent emotions and grief of the living, the state-sponsored performance of this ritual in the context of *las Jornadas Villistas* achieves a similar goal. Thus, for a few weeks in late July, Villa can be “safely” resurrected and allowed to walk among us before being safely returned to his grave. Through his resurrection in popular spectacle, Villa is purified and the once irreconcilable divisions within *Villismo* are selectively forgotten.

By resurrecting Villa (and his body) through the use of public performance and spectacle during *las Jornadas Villistas*, the community of Parral, and in fact the state of Chihuahua attempts to recuperate a displaced symbol of local pride. Yet, as this regional reappropriation of Villa’s body challenges his 1976 placement in the *Monumento a la Revolución* and contradicts official national history, it is much more than a simple manifestation of regional pride. In fact, there are a number of contributing factors behind this relatively recent manifestation of *Villismo*. First, there are tangible benefits associated with the ownership/control of the dead. In his study of the remains of Emiliano Zapata, Samuel Brunk explains that the body of a fallen hero such as Villa can transfer its “sacredness onto the place where it is buried or exhibited.”³⁹ In this case, this “sacredness” has included both economic and political benefits. Just as the coffers of a church benefit from housing a notable religious relic, the influx of tourists and the cultural activities associated with *las Jornadas* have been an economic boon to Parral and the region in general. In addition, controlling the body of Villa is a useful political tool, as Parral competes with larger urban centers such as Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua for resources. While Parral was once known as *la capital del mundo de la plata*, today another subterranean resource, that is, Villa’s bones, puts this former mining town on the map. However, Parral has also had to compete for this resource. In fact, in 2006 the *Ayuntamiento de Chihuahua* officially petitioned both the nation’s President and the national legislature for the transfer of Villa’s remains

38 *Idem.*

39 Brunk, 2004, p. 171.

from the *Monumento a la Revolución* to his empty mausoleum in their city. Then, in retaliation, the permanent commission of the state of Durango's congress unanimously voted to "respectfully" ask the President to deny Chihuahua's petition, arguing that "Villa [...] pertenece a todos los mexicanos sin centrarse en regionalismos o patrimonialismo alguno."⁴⁰ While this is indicative of a long debate between both states over Villa's legacy, it also effectively negates the popular theory that Villa's body never left Parral. Thus, even within the region itself the true location of the general's remains is a source of conflict and, in fact, reflects larger political and economic disputes.

While there are many advantages associated with the possession of Villa's remains, they do not explain the particular timing of this renewed interest and struggle over the figure of Pancho Villa. After all, *las Jornadas Villistas* began in 1994, the very year that NAFTA took effect, eighteen years after the general's removal from the *panteón Dolores*, and a matter of months after the Zapatista uprising in the state of Chiapas. In many ways, this resurgence of Villismo during a period of political transition and economic instability is reflective of a common trend in Latin America, as Lyman L. Johnson outlines: "The nations of Latin America typically turn to dead heroes in times of crisis, the very endurance of the hero serving as a model for peoples tested by political and economic threats."⁴¹ Thus, as was the case in 1976 when Villa joined the ranks of the "nationalized" dead, it is not uncommon for a government or competing groups to evoke the memory of a dead leader in order to deal with a present dilemma. For example, in 1989 Argentine president Carlos Saúl Menem repatriated the remains of Juan Manuel de Rosas in an elaborate funerary spectacle in order to unify the country following years of military rule.⁴² More recently, the long-awaited arrival of the lost body of Ernesto "Che" Guevara in Cuba (1997) coincided with a particularly chaotic period in the nation's development following the fall of the Soviet Union, as Paul J. Dosal explains:

Coming during revolutionary Cuba's most difficult political and economic crisis, Fidel received Che's body as a badly needed reinforcement, an invincible combatant who had returned to Cuba to fight alongside his comrades.⁴³

40 Congreso de Durango, 2007, p. 1.

41 Johnson, 2004, p. 18.

42 See Shumway, 2004, pp. 105-140.

43 Dosal, 2004, p. 336.

Even the bones of a long absent rebel can help resolve the political and economic problems of a nation. After lying in state at the José Martí Monument in the *Plaza de la Revolución* in Havana, Che's remains were the center of an official caravan to Santa Clara, effectively recreating his victorious 1958 march across Cuba.⁴⁴ As each of these cases demonstrate, the bodies of the dead can be particularly useful during moments of economic and political uncertainty. Figures that are able to survive defeat and humiliation, such as Villa, are particularly useful in this type of situation.⁴⁵

The decade leading up to the creation of *las Jornadas Villistas* was a key period of political transition at the regional level. In fact, Chihuahua was among the first states in which the opposition made notable gains against the PRI. In 1983, the PAN (*Partido de Acción Nacional*) won a number of key municipal elections, including Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez, and the *Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores* and the *Partido Socialista Unificado de México* also scored important victories. As a result of these losses, and additional conflicts in the state's universities, the *priista* governor resigned his post in 1985. However, this transition was far from peaceful, as in 1986 a wave of protests followed the highly contested victory of PRI gubernatorial candidate, Fernando Baeza, as historian Luis Aboites describes:

El resultado oficial [...] desató una intensa movilización en las principales ciudades en contra de lo que se consideraba un enorme fraude electoral. Marchas, mítines, bloqueos de calles, paros de empresas, huelgas de hambre de connotados personajes y cierres de puentes fronterizos llenaron los encabezados de los periódicos locales, nacionales y hasta del extranjero.⁴⁶

In this manner, civil unrest unified the people of this *patria chica* against a common enemy, that is, electoral fraud. Even the Church became involved when the archbishop of Chihuahua officially suspended religious services on July 20th in protest, which consequently marked the sixty-third anniversary of Villa's assassination. While Baeza served his term in office, the PRI was easily defeated in 1992 by PAN candidate, Francisco Barrio, making Chihuahua the second state to have a governor of the opposition. Thus, *las Jornadas Villistas* were established by a government of the opposition, during a particularly tumultuous period of political transition. Given

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 337.

⁴⁵ Johnson, 2004, p. 18.

⁴⁶ Aboites, 1994, p. 170.

the anti-centralist nature of *Villismo*, it is notable that a new state government instituted such a celebration. After all, by resurrecting Villa through performance, *las Jornadas* directly challenge the 1976 nationalization of Villa by *prúista* president Echeverría.

Yet, as in the case of Rosas in Argentina or Che Guevara in Cuba, *las Jornadas Villistas* represent more than a simple reaction to a change in government. In actuality, 1994 was a difficult year of political and economic crisis/transition in Mexico, as the day NAFTA took effect (January 1, 1994), the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) took up arms against the central government and violently drew both national and international attention to the state of Chiapas. The emergence of the EZLN made it clear that the dream of the Mexican Revolution had not been realized, and that the transition to a new national economic and political project would not be an easy one. In fact, by the end of the year interest rates increased dramatically, and in December the federal government once again devalued the national currency. Given its proximity to the United States, northern Mexico was particularly sensitive to the changes enacted through NAFTA. In fact, increased globalization had already significantly altered both the region's economy and social structure as *maquiladoras* sprang up across the north beginning in the 1960s. In this way, the region was threatened (economically, politically, and culturally) by both the central Mexican state and increased dependence on the international economy. In such a climate, it is easy to see why Villa once again became a "model" for the people of his *patria chica*. Villa, not unlike Zapata, stood up for regional ideals and defended his *patria chica* from outsiders. Thus, it is not surprising that figures such as Villa and Zapata reemerged in 1994 just as the country underwent an intensive period of economic and political transition. Unlike the situation in Chiapas, however, the figure of Villa did not inspire an armed revolt in the North, as local authorities channeled the revolutionary potential of *Villismo* into a state-sponsored celebration of regional memory and identity. Once again, Villa's body and his legacy were manipulated by governmental authorities in order to serve a particular need, only in this instance it was a regional, not a national, government.

Conclusions

Clearly, the battle over Villa's body and memory is a complex phenomenon that reveals a great deal about the changing status of northern

regionalism in modern Mexico. In fact, the treatment of his bones provides a useful measure of the development of the Mexican political system as a whole. Immediately following the Revolution, Villa and the revolutionary potential of *Villismo*, came to represent a threat to national consolidation. As a result, he was excluded from the national pantheon of heroes, despite his popularity, and his body remained in the periphery for over fifty years. Even in Parral, the general's body was the target of vandalism. Ultimately, the location and treatment of his remains only changed as economic and political realities, namely the failure of the "Mexican Miracle" and the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, forced the central government to reevaluate the focus of its national project. Villa was "nationalized" in order to serve the immediate needs of a country on the verge of a national crisis. However, this placement was temporary, as in 1994 another emergency, centered on the emergence of NAFTA, would lead the general's *patria chica* to reappropriate his body through the creation of *las Jornadas Villistas*. Although officially the general's cadaver never left the confines of the *Monumento a la Revolución*, *las Jornadas* resurrect Villa through the use of performances that directly challenge the authority of the central state. This marks a significant shift in the system as local authorities utilize regional identity in order to undermine the center, and survive a particularly difficult moment of political, economic, and cultural transition.

Las Jornadas Villistas, however, are still a state-sponsored celebration of *Villismo*. Although ICHICULT and other state agencies try to recreate a "popular" regional identity, this is an orchestrated event that is meant to channel and control the potentially transformative, and revolutionary nature of *Villismo*. By evoking Villa, and then neatly returning him to the confines of an earthly grave, the state of Chihuahua attempts to reconcile the enduring fissures and inconsistencies of this divided *patria chica*. Thus, by simultaneously resurrecting and murdering Villa, *las Jornadas Villistas* attempt to confine *Villismo* to a relatively brief celebration that erases or "forgets" many of the more controversial or potentially "dangerous" aspects of *Villismo*. What is more, these performances fill the space in the central state's cultural project which was once filled by the literature of the Mexican Revolution. Diana Taylor explains that embodied performances have long played an important role "in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semiliterate, and digital societies."⁴⁷ Thus, per-

47 Taylor, 2003, p. 27.

formance serves as an alternative to literature as a way of preserving, rewriting, and managing regional identity. Given the development of the internet and mass media, performance has the potential to reach a large audience. In addition, it provides a regional alternative to the novel, a more “national” genre. Yet, unlike the printed word, public spectacles and performances are unpredictable and cannot be completely controlled by the “author.” Thus, there are often moments during the *Jornadas Villistas* that escape the control of the event’s organizers. Spectators dressed in revolutionary garb come from across the country in order to honor Villa’s memory, and often it is the site of political dissent. For example, in 2006 attendees carried signs protesting suspected electoral fraud during the recent presidential elections. Also, one should not forget the popular origins of the *ceremonias luctuosas* which predate *las Jornadas Villistas*. In this way, the popularity of Villa cannot be underestimated, and *Villismo* cannot be simply discounted as a constructed identity. As in the case of literature, one only need “read” between the lines of such public spectacles in order to discover their true complexity.

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