Exequias: Braiding salt, rebozos, and justice

By Rocio Graham

Exequias - Obsequies

noun [[ plural ]](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/help/codes.html)   formal

UK  /ˈɒb.sɪ.kwiz / US  /ˈɑːb.sɪ.kwiz/

Things that are [formally](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/formal) said and done at a [funeral](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/funeral). Rituals of mourning.

The way a country grieves is the way a country heals. Mourning rituals are the physical manifestation of love and grief; they are intended as spaces in time that unify community, provide solace, meaning and opportunities to people to start their reckoning journey with loss and grief. Claudia Chagoya’s exhibition offers a unique vantage point to the experience of grief, one that is personal yet universal. Chagoya brings traditional ritual elements of her Mexican culture to the gallery space, transforming them into symbols of protest, mourning, and expressions of filial love.

*Exequias* – Obsequies is a rare glimpse of what caring for our wounded soul through material practice looks like. Chagoya unravels her family story of femicide in front of us as a cautionary tale of what grief can do to a family and a country if left unattended and uncared for. It is also a story of redemption, a story of filial love through generations. The tending for our departed postmortem through rite, memorial, and sharing can help heal us and them.

Seared in Chagoya’s memory is the advice of her mom, “you should go to Canada, you will be safe there and have more opportunities.” The naivety of the Canadian dream and the irony of it all doesn’t escape Chagoya’s mind. Upon arriving in Canada, she would quickly realize that Canada and Mexico share more than trade agreements; they share the dirty secret of gender violence. In Mexico, on average 10 women or girls are killed daily nationwide[[1]](#endnote-1). In Canada, with a smaller population, one woman or girl is killed very 48 hours.[[2]](#endnote-2) But focusing on numbers negates the human stories; these victims had families, communities, and rich lives that deserve to be acknowledged and cared for. In declaring the significance of their loss in our society, we can create spaces for healing to occur. Here is where Chagoya’s work begins. She carefully weaves the stories of grief from her beloved family and her country through the use of various ritual elements like salt, copal, water, soil, sawdust, hair, and *rebozos* (shawls used by Mexican women to protect their heads from the sun, to carry babies, or used in funerary services).

Chagoya has carefully created a space of mourning that reflects on the lives of the many women murdered in Mexico and the significance and effect of their loss in Mexican society. The salt in her sculptures violently eroding the fabrics and weavings represent tears, the embodiment of grief, in an abrasive way and as a purification element. The tears flowing like rivers are also washing away our sorrows. The metaphor used in this exhibition is evident, the poison is also the medicine.

The *rebozos* have tender associations with filial love. They are used to carry babies, protect ourselves from the elements, and are also used during ceremonies of grief. Rebozos emerged in their present form after Europeans arrived in Mexico and influenced the way Indigenous people dressed. It became an iconic piece of clothing that is used to this day by women of all walks of life. I can dare to attest that the rebozo unifies Mexican women. It would be rare to find a house without a rebozo. In my own family we have black rebozos for funerals, white rebozos for weddings, and red rebozos for Mexican Independence Day. The rebozos have aesthetic and utilitarian characteristics. Often woven by traditional hand-work and intensive methods that imbues them with labour and female associations. The most intricate woven rebozos become family heirlooms often passed from generation to generation. The *Exequias* work in this exhibition consists of a 4.20-meter *trenza* (braid) woven using black rebozos. The braided rebozos become a metaphor for family lineage, women’s bodies, and intergenerational trauma that, like a rebozo, is passed from generation to generation. They are braided to resemble a woman’s black, braided hair. The length of the braid reminding us that our communal grief for women’s murders keeps growing like hair.

Rebozos take a central stage in the exhibition. Nine frayed rebozos with crystallized salt are displayed prominently in the gallery. They hang like corpses preserved in salt. A reminder that violence can leave us with crusty wounds and reduce us to bones. Chagoya recalls her own family emotional erosion after facing femicide. A personal story that has taken her years to unthread the same way she slowly and methodically frays the rebozos. Unweaving Foundations, the expansive textile map of Mexico, highlights the states with the most femicide cases (2018 statistics). One can see the threads that have been methodically removed symbolizing the lives lost. The structural compromise suffered by the community and the weakening of bonds that sustain it. The slow unraveling speaks about the weakening of family and society’s structure after femicides.

When much is lost, when the authorities’ corruption and negligence leave the families with no answers, people seek justice and vindication where they may. *Ruega for nosotros* (pray for us) is often uttered as a whisper from the tired and dry lips of relatives of missing and murdered women in Mexico. In that prayer, the weight of exhaustion hits you. Chagoya’s soundscapes around the exhibition combine murmuring prayers, water drips, petitions for justice, and invocations. They confront us with the reality that communities facing femicides are often left to navigate the chaotic and disorienting justice system by themselves.

It is hard for families to find closure on their own. They often conduct their own investigations, do their own advocacy, and organize themselves in a search for answers as a grieving mechanism. The soundscapes in the exhibition allow us to have a glimpse of what families navigate on their own when seeking answers. The repetition reminds us of the rosary, often part of funeral rituals in Catholic Mexico. In that repetition and predictability of the praying cycles there is also comfort. Something that families cling to when everything else has failed them. Praying gives them agency when they have found none in dealings with authorities.

As a Mexican, trained curanderix[[3]](#endnote-3), death doula, and grief coach I am captivated by the sophisticated and subtle way Chagoya weaves pre-Hispanic mortuary ritual traditions. She reclaims colonization symbols and uses protest strategies to process grief. She speaks about death in an unmedicated way – raw, honest, and caring.

Artists like Chagoya highlight the power of storytelling as a healing agent. Her work reminds us that our role in times of paramount grief is to witness family stories, even when we are uncomfortable. Their lives and stories are important and so is honouring them. In doing so we become creators of a community of care. Often in our attempts to support families that have faced immeasurable loss, we rush them in their grief journey; their pain becomes uncomfortable for us. We want people to “move on fast” not because we want people to be well, but often because their grief stirs our own and we fear feeling pain. Families and communities that shut down painful loss have the risk of being left with unprocessed grief that permeates our society. Pain becomes a collective cancer and we become stuck not only personally, but as a community. It is daring to open a gallery space so openly to grief. It rips off the collective bandage we all are carrying with personal loss and gender violence that we have witnessed in this country. Nobody is immune to the effects of it. Once the bandage is off, we are confronted with the open wounds of femicide. We are also presented with the possibility to tend to them and heal them in ways we have not done before. This exhibition offers us the space to talk about our own loss, our experience with gender violence, and how collectively we can tend to each other’s emotional needs. Sharing experiences bond us and make us feel less alone. We feel acknowledged and seen.

Chagoya has the ability to braid seamless hard conversations about gender violence, community building, social justice, and spiritual practices. We see traces of braids in many of her pieces. The braid represents family stories, filial love, and tradition. Braiding someone’s hair is an act of care. Braiding is a metaphor for what needs to be strengthened by connection and brings us together.

For Chagoya, this work is deeply personal. It is hard work that takes a toll on the emotional state of an artist. She states that she never imagined how personal her work would become. Her own mourning has evolved as she revisits her family story through the lens of a community experience. A deeper understanding of her own family dynamic has allowed her to see the impacts of femicide in the tapestry of her kin and her community. The challenge is how to provide hope when much is lost. She invites the viewer to also mourn and participate in an act of care for the lives lost. Through ritual, she invites us to use salt and copal as a way to purify and clear emotions, reflecting on our own experience with grief. Weaving our tears with the tears of strangers, bringing us together one thread at a time. Witnessing is an act of care but is also an act of justice.

**ROCIO GRAHAM** (she/they) is a Mexican-Canadian multidisciplinary artist raised in the Cahita and Curandera tradition by the Fuerte River in Mexico. Since her arrival to Canada in 2002 she has lived and created in the lands of the Treaty 7, Musqueam, Squamish and currently the traditional lands of Sinixt and Syilx people. Graham studied photography at Emily Carr University, obtained a B.Des. in Photography at the Alberta University of the Arts and completed her R.E.A.L. Art Administration education through the Rozsa Foundation. She is a certified Grief Coach and Death Doula. These practices inform the way she explores life cycles in her art.  Ritual and ceremony are key elements in her practice.

She has mentored emerging and BIPOC artists through organizations like AUArts, Arts Commons, Gallery 44, Arts Ontario and Santa Rosa Arts and Healing. She is the Executive Director of the Christina Lake Arts and Artisans Society and Arts on 3. Her writing has appeared in national and international publications such as Luma Quarterly, Photo Ed magazine, SNAP Magazine, Yolkless press, WSG Blog and Rungh magazine.

**CLAUDIA CHAGOYA** is a Mexican interdisciplinary artist born in Zacatecas, Mexico, and based in Calgary. She holds an MFA degree from the University of Calgary (2019), and a BFA from Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (2017). Her artistic practice explores topics related to gender violence and her socio-political background, using materials rooted in Mexican culture such as: rebozos, salt, copal, and sawdust. She is currently developing a new body of work consisting of sculptures made of hair, funded by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (2023-2024). Additionally, Chagoya is the recipient of the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society’s New Canadian Artist Award 2022. Her artwork is featured in ARCHIVO, an archival digital platform focused on showcasing Latin American Artists living in Canada. Her work has been exhibited in Mexico and in Canada, including the group show Reimagining Mourning at Sur Gallery in Toronto (2021). Furthermore, her work forms part of the collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (2023).

1. # CTV NEWS, The Associated Press, “Femicides in Mexico: Little progress on longstanding issue.” Published Dec. 27, 2022.

   <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/femicides-in-mexico-little-progress-on-longstanding-issue-1.6209573> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. # CTV NEWS, Melissa Lopez-Martinez, “Femicides on the rise as report indicates a woman or girl is killed every 48 hours in Canada.” Published April 2, 2023. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/femicides-on-the-rise-as-report-indicates-a-woman-or-girl-is-killed-every-48-hours-in-canada-1.6339213>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. # Learn Religions, “Curanderismo: The Folk Magic of Mexico.” https://www.learnreligions.com/curanderismo-the-folk-magic-of-mexico-2562500

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)