The Reception of *Día de Muertos* and Frida Kahlo and their Reincarnations in the United Kingdom (2015–2020): A Question of Cultural Degeneration or Rejuvenation (Again!)?[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

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Debates about cultural appropriation as either a site of renewal or a form of degradation of tradition are not new. Thanks to globalization and media technologies, the travelling, or ‘deterritorializing’, of many popular cultural forms has never been easier.[[2]](#footnote-2) While for some, debates pertaining to appropriation are unhelpful in an age of cultural hybridization, such discussions, both in academia and the public domain, are still very much alive. Recent examples include the heated charges of exploitative appropriation directed towards mega-brands Christian Dior and Carolina Herrera New York. Dior was critiqued for casting its brand ambassador, US actress Jennifer Lawrence, in its campaign for the Dior Cruise collection 2019 and thereby whitewashing *escaramuza* (Mexican horsewomen) designs; while the Mexican Federal Government accused the Herrera Resort 2020 Collection of plagiarizing and exploiting indigenous Mexican patterns. Some social media users saw the Dior campaign as celebrating Mexican heritage, while others called out the label for whitewashing and for overlooking the social injustices *escaramuzas* face.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This article will also address the thorny issue of cultural appropriation, this time in relation to *Día de Muertos*, Frida Kahlo, and their respective ‘halloweenization’. Whilst the *Día de Muertos*—widely celebrated by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the USA—and its cultural adoption and halloweenization in the USA have been the subject of research and debate,[[4]](#footnote-4) this article seeks to add fresh layers of understanding by examining the phenomenon’s staging, reception and consumption in the UK. Drawing on *Spectre* (2015), *Coco* (2017), press articles, YouTube make-up tutorials, *Strictly Come Dancing*’s 2018 series, the 2018 Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)’s Frida Kahlo exhibition, Halloween costumes and community festivals, I analyse how British celebrations of the *Día de Muertos* are conflated with another globalized phenomenon, namely the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, whose own persona and image is halloweenized, deterritorialized and subject to *cosificación* (commodification). [[5]](#footnote-5)

The process of Halloweenization, premised on appropriating exotic and stereotyped images, is linked to Arjun Appadurai’s notion of ‘mediascapes’, the global movement of media production and distribution. Such movements, operating through a fusion of reality and fiction, provide audiences with a narrative which creates ‘imagined worlds’ of distant ‘other’ cultures frequently based more on fantasy and falsities than the ‘real’.[[6]](#footnote-6) The criss-crossing of socio-cultural, political, technological, economic and historical ‘scapes’, accelerated by globalization, illuminates ‘disjuncture and difference’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Similarly, these dynamic transformations resonate with Néstor García Canclini’s discussion of ‘deterritorialization’. Drawing on ideas of ‘transculturation’, Canclini examines the hybridization of new and old cultural systems in Latin America which are being accelerated by globalization, communications media, and by uneven socio-economic and political modernization processes. For Canclini, cultural overlay provides opportunity for ‘improvisation and acts of imagination, that imply the constitution of new agents and new actors’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Canclini’s deterritorialization refers to the process of change which traditional cultural forms undergo as they become modified and uprooted from a fixed location, commercialized as ‘new products’ and fused with other cultural expressions. The *Día de Muertos*’ and Kahlo’s mediascapes and deterritorialized adaptations represent primers of contested, hybridized, creative ‘acts of imagination’.

I will argue that in the UK the appropriation of the *Día de Muertos* has had a two-fold effect. Firstly, commercial media productions and retailers have contributed in ambiguous ways to both cultural awareness and halloweenized understandings, resulting in opposing public opinions about cultural appropriation. Secondly, community-based events are fostering awareness of the practice’s religious, local and cultural significance and are fashioning their own socio-economic and cultural benefits.

***Día de Muertos* and Cultural Appropriation**

*Día de Muertos* is a global transnational phenomenon celebrated across Latin America, the USA, Canada, Europe, Africa and Asia and/whilst each country celebrates this event in its own unique way. Drawing from Mesoamerican, Roman Catholic and pagan traditions, *Día de Muertos* is celebrated across Mexico with regional variations, from the 28–31 October and on 1–2 November and is premised on joyous remembrance and respect for the deceased.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Día de Muertos* and Halloween share Catholic roots, but the latter, celebrated on 31 October, is now largely divested of its religious origins, becoming a commercially-driven globalized phenomenon revolving around the fear of death and ‘spookiness’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Halloween, like *Día de Muertos*, has spread across the globe, including to Latin America more recently owing to diasporic transnational processes. The spread of Halloween around the world and specifically in Mexico is widely considered symptomatic of US cultural imperialism, while the *Día de Muertos* is perceived as a glocal symbol of Mexican national identity.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Opposing views about the appropriation of the *Día de Muertos* or Frida Kahlo in the UK can be situated within broader notions of hybridization and cultural appropriation. Claims of the ‘authentic’ *Día de Muertos* culture or the ‘real’ artist (Kahlo) can be seen as problematic in light of hybridization, which refers to ‘not only the mixing of ethnic and religious elements but the products of advanced technologies and modern or postmodern social processes’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Given that *Día de Muertos* is shaped by regional, transnational and global differences of consumption and by processes of hybridization, the Mexican practice interacts via ‘in-between spaces’[[13]](#footnote-13) thus challenging fixed (national) cultural identities and binarized value judgments. One has only to reference a few of Mexico’s region-specific *Día de Muertos* practices to allude to this heterogeneity.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Broader academic and popular discussions on cultural appropriation often hinge on whether it is wrongful, harmful, (commercially) exploitative or disrespectful to ‘cultural groups that cut across multiple racialized groups [...] cultures surrounding disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Cultural appropriation can seem morally problematic when there are instances of ‘*misrepresentation, misuse,* and *theft* of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized’.[[16]](#footnote-16) A significant source of the wrongfulness of cultural appropriation is when it goes beyond merely causing offence, causing what Joel Feinberg terms ‘profound offense’, that is ‘an offense to one’s moral sensibilities … [that] strikes at a person’s core values or sense of self’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Whilst cultural appropriation can lead to cultural erosion and assimilation, so too is misrepresentation seen as trafficking in prejudices and stereotypes. Objections to misrepresentation are predicated on ‘distinguishing cultural insiders from cultural outsiders’ which ‘requires criteria for cultural membership’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Such criteria are problematic as they serve to construct ‘ “essential” […] boundaries with the propensity to falsely represent cultures as homogenous, static …’[[19]](#footnote-19) Furthermore, the policing of the boundaries of cultural groups ‘can construct common understandings of “real” or “authentic” group members that serve to disenfranchise those who do not meet all the relevant criteria’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Given *Día de Muertos*’ heterogeneity, sympathizers with hybridizing arguments may take issue with claims of cultural ‘authenticity’ and with terms such as cultural or national patrimony. In 2008, UNESCO designated *Día de Muertos* an expression of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity recognizing how the practice has universal value that ‘transcends local attachments’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Whilst such a characterization of *Día de Muertos* has been used by institutions and (local) governments to cultivate a sense of Mexican national or cosmopolitan/transnational identity, so too could such a designation come under attack by those who question whether ‘there is a universal human heritage to which everyone has a claim’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Matthes cautions that the idea of a national culture, as *Día de Muertos* has been labelled, becomes conflated ‘with the empirically false claim that nations are culturally homogeneous’ whilst within Mexico, ‘there is of course significant cultural diversity in cultural groupings of many kinds, nationalistic or not’.[[23]](#footnote-23) The universalizing impulse of UNESCO’s ‘intangible heritage’ diffuses the *locus* of ownership and authorship, paradoxically enabling *cosificación* by ‘outsiders’. Furthermore, claiming the *Día de Muertos* as ‘genuine’ and asserting authoritative knowledge about the tradition implies a value judgment suggesting that ‘there is a right and wrong way’ of presenting or ‘performing a culture, or that of others’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Young’s description of cultural appropriation is a generally accepted proposition referring to the use of the cultural products of ‘cultural insiders’ by ‘cultural outsiders’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Rogers notes that cultural appropriation is‘defined broadly as the use of a culture’s symbols, artefacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture’ and ‘is inescapable when cultures come into contact, including virtual or representational contact’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Distinguishing between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ serves to construct essentializing boundaries whereby non-Western folk practices are perceived as ‘pure’ and homogenous traditional expressions created in pre-industrial societies. Whilst it is possible to ascertain particular features which are intrinsic to local practices, when they become uprooted and taken up by diverse audiences it is difficult to determine whose ‘version’ or authority to accept. Thus ‘authentic’ folk culture is more of a creation of people’s imagination than a real phenomenon. No barometer of authenticity exists to act as a standard against which to evaluate change. Local traditional practices are not static and are constantly evolving through fusions with cultural elements from diverse sources.

Proponents for the cultural hybridity of the *Día de Muertos* have been critiqued for overemphasizing cultural fusion as a progressive force and for ignoring power, cultural and social inequalities and ‘the loss of regional traditions and of local roots’.[[27]](#footnote-27) For many, the commoditization or *cosificación* of the *Día de Muertos*, other cultural symbols or iconic historical figures (e.g. Frida Kahlo or Che Guevara) constitutes the most significant example of de-contextualisation which can result in the distortion of meaning and ‘authenticity’.[[28]](#footnote-28) The appropriated commodity thus ‘becomes a fetish, a representation of values with no intrinsic relation to the object’s use value, production or circulation’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Issues with commoditization are therefore seen as residing in inequalities of power and who controls the ‘authentic’. As with the Dior and Herrera examples given above, cultural appropriation via commoditization is seen as a Western neo-liberal and neo-colonial endeavour aimed at financial gain by an outside appropriator resulting in the exploitation and debasement of non-Western folk cultural forms and identities. By putting claim on ‘authentic’ culture, the *escaramuza* and indigenous design examples show how stereotypes which perpetuate prejudices become economically profitable for appropriators whilst simultaneously excluding marginalized insiders from profiting from cultural and economic achievements.[[30]](#footnote-30) Others might dispute these ideas by proposing that consumer cultures can capitalize and invigorate cultural forms via cultural borrowing as well as benefiting local communities. Overall, then, it is acknowledged that misrepresentation and cultural ownership by outsiders can be harmful because it is about power that essentializes and disregards marginalized groups, and exploits and perpetuates socio-economic and cultural inequalities. Cultural appropriation is simultaneously perceived as crucial to cultural rejuvenation and a positive force fostering creativity and exchange.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The overarching transnational adoption of the *Día de Muertos* may be seen as ambiguous. Indeed, for some it perpetuates a monolithic cultural character or selective ‘Mexicanness’ whereas for others such an appropriation is perceived as rejuvenating the practice.[[32]](#footnote-32)

*Día de Muertos* **in the United Kingdom: Community Events**

International fascination with *Día de Muertos* has been growing steadily, and the release of Disney Pixar’s *Coco* in 2017 prompted a global surge in interest in the celebration. In the United Kingdom its presence has been gaining momentum more recently. The reasons for this are varied, but community events, the media and commercial interests in the UK are important contributing factors. British (tourist) interest in Mexico and the participation of wider, non-Mexican audiences in *Día de Muertos* celebrations can be attributed to Mexicans, to diasporic communities and to events such as ‘2015: The Year of Mexico in the UK and the UK in Mexico’ sponsored by the UK’s Mexican Embassy. Similarly, whilst halloweenization of the Mexican celebration has been ambiguously reinforced and challenged by mediascape profit-driven corporations and retailers, so too is there a drive to bring awareness of the cultural differences between *Día de Muertos* and Halloween. Though most people in the UK are aware that Halloween and *Día de Muertos* are two distinct celebrations, the latter is sometimes construed as a Mexican Halloween. In such a context, community *Día de Muertos* events in the UK raise people’s awareness of the significance of the Mexican practice and how it is different from Halloween. This awareness of their differences is more apparent in the USA because of the large Mexican and Mexican-American demographic, particularly in the Southwest.

*Día de Muertos* community events organized in the UK are loosely scheduled following Mexico’s *Día de Muertos* celebrations on 1 and 2 November, using elements that are widely recognizable and practised throughout Mexico (and beyond its borders), such as sugar skull decorating, altar building and making *ofrendas*, offering family photos or marigolds to the deceased. Local councils, museums, restaurant owners or street market organizers are raising awareness of this practice by running events which are publicized on social media. Metropole Street Market in Bournemouth, for example, ran an event including Mexican food stalls and parades for the first time in 2017 and again in 2018 (Figure 1) because of popular demand.[[33]](#footnote-33) Similarly The Brook, a music venue in Southampton, in 2017 and again in 2018 and 2019, in collaboration with Southampton University’s MeXsu centre and Mexican society (MexSoc), has hosted similar events (Figure 2).[[34]](#footnote-34)

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Figure 1

Poster for Bournemouth Metropole Street Market, 2018.

Photograph courtesy of Mark Cater, Director of Metropole Market

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Figure 2

UK-based Mexican *mariachi* duo Ingrid Rueda and DeAnna Avis: Las Guadalupes

The Brook, Southampton, 2019.

Photograph by the author.

Events like these highlight that cultural appropriation does not necessarily entail degeneration: drawing attention to how the marriage of both economic capitalization and cultural recycling are mutually beneficial for communities as a whole. For example, recent *Día de Muertos* cultural activities celebrated in the borough of Basingstoke and Deane were included in the Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council’s strategy for cultural enhancement, published in 2017, to foster economic growth, employability, community cohesion and to reach disadvantaged social sectors.[[35]](#footnote-35) Events such as those of the Metropole Market, The Brook and other UK-wide *Día de Muertos* activities involve, and benefit, Mexican diasporic communities such as families, students, event organizers, restaurant owners, artists and musicians as well as (non-)British families, professionals and artists.[[36]](#footnote-36) By bringing Mexican local knowledge to new transnational spaces, this ‘deterritorialization’ does not imply a loss of ‘authenticity’ but rather a site of possibility whereby Mexican cultural symbols and practices are fused with fresh meanings by interacting with new locations, audiences and producers.

Although locally-run events have resulted in socio-economic and cultural benefits, community awareness and participation in *Día de Muertos* culture, so too are the major Hollywood productions, *Spectre* (2015) and *Coco* (2017) powerful referents for the explosion of *Día de Muertos* events in the UK and elsewhere. Bournemouth’s Metropole market organizer Lyn Turnbull noted that *Coco*, released in the UK in January 2018,had sparked the interest in the local community to participate in the 2018 market celebrations.[[37]](#footnote-37) The Mexican-inspired costumes worn by both children and adults are becoming an increasingly familiar sight on Halloween night in the UK. The UK’s former leading party supplier, Peeks Party Store, saw a spike in sales of *Día de Muertos* costumes and accessories following the release of the James Bond film with its iconic *Día de Muertos* parade but also attributes the growth in demand more broadly to community events celebrating the Mexican practice across the UK.[[38]](#footnote-38) Peeks’ provision of an entire aisle of *Día de Muertos* items—top hats, floral tiara headbands, skull make-up and onesies—in 2018 and 2019 was indicative of growing consumer demand (Figure 3). The sugar skull garland, which honours the ‘papel picado’ traditionally used in Mexican *Día de Muertos* festivities, was Peeks’ best-selling piece.[[39]](#footnote-39) Interestingly, praise for the visual language in *Coco* includes its use of ‘papel picado’ in the opening sequence.[[40]](#footnote-40) Online retailer Amazon sells *Coco* inspired banners and many reviewers comment on how they use these accessories for Halloween or for *Coco* themed childrens’ parties.[[41]](#footnote-41)

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Figure 3

Peeks Party Store, Christchurch, 2019.

Photograph by the author.

In October 2017–October 2020, the commercialization and halloweenization of the Mexican cultural practice was apparent as items associated with the Mexican celebration were sold interchangeably alongside Halloween party accessories in UK retailers both on the high street and online (Figures 4, 5a & 5b).

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Figure 4

A Mexican Catrina next to a witch.

Sainsburys supermarket, Christchurch, 2019.

Photograph by the author.

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Figure 5a & 5b

Halloween and Day of the Dead face-paint and masks

Tesco supermarket, Bournemouth, 2020.

Photographs by the author.

Similarly, articles, videos and television programmes, which highlighted the growing popularity of *Día de Muertos* in British popular culture (inadvertently) halloweenized the Mexican practice by reinforcing monolithic and stereotyped images. Such halloweenization is in line with Appadurai’s imaginary reconstructions of a distant ‘other’ *Mexicanidad* and Canclini’s deterritorialization.An online 2018 BBC article headlined ‘Make no bones about it: this is the hot look for Halloween’, reinforced the idea that *Día de Muertos* is exotic and desirable as well as a form of Mexican Halloween celebrated during Halloween in the UK.[[42]](#footnote-42) The accompanying video focuses on Norfolk makeup artist Kate Elgood who notes that ‘[i]t’s a huge trend at the minute’ and that most of her clients ask for skull make up. Skull make-up tutorials are also amply available online. With titles such as ‘Easy Day of the Dead Skull Makeup Tutorial’,[[43]](#footnote-43) the tutorials’ step-by-step instructions emphasize the uncomplicatedness of this practice. The global fashion magazine *Marie Claire*—read by millions of UK readers—also ran online articles with skull make-up tutorials.[[44]](#footnote-44) These free and accessible articles and videos appeal to an amateur audience as the comments attest: ‘I love that this one a lot [*sic*] easier to follow for noobs like me lol and you used a lot of affordable products﻿’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Accessibility compounded with affordability is also evidenced in the prominence of an array of DIY sites giving, for instance, parents tips on how to create cheap *Día de Muertos* costumes for their children. In popular culture, likeability or attractiveness, accessibility and affordability are key features to the success of any given cultural product in terms of its reception, consumption and distribution. Consumers’ demand for beauty and accessibility is evidenced in the sales during Halloween of skull transfer stickers which are marketed as easily applicable whilst providing a professional-looking result. Popular attraction to the *Día de Muertos* look is attributed to its accessibility, its visually striking characteristics and in particular its ‘sexiness’. Social media influencers have taken up the skull look, such as Latina Youtuber Elicia Aragon whose video takes her followers through a tutorial entitled ‘Sexy Glam Sugar Skull Halloween Makeup Tutorial’ (2015).[[46]](#footnote-46) With the help of well-known cosmetic brands, Aragon is transformed, as one user notes, into a representative of ‘Beautiful Mexicana culture’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Like the make-up, the *Día de Muertos* costumes for women are also marketed, for instance on Amazon, as alluring pieces to wear including ‘sexy’ lady skeleton onesies or frilly Catrina dresses with Kahloesque floral tiaras which are worn by attractive models posing in suggestive ways. Such examples signal how the version of the *Día de Muertos* which mediascapes adopt is one which often becomes associated with a ‘deterritorialized’ sexuality and femininity, which can be reused in any context.

The halloweenization of the *Día de Muertos* in the UK, and the opposing viewpoints about its cultural appropriation via commercialization processes, was no more apparent than in responses to an episode of the nationally popular *Strictly Come Dancing* series in 2018. With an average audience of ten million viewers, *Strictly*, as it is colloquially known,was the most watched television programme of Halloween night with professionals and their celebrity partners dancing to a *Día de Muertos*-themed performance. Some viewers praised it by drawing comparisons with *Coco*, attesting to the film’s influence in giving prominence to the Mexican practice in British popular cultural consciousness: ‘I have a daughter obsessed with disneys COCO so soon as this started she was mesmerised!! Brilliant start to.the show but i thought rest of show was just lacking something.not as halloweeny as usual 😯🎃’’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Such comparisons highlight how media corporations are contributing to the conflation of both traditions and their roots by some viewers, and foster ‘imagined worlds’ whereby the lines between real and fictional landscapes become blurred.[[49]](#footnote-49) Other viewers were nevertheless dismissive of such a conflation of the two practices: ‘Why mix Day Of The Dead with Halloween!? They’re two separate celebrations....anyone who has even watched Coco will understand this now🤦🏻‍♀️’.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Many took issue with the performance’s use of stereotyped images of Mexico, including *sombreros*, *mariachis*, colourful dresses and make-up. It was felt that the tradition’s religious and national significance had been made a mockery of because of the use of such clichéd images and how the performance was danced to the tune of the calypsoesque *Jump up the Line* by Harry Belafonte, whilst one of the contestants, former British cricketer, Graeme Swann, drummed on *papier mâché* skulls. After the show, leading UK online newspapers picked up on viewers’ mixed reception to the controversial performance, as is captured in article titles such as ‘Strictly Come Dancing’s Day Of The Dead-Inspired Opening Dance Blasted For ‘Cultural Appropriation’[[51]](#footnote-51) *The Sun* alluded to spectators’ description of the performance as ‘racist’ whilst the *Daily Mail* noted that ‘the dance, which is based on Disney’s latest film *Coco*, was criticised by fans for “cultural appropriation” and that the Day of the Dead is not related to Halloween’.[[52]](#footnote-52) By suggesting that the dance is based on *Coco* rather than the Mexican tradition, this adds to popular mediascaped misconceptions of the roots of the latter. One Twitter user critiqued the BBC corporation for Halloweenizing: ‘Love @bbcstrictly but Dia de los Muertos aka ‘day of the dead’ should not be a halloween costume or theme, it’s cultural appropriation 😬🙃’.[[53]](#footnote-53) The competing responses in the media can be understood as *profoundly offensive* to some because of the performance’s perceived ‘disrespectful’ and stereotyped ‘racist’ overtones; or as being praised for its celebration of cultural heritage or creative hybridization of forms by merging *Día de Muertos*, Halloween and *Coco*.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Journalists running pieces on *Día de Muertos* are well versed in the cultural appropriation debate: whilst they emphasize the widespread attraction of celebrating the practice they also, to avoid accusations of cultural insensitivity perhaps, are keen to explain to their listeners or readers that the cultural practice should not be equated to Halloween, albeit at times putting such arguments forward in ambiguous fashion. For example, whilst the BBC article examined above halloweenizes *Día de Muertos* by presenting the skull make up as the ‘hot’ look for 2018 Halloween celebrations, so too does it stress that it has nothing ‘to do with Halloween’.[[55]](#footnote-55) The *Marie Claire* article is similarly ambivalent in its tone. Whilst the author emphasizes that *Día de Muertos* is not Halloween, by emphasizing Halloween’s date (‘October 31st is upon us’) rather than referring to the multiple dates *Día de Muertos* are celebrated, there is (inadvertent) halloweenizing.[[56]](#footnote-56) The piece appears to be claiming authoritative knowledge of this Mexican tradition by noting that the examples of makeup options provided for consumers should be ‘respectful and culturally appropriate’, but it is unclear what is meant by these prerequisites. Such claims imply that the journalist knows what ingredients are needed in order to perform the ‘authentic’ culture of others in the ‘right way’. Similarly, the suggestion that ‘inappropriate’ makeup will ‘demean the history of an entire group of people’ is a sweeping generalization as it makes the false assumption, to draw from Matthes’ previous critique of essentializing ideas of cultural membership, that all Mexicans celebrate the Mexican ‘national’ *Día de Muertos* in the same way. Whilst *Día de Muertos* ‘belongs’ to Mexico, this statement presents the practice as homogenous, when it is characterized by glocal differences and hybridization.Furthermore, to any viewer the examples provided here of supposedly ‘culturally appropriate’ makeup choices do not appear any different from the thousands of ‘sexy Catrina’ images we find elsewhere online as all the beautiful models are posing alluringly with pouting lips. Therefore, once again the Day of the Dead is conflated with a halloweenized pansexuality and a deterritorialized Mexicanness which is premised more on Appadurian imagined falsities than the real.

***Día de Muertos* and Frida: *Coco* Rewriting the Tropes of Death and Sexuality?**

Like *Día de Muertos*, the co-optation of the dead artist and her work in mediascape globalized market-derived reincarnations has provoked opposing responses, from derision to celebration. The conflation of this woman artist with the cultural practice of Halloween is seen by some as a form of disrespect and as degrading the ‘authenticity’ of Kahlo, her work and the Mexican celebration, in terms of its religious meaning and local specificity. Others, however, celebrate this hybridization. One of the problems with the appropriation of the Mexican cultural practice or the woman artist via commercialization processes, is that some consider that only certain elements have been selectively adopted—typically homogenous and exoticized images—for financial gain and have departed significantly from the ‘original’ context and ‘authenticity’.[[57]](#footnote-57) A key related point here is who precisely is benefitting financially from cultural products such as these. The *Día de Muertos* as commodity becomes enmeshed with Frida as (post-) feminist commodity in the Hollywood film production *Coco* and in the British art scene with the V&A’s exhibition of Kahlo’s personal artefacts and clothing (June–November 2018) during which an event to celebrate *Día de Muertos* was also hosted at the venue in which an altar in Kahlo’s honour was displayed. The performativity of a deterritorialized self, symbols and practices challenges notions of authenticity or (mis)appropriation and showcases instead the way in which people connect with *Día de Muertos* and/or the artist, her life and objects in multiple ways as they take away from these what they desire.

Frida Kahlo’s skeletal reincarnation in *Coco* sheds an interesting light on questions of authenticity, (mis)appropriation and the sexualization of *Día de Muertos*. This is certainly not a *Coco* specific association, and neither is it a clear-cut issue of misrepresentation, for both *Día de Muertos* and death were aspects which were intrinsic to Kahlo’s art and life experiences. Kahlo’s contraction of polio as a child and a bus accident in adulthood led to a life of excruciating disability, administration of medication, mental health issues, drug addiction, miscarriages and thoughts of suicide, all of which riddled the artist and her work. Given Kahlo’s personal and artistic links to the deathly, *Coco*’s conflation of the skeletal artist with the *Día de Muertos* should be unproblematic. To understand the issues of appropriation which emerge in *Coco*, brief reference to Julie’s Taymor’s biopic *Frida* (2002) can be made. Whilst the visuals and soundtrack have been widely praised, *Frida* has been critiqued for its de-contextualization of Kahlo’s Mexican, personal, artistic and politically-engaged reality.[[58]](#footnote-58) The polarized reception of Taymor’s film can be aligned to public reactions to *Coco*. As in Taymor’s film, in *Coco* both Mexico and Kahlo are conflated with death, the *Día de Muertos* and the exotic. Stereotyped views of Mexico as either a country of death and violence or exotic (female) beauty and colourful folklore permeate the mediascape. By making *Día de Muertos* a central theme, *Coco* crystallizes these binary oppositions by representing death and the exotic. Whilst defying such categories so too does the film perpetuate them in ambiguous fashion. *Coco* reinforces an ‘imagined world’built upon one-dimensional exotic tropes, as in *Frida*, with its use of temperamental *tías*, colour-coded emphasis on primary colours, ‘sexy’ Latinas, the patriarchal *gran familia*, vibrant *alebrijes*, *mariachis*, and pan-regional *Día de Muertos* objects. All these tropes are what often makes Mexico so appealing to UK foreign visitors whilst also underpinning the ‘performance of an authentic Mexican identity’.[[59]](#footnote-59)

*Coco* has never the less been praised for its visuals, for not ‘orientalizing’, for its portrayal of memory and accurate depiction of the fusion of Aztec and Catholic concepts of death.[[60]](#footnote-60) *The* *Guardian* lauded the film for not ‘becoming the west’s condescending gap-year obsession’ with today’s endless ‘Instagrammable images’ of the Day of the Dead and offering instead an ‘empowering, family-friendly folk myth that puts us in touch with our heritage’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Coco has been praised for its highly politicized message in an era of ‘Trump’s anti-Mexican rhetoric’, as atoning ‘for years of Mexican cartoon stereotypes’ and for reminding viewers of the influence of Mexican artists and directors in the global film industry.[[62]](#footnote-62) However, reception was mixed following its premiere in Mexicoon 20 October 2017 during the Morelia International Film Festival. A journalist, who notes that ‘aunque cierto sector del público alabó el trabajo de animación, hubo quienes aseguraron que en el filme los mexicanos son estereotipados,’ cites begruntled Twitter users: ‘*Coco* me parece un estereotipo tremendo de los mexicanos y una copia Disney de *El Libro de la Vida*’, and ‘[p]areciera que siempre estamos celebrando el Día de los Muertos y aparentemente somos muy buenos tocando la guitarra. Necesitaré tomar algunas clases’.[[63]](#footnote-63) The tweets recall Appadurai’s mediascapes in creating skewed ‘imagined worlds’ and Matthes’ point above about how outsiders can essentialize the appropriated culture by presenting it as monolithic whereby all insider members are perceived to align themselves to one form of practice or belief system. Other Twitter users were more receptive: ‘Donald Trump debe estar revolcándose en su tumba al ver que Pixar honra a México con una Obra de Arte’.[[64]](#footnote-64) The reference to ‘Obra de Arte’ is a nod to UNESCO’s endorsement of the *Día de Muertos* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The film thus becomes an important riposte to the *Día de Muertos’* halloweenization and to Trump’s anti-Mexican and Americanization rhetoric. This quote could similarly be an ironic reference to Disney’s attempt in 2013 to trademark the name ‘Día de Muertos’ for merchandizing purposes but which backfired after the decision was critiqued by many as a form of cultural appropriation of ‘lo mexicano’ and an ‘authentic’ Mexican practice by neo-imperialist mediascapes. These responses reinforce the idea that insiders can sometimes feel that they are unquestionably entitled to their ‘authentic’ culture, whereas outsiders who attempt to appropriate their culture particularly through commoditizing processes are seen as a form of neoliberal and neo-colonial exploitation and debasement of insider folk cultural forms and identities.

Another Twitter user notes that after watching the film, some Mexican children wanted to place an *ofrenda* on altars: ‘Lo más bonito fue escuchar a todos los niños que querían poner ofrenda’.[[65]](#footnote-65) This is an interesting case of hybridization and reterritorialization. It recalls a similar example when in 2016 Mexico City held its first ever *Día de Muertos* parade which was inspired by the 2015 James Bond film Spectre. In particular, the film’s opening scenes of a *Día de muertos* parade inspired Mexico’s own use of such a practice on its streets. Whilst the parades are well received by Mexicans, parades are associated with Halloween and so some critics perceived the *Día de muertos* parade as an example of imperialist commodification and halloweenization. Whereas appropriation often signals the transformation by hegemonic society of the symbols of insider cultures, both these particular examples show how deterritorialization is not unidirectional and that reterritorialization can result in dynamic reappropriation and transformation by insider groups. These examples also indicate that mediascapes do not always create negative ‘imagined worlds’ based on preconceptions and can in fact be beneficial for diverse insider communities by revitalizing traditions for a younger generation.

Like *Día de Muertos*, the representation of the skeletal Kahlo in *Coco* is ambiguous in terms of how she has been repackaged by Disney-Pixar for a globalized and specifically UK audience. *Coco*, like Taymor’s *Frida* and other cultural productions about the artist, presents Kahlo as possessing strength and creativity. *Coco* pays homage to Kahlo’s creativity by showcasing her painting of Mexican papaya fruit and *Self-portrait with Monkeys* (1943). The skeletal Frida’s *alebrije* monkey acts as a clever hook in establishing an intertextual connection between the characters, the artwork and artist. A strong feature of *Coco* is the role of performativity which translates ‘the themes and symbols of Kahlo’s art into a stage show, a kind of “living self-portrait” ’.[[66]](#footnote-66) As a deferential nod to Kahlo’s hybrid self and art comprising magical and Mexicanist traditions, her *motifs* come to life when she puts the finishing touches of the performance involving a troupe of dancers who are costumed as Frida, emerge from a papaya and drink the milky tears of a giant cactus which is also costumed as Kahlo. Such living pictures resonate with Taymor’s critically acclaimed use of *tableaux vivants* in *Frida*. After the rehearsal, *Coco*’s Kahlo rhetorically asks Miguelito about the meanings she is conveying: ‘Is it too obvious?’, cleverly playing upon the idea of Kahlo’s work as being far from simple but rather a complex hybrid of meanings and forms which allow the viewers to take from the works what they want. The notion of performance in *Coco*, as indeed in the Kahlo exhibit at the V&A,has an important bearing on our understanding of Kahlo’s complex persona and art as well as her own self-conscious performative self.

As an international icon, Taymor’s and Disney-Pixar’s artist has been cast in a way in which UK or global audiences expect her to be, that is as a figure who is strong despite facing adversity because of her disability and tumultuous relationship with Diego Rivera. But Kahlo’s creativity is watered down and whereas references to her disability, disease or suicidal thoughts are almost entirely masked in Taymor’s film, in *Coco* they are entirely absent. In both films the physically disabled Kahlo has been replaced by a ‘sexy’ (pan)latina.[[67]](#footnote-67) In *Coco* many of the female skeletons and Catrinas are presented as somewhat sexually desirable: one critic notes, in relation to Diego Rivera’s model, that ‘what’s also really impressive is how they made a skeleton with *no* clothing on look sexy’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Frida (like Taymor’s artist) has been whitened according to mainstream Western perceptions ofLatina beauty and post-feminist values. She is depicted, albeit in her skeletal form, as an alluring husky-voiced pan-feminine skeleton with a stylized uni-brow, full-lipped, curvaceous, a cinched waistline and jaw-dropping cheekbones.

The halloweenized *cosificación* and sexualization of *Día de Muertos* becomes apparent here as the alluring female skeletons with their colourful floral tiaras and painted faces recall the flesh-and-bone ‘sexy’ panlatina Halloween Catrinas, as discussed earlier. The women who wear skeleton/Catrina outfits and makeup during Halloween in the UK are often unaware of their cultural significance. They wear these costumes without knowing that they are a deferential nod to the Aztec Goddess Mictecacihuatl and her modern counterpart Catrina, whom the printmaker, cartoon illustrator and lithographer José Guadalupe Posada immortalized in his *La Calavera Catrina* (*c.*1900). The popularity of *La Calavera* is equally derived from Diego Rivera’s own appropriation of Posada’s female skeleton in his mural *Sueño de una tarde dominical* (1948). The floral tiaras are another sartorial nod to Frida Kahlo—who was similarly influenced by Posada’s Catrina—and her staple headdress. Whilst *Coco*’s Catrinas or Halloween Catrinas in the UK are thus figures of sexuality, neither Posada’s Catrina nor indeed Frida Kahlo can be said to embody sexual allure, even though both embrace the feminine. Indeed, whereas the cinched, corseted waistline becomes analogous with contained post-feminine beauty and sexualization in *Coco* andHalloween Catrina outfits, the corset for Kahlo came to embody in her life and self-portraits physical pain, disability and self-expression. Kahlo rejected the idea of herself as being sexually desirable in *Self-Portrait with Monkeys* featured in *Coco*. Amongst other complex reasons, the view of herself as being ‘unwomanly’ and ‘unmotherly’ was a result of her chronic health problems.

Ultimately, whilst *Coco* is a is a PG-rated film and some elements of Kahlo’s life may not be deemed appropriate for a family film, *Coco*—even more so than in the biopic—presents to UK audiences a repackaged mass consumer Kahlo, whose radical feminist, politicized and bisexual and complex creative self is diluted.

**Whose Frida and Whose *Día de Muertos*?**

Both Frida Kahlo and the *Día de Muertos* share something in common: *cosificación*. As with *Día de Muertos* objects (Figure 6) and costumes which are becoming increasingly consumed globally, so too has the female artist been reincarnated in various mass consumer forms from tiaras, toilet rolls, and mobile phone covers to (Halloween) costumes and skeleton forms. Just as objections to appropriation via *cosificación* of symbols and practices are raised because of potential loss of local roots and ‘authenticity’, so too do objections emerge when important historical or cultural figures are subject to *cosificación* within the broader global exchange system. Such reification is perceived as divesting one’s agency and resulting in fetish creation whereby the threat of the ‘other’ is muted and the ‘other’s ‘knowable’ and exotic qualities are appropriated.

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Figure 6

Day of the Dead dog chew toy. Halloween 2020.

Pets at Home store, Christchurch.

Photograph by the author.

Kahlo’s more recent appropriations in object form created as a posthumous celebration of the artist include Kahlo’s image being featured on a bracelet worn by former British Prime Minister Theresa May in 2017, and by being made into a Mattel Barbie doll (2018). Both these forms of *cosificación* resulted in debates over misappropriation, co-optation and ‘authenticity’.[[69]](#footnote-69) In *Coco*, the skeletal Kahlo’s reference to the philandering Rivera’s ‘fancy Barbie’ could be seen as a parodic premonition of the controversy that ensued following the release of Mattel’s doll. To coincide with International Women’s Day 2018, Mattel marketed the collectable ‘Inspiring Women’ Barbie dolls in the likeness of Kahlo, amongst other notables. Whilst Mattel’s dolls celebrate the idea of post-feminist ‘girlie feminism’ others decried Mattel’s sexist views of womanhood by underplaying Kahlo’s life, achievements and feminist beliefs. Kahlo’s signature unstyled uni-brow and upper lip hair have been removed and replaced with stylized eyebrows which are in line with contemporary views of ‘appropriate’ facial hair. The Barbie version looks ‘less Indigenous’ with blue eyes, slimmer body and given fuller, ‘sexier’ lips. By erasing Kahlo’s unique features, the Barbie doll—like Taymor’s or *Coco*’s Frida—embodies ‘tropicalized’ traits as delineated by Western concepts of pan-latina beauty. All three Fridas have been transformed into slick market consumer objects which emphasize desirable post-feminist qualities such as physical attraction, creativity and strength whilst removing other less marketable features. As with *Frida* and *Coco*, the Communist, Stalinist, disabled, bisexual, suicidal, hirsute and feminist Kahlo is conveniently erased in Mattel’s version. Interestingly, Salma Hayek, who embodied an exotic and safe Kahlo in Taymor’s biopic (unwillingly of course, as this was a Weinstein mediascape creation), reacted to the production of Mattel’s Kahlo Barbie in similar fashion to critics of her own filmic (mis)appropriation of the artist by decrying the manufacturers’ glamorization of Kahlo for profit: ‘She celebrated her uniqueness. How could they turn her into a Barbie?’[[70]](#footnote-70)

The Frida Barbie doll controversy has a striking parallel with Mattel’s creation of a *Día de Muertos* Barbie. Similarly sensuous to her Frida counterpart, this doll is dressed as a Catrina, with her dress and face adorned with the ritual’s signature motifs as well as donning a colourful tiara with marigolds, monarch butterflies and roses. When the doll was released in 2019, Mattel wanted their plastic creation to ‘honor the holiday for the millions that celebrate [*sic*] and to introduce people not familiar with the tradition to the rich meaning’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Many, in particular Mexican Americans or Latinos in the USA, however, took issue with such an appropriation as it risked watering down the significance of its religious and national roots, morphing ‘into a commercial machine in the United States, especially after the success of “[Coco](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/21/movies/coco-review-pixar-disney.html)” the 2017 Pixar film’; or becoming ‘a Halloween thing’.[[72]](#footnote-72) Other Latinos or Mexican Americans living in the US, were nevertheless more receptive to the creation as it ‘added immediate visibility to Mexican and Mexican-American identity’.[[73]](#footnote-73) Another noted that the tradition has already been subject to ‘many changes and re-appropriations […] It’s always been linked to an essential Mexican identity, too, although the definition of that identity has also changed over the years […] I don’t think that a new toy with a Día de Muertos theme will change things much’.[[74]](#footnote-74)

The reification of Kahlo as object and the conflation of the artist with death and the *Día de Muertos* becomes apparent in the context of transnational exhibition spaces, namely the artist’s home Casa Azul (Mexico City) and the 2018 V&A exhibition *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*. The UK exhibition showcased Kahlo’s possessions from the Casa Azul which had until then not been exhibited outside Mexico. The possessions included self-portraits, medicine bottles, corsets, costumes, accessories, photographs and letters. Kahlo died in the Casa Azul which was subsequently made into a museum commemorating Kahlo and her possessions. *Día de Muertos* celebrations are held in the house where altars have been displayed in Kahlo’s honour. As a ‘re-imagined Blue House’,[[75]](#footnote-75) the V&A became a proxy Casa Azul museum-within-a-museum-altar in which the *Día de Muertos* was celebrated (Figure 7) and displayed an *ofrenda* in honour of Kahlo created by Mexican artist Humberto Spíndola. The objects in the artist’s home and the V&A become transnational *funeraria*, objects which are traces of the living and things with which to remember the dead artist.

Reception in the UK of the exhibition oscillated from outright dismissal to praise. The exhibition of Kahlo’s possessions was subject to the same criticism as those who have appropriated Kahlo through the prism of memorabilia, objects or fashion and so devalue her art and values.[[76]](#footnote-76) It is interesting to compare this kind of reception of the V&A event against the reception of the exhibition of Kahlo’s possessions alongside her works in the Casa Azul which have never been subject to such critique. This may have to do with the idea of cultural heritage or ownership: Kahlo for many is a national treasure whose art and objects ‘belong’ to the Casa Azul and to Mexico. Here there would be no question of critiquing the exhibit of her things as a *cosificación* of the artist and her life, even though the house attracts thousands of fee-paying national and international tourists every year. Yet once a cultural artefact or figure is appropriated by outsiders it appears that it is deemed as more acceptable to scrutinize its *cosificación*.

The less positive reception of the V&A exhibition can be understood in a broader context whereby some critics see the appropriation of Kahlo or *Día de Muertos* in a negative light since they perceive people’s reconstruction of both in accordance with their objects of desire as annihilating their ‘authentic’ essence. With the increasing popularity of icon and practice, their ‘Mexicanness’ has become a halloweenized ‘stylistic gloss, decorative, colourful, pretty’.[[77]](#footnote-77) *Día de Muertos*, as mentioned previously, is perceived as being transformed into a form of consumerist *pastiche* where the local, religious dimension is forgotten. With Kahlo this appropriation is similarly perceived as resulting in the ‘stuff of popular mimicry, from Beyoncé’s Halloween costume to a myriad of Frida look-alike competitions’.[[78]](#footnote-78) By drawing attention to the woman and to her exterior features rather than to the artist, this divests understanding of the artist’s intentionality in her work.[[79]](#footnote-79) But the woman cannot be divested from the artist either: Kahlo had many (post-)feminist qualities. She was fascinated with all things feminine from accessories to makeup which she saw as a form of (feminist) empowerment and self-definition. Tote bags being sold with *Self-portrait with Monkeys* in the V&A (Figure 8) or elsewhere with images of the artist with logos such as ‘Fight like a Girl’, mirror these (post-)feminist characteristics and therefore may not be so at odds.[[80]](#footnote-80) As the V&A exhibit was keen to highlight, Kahlo used her costume in both her art and her self-presentation ‘to empower or constrain, but never as simple ornament’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Kahlo’s style—particularly her (appropriated) Tehuana dress—was a conscious and ‘complex combination of her communist ideology, her Mexican-ness […] as a reaction to her disabilities’,[[82]](#footnote-82) and to her anticolonialism and antiracism.[[83]](#footnote-83)

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Figure 7

Frida Tote Bag, V&A Shop (2018).

Photograph courtesy of Ali Dickens.

The criticism of the V&A event of throwing into relief the possessions of the artist against her art and life and therefore divesting understanding away from her ‘true’ self, is an important issue when placed alongside questions of remembrance, (self) construction and performance. The V&A had a special altar dedicated to Kahlo as a way of encouraging visitors to remember her. A question that one may ask is, just as Héctor in *Coco* is kept alive in the Land of the Dead thanks to family remembering him, who keeps the skeletal Frida or even the ‘real’ artist alive in the realms of the non-living? Such a question may not seem so absurd when considering the way in which the ‘real’ Kahlo has been subsumed into fictional reconstruction. In *Coco*, Héctor is kept alive because of Miguelito’s quest to find the truth, that is, to prove Ernesto de la Cruz murdered Héctor in order to steal the songs he had written, and so passing them off as his own to become famous. At the end, letters kept by Coco contain the evidence that Ernesto stole Héctor’s songs. Consequently, Ernesto’s legacy is destroyed and during *Día de Muertos* community honours Héctor instead. It is truth then that gives the film a sense of closure. With Kahlo, however, whilst some may seek out the ‘true’ Kahlo in order to remember her and even lay claim on her, she none the less elides knowability. Partly due to mediascapes and the spread of mass consumerism, Kahlo is one of the most easily recognizable, and therefore apparently knowable, women of twentieth century Latin-American history, just as the *Día de Muertos* is quickly becoming one of the most identifiable global cultural practices. From dedicated objects and websites to biographies and documentaries, Kahlo’s image, like that of the *Día de Muertos*, has been endlessly reproduced. These cultural productions purport to be the purveyors of ‘truth’ in order to bring audiences closer to the ‘real’ Kahlo. In the book accompanying the V&A exhibition, whilst acknowledging the complexities of Kahlo, Circe Henestrosa appears to suggest knowability: ‘I felt I had met her personally […] through her unique wardrobe [...] my research has been an attempt [...] to truly understand her’.[[84]](#footnote-84) With titles such as ‘The Real Story Behind Frida Kahlo’s Style’,[[85]](#footnote-85) such cultural productions appear to set out to provide a coherent construction of her selfhood, to dispel myths surrounding her life and to make Kahlo ‘someone we not only recognize but also think we know’.[[86]](#footnote-86) But there is no authoritative, single version to be uncovered since Kahlo’s and *Día de Muertos*’ ever-changing cultural identities embody the construction of an image or practice for (mass) consumption appropriated by diverse groups who read and consume Kahlo or *Día de Muertos* in myriad ways. The ever-growing myths surrounding Kahlo make the task of recovering her ‘true’ story very difficult. During the V&A exhibit there was a re-emergence of one such myth which fuses ‘truth’ with ‘fiction’ and emphasizes an almost supernatural relationship between Kahlo and death in order to reinforce her fighting spirit on the day of her cremation.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Positive critical reception of the V&A exhibition hinges on how the collection of personal artefacts sheds an important light on the manner in which Frida Kahlo constructs herself.[[88]](#footnote-88) The artist, like the *Día de Muertos* practice, oscillates between ‘core identity’ and ‘role’ and between the ‘true’ face and the mask. Whilst both Kahlo and *Día de Muertos* have specific features which make them intrinsic to an idea of Mexicanness—in the broadest sense whilst acknowledging the complex meanings attached to it—and in the case of Kahlo, specific to her lived experiences of disability, political beliefs or artistic complexities, so too is it the case that ‘there is no more one Frida than there is one true Mexico’.[[89]](#footnote-89) Kahlo was an actress as well as an artist, whose public identity, both in life and art, was carefully constructed by adopting different personas, which make it difficult for us to differentiate the ‘core’ Frida from the constructed one. The V&A’s exhibition title of ‘Making Her Self Up’ effectively captures the idea that Kahlo’s aesthetics of self-portrayal in both her self-portraits and personal styling was aimed at expressing her different identities.[[90]](#footnote-90)

This idea of performance is mediated metatextually in *Coco*, where the skeletal Kahlo directs her own performance in which she is performed by others. The multiple versions and alter egos of Frida as a troupe of skeletons and a giant cactus which take on her likeness becomes a humorous nod to her self-conscious aesthetics of the performative self in life, art and death. Such adoptions of the artist’s persona allude to the idea of Kahlo as pastiche and work as a recognition to those different individuals and communities who have appropriated her for their own needs by ascribing to her values which fought against physical, gender, racial and political discrimination. Since Kahlo’s death in 1954, the artist has become an international icon whom different groups continue to lay claim to from Feminists, Latinos, and the LGBTQ community to disabled people. Kahlo was a performer who enjoyed taking on other personas or animal forms and would likely have been fascinated by the way others have adopted her image and persona. The V&A exhibition’s curator Claire Wilcox notes that the exhibition of Kahlo encouraged visitors to take away what they wanted from it by connecting with her life, work and objects in multiple ways.[[91]](#footnote-91) Whilst her exterior features and objects are seen as totems of her artistry of expression, Wilcox stresses that the objects on display alongside Kahlo’s works were beyond just exteriority. They were about Frida as reflected in the lens of the camera and in her self-portraits which she painted with the use of a mirror. There were mirrors located throughout the exhibition to reinforce the mechanics of the construction of the artist’s self and the self of the viewers.

Whilst appropriation may well result in a universal claim on culture such as the *Día de Muertos* and Kahlo meaning that something has been lost, so too, can one argue that the unexpected has also been gained which adds new resonances to our (personal) interpretations of Kahlo and her art and of *Día de Muertos*.Throughout the exhibition period some visitors chose to dress as Kahlo, which is not in itself a new phenomenon, and on *Día de Muertos* some visitors were dressed up as either Kahlo or in skeleton outfits. One visitor to the exhibit, a Mexicanist and Professor from the USA working in the UK (Figure 9), chose to dress as the artist for a selfie for her Facebook friends taken in her home after she saw the exhibition. She did so to express, like Kahlo in many ways, her own in-between, diasporic identity.[[92]](#footnote-92)For her, masquerading was a way of expressing, albeit in tongue-and-cheek fashion, her sense of non-conformist aesthetic self, as Kahlo did.[[93]](#footnote-93) Such responses conjure the idea that Kahlo is ever evolving in meaning as she evokes in others unique responses or senses of place.

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Figure 8

‘Kahlo Selfie’

Photograph courtesy of the subject.

Kahlo’s ever-changing significations in terms of how she constructed herself and others construct her are mirrored in the *Día de Muertos* event at the V&A, and signal the practice’s own constructed myriad meanings. As in *Coco*, the V&A’s Kahlo and *Día de Muertos* go hand in hand: the idea of construction and performativity attributed to both was underpinned in the manner in which to celebrate both artist and cultural practice, visitors were encouraged to dress up as Kahlos or skeletons and to display their costumes in a procession. The notion of Kahlo and *Día de Muertos* as commoditized goods becomes apparent as the owners of the winning costumes were awarded prizes comprising Kahlo memorabilia. The V&A webpage for the exhibition has a link to the online shop where one can purchase Kahlo-inspired items such as the tote bag or a scarf with a photograph of Kahlo by Leo Matiz. The idea of construction of the ‘real’ and replica is perhaps nowhere better captured than in Kahlo’s self-portraits and photographs of her exhibited at the V&A. The repetition of her face in each painting and photograph suggests ‘multiple versions of herself’[[94]](#footnote-94) which she carefully stylized. As a modern icon, she is the quintessential ‘selfie queen,’ who not only inspires mimicry in others but also permits it. During *Día de Muertos* at the V&A exhibit visitors were encouraged to ‘Take a Seat on the Selfie Bench […] Sit down with the skeletons and mark the moment with a selfie’. Kahlos and skeletons were seen taking selfies of themselves. Self-replica thus becomes for some individuals a means to either insert their lives into Kahlo’s or Mexico’s ‘reality’ or merely as a form of ludic masquerade and fantasy.

**… Does It Matter?**

Both *Día de Muertos* and Kahlo occupy shifting and ambivalent (subject) positions. Via globalized mediascapes and the deterritorialization of both cultural practice and icon, it becomes apparent that they continue to be the subject of debate surrounding questions of authenticity, cultural theft and (mis)appropriation. Opposing responses, from contempt and offence to celebration, have emerged because of the perceived co-optation of the dead artist as well as *Día de Muertos* in their (market-derived) reiterative reincarnations. Cultural hybridization of Kahlo and *Día de Muertos* has been celebrated for allowing diverse groups such as (British) diasporic, local or other communities to take from them what they desire as a way of rejoicing, (self)-empowerment, self-identification or even as strategic renewal.[[95]](#footnote-95) Conversely, such hybridization has led to protest: the halloweenizing, sexualizing, exoticizing and even whitewashing of both Kahlo and Mexico and their reincarnations as consumable, glossy goods has been condemned for divesting their diversity or complexity.

Whilst many have dismissed objections to cultural appropriation because they stand in the way of celebrating cross-cultural appreciation and understanding, a failure to acknowledge the harms of cultural appropriation—as with the *escaramuza* or Indigenous design prints examples—is also a failure to acknowledge the cultural and socio-economic injustices sometimes faced by cultural insiders. Questioning cultural appropriation remains important in order to question (racial) inequalities of power; to show sensitivity and the need to value and to respect cultural autonomy.[[96]](#footnote-96) In both examples, Frida Kahlo and *Día de Muertos*, the question of one’s position with regards to the purported theft or rejuvenation of these globalized phenomena, is one which perhaps does not really matter. With Kahlo and the Day of the Dead, the boundaries between apparently opposing issues such as those of inspiration or appreciation or copying and theft in the context of appropriation in a globalised age are muddied: whilst communities or events in honour of the Day of the Dead or Kahlo may seek to represent or appropriate these phenomena in ‘accurate/respectful’ ways so too are there often commercial interests at play, whereby mediascapes and retailers are all too aware of the power of the ‘consumable’, exotic and colourful versions of both phenomena. These different forms of appropriation play or feed off each other and have become so hybridized themselves that they are often difficult to differentiate.

So the ongoing legacy of Frida Kahlo and the Day of the Dead should be seen in terms of their lasting impact rather than in terms of questions of appropriation. They are of course two different phenomena in that Kahlo was an individual and is no longer alive but her artistic and personal life continues to inspire many. The *Día de Muertos* is a collectivized practice which has continued for centuries and which is a dynamic culture which continues to this day. But both are powerful phenomena which have captivated the public imagination and are increasingly being embraced across the world. They exemplify hybridized subjectivities that Kahlo constructed for herself and others have constructed for her and for the Day of the Dead, and it is perhaps this same versatility that has earned these phenomena millions of followers from radically diverse communities. Just as Kahlo built upon her chameleonic (public) proﬁle by presenting herself through a series of points of views and her art, so too is she in death, like the *Día de Muertos*, in continual ﬂux and transformation, ultimately embodying the creation of a series of images for (mass) consumption which can be read in a rich multitude of ways.

Perhaps the most enduring quality of both phenomena is their temporal dimension. When someone feels a whimsical compulsion to ‘be’ Kahlo or people dress up as skeletons at Day of the Dead street celebrations for the sheer fun of it, both cultural phenomena bestow upon us the experience of something in flow state whereby we take part in an activity with such full enjoyment that nothing else seems to matter.[[97]](#footnote-97) But the quality of that experience in the moment can similarly be enhanced because of the intentions which people may bring with them: the spirit of remembrance and celebration for the dead Kahlo and the deceased.[[98]](#footnote-98) Nowhere better was this fusion of temporal *jouissance* with remembrance and celebration expressed than in The Brook’s 2019 *Día de Muertos* event, which had as its theme the celebration of Mexican women with a focus on Frida Kahlo and the female Mexican diasporic *mariachi* band Las Guadalupes. The *mariachis* sang to iconic tunes such as *La llorona* on a stage which was decorated with ‘papel picado’ and an altar featuring marigolds, sugar skulls created on site by children and photos of loved ones, including Kahlo. Skeleton and Kahlo outfits were donned by British and diasporic Mexican families (Figure 10); ornate skull make-up was applied to Mexican, British, French and Spanish children by British artists; and *enchiladas* and steak and ale pies were served up by Mexican and British cooks. This was a truly dynamic transnational space where Mexican cultural figures, symbols and practices acquired new (deterritorialized) meanings by interacting with the local. Importantly, this event created a sense of ‘connected communities’,[[99]](#footnote-99) not just in terms of the connections for diasporic Mexicans between the ‘aquí’ and the ‘allá,’ but also between different individuals and local communities.

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Figure 9

Winners of the ‘Best Kahlo and Skeleton Family’, The Brook, 2019.

Photograph courtesy of Vanessa Mar-Molinero

This article was written over the course of the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, *Día de Muertos* became a particularly poignant festivity both in the UK and globally considering the tragic death toll. It is notable how mediascapes and commerce capitalized simultaneously on both Covid-19 and *Día de Muertos*,[[100]](#footnote-100) for events having to cancel or postpone due to the pandemic,[[101]](#footnote-101) and how cultural events in Mexico and throughout the world were modified in order to adhere to social distancing rules or used Covid-19 as the creative focus of some of their events.[[102]](#footnote-102) In Mexico City, the 2020 street events and parade were replaced by virtual events which payed specific homage to all those who have passed due to Covid-19.[[103]](#footnote-103) Though ‘normal’ *Día de Muertos* global practices have been affected by the pandemic, so too does it become apparent that the phenomenon is constantly transforming to meet people’s needs. More than ever, the practice in 2020 became all the more relevant with its commemorative dimension to individuals and different communities across the world who were affected by Covid-19 and who continue to experience a heightened fear of dying themselves or of losing a loved one.[[104]](#footnote-104)

1. \* I would like to thank Professor Laura Lewis, Ms Ali Dickens, Vanessa Mar-Molinero and Professor Clare Mar-Molinero (of the University of Southampton’s MexSoc and the MeXsu Centre in collaboration with *The* *Brook*, Southampton) and Mark Cater, Director of Metropole Market (Bournemouth) for permission to use images as indicated in captions throughout. My thanks also to Dr Charlotte Gleghorn (University of Edinburgh); Mr Christopher Byrne, Professor Laura Lewis, Ms Irina Nelson, Dr Patricia Romero de Mills (University of Southampton), and Dr William Rowlandson (University of Kent) for their feedback. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari & Silvia L. López, foreword by Renato Rosaldo (London/Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In response to global fashion designers, the Mexican Government is developing legislation to grant intellectual property protection to cultural knowledge and identity of Afro-Mexican and indigenous groups. See Sam Jones, ‘Mexico Accuses Designer Carolina Herrera of Cultural Appropriation’, *The Guardian*, 13 June 2019, n.p.; available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/13/mexico-carolina-herrera-fashion-designer-cultural-appropriation>> (accessed 27 October 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Regina M. Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. P., 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Spectre*, dir. Sam Mendes (2015); *Coco*, dir. Lee Unkrich & Adrian Molina (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Arjun Appadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’, in *Global Culture*, ed. Mike Featherstone, *Theory Culture Society*, 7:2–3 (1990), 295–310 (pp. 298–99). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Appadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Canclini quoted in Daniel Balderston, Mike Gonzalez & Ana M. Lopez, ‘Introduction’, in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures,* ed. Daniel Balderston Mike Gonzalez & Ana M. Lopez, 3 vols, (London: Routledge, 2000) I, *A–D*, xix-xxii(p. xxi). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Events begin on 28 October and culminate with the *Día de Muertos* on the 1 and 2 November and, due to its syncretic roots, coincides with the Catholic celebrations of All Saints’ and All Souls’ days. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Halloween has hybridized pagan and Catholic roots: the Celtic tradition of *Samhain*, celebrated on 31 October, came to be partly incorporated into All Saints’ and All Souls’ days (1 and 2 November). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stanley Brandes, ‘The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 111:442 (1998), 359–80. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. García Canclini, *Hybrid Strategies*, trans. Chiappari & López, xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Some regions hold *Día de Muertos* events which are not celebrated in other parts of the country such as Michoacán’s *Kuirisi-atakua* (duck hunt; 28 October–2 November), and Yucatán’s *Hanal Pixán* (Mayan celebration of the deceased with food offerings, which takes place between 31 October and 2 November). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Erich Hatala Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?’, in *Dominating Speech*, ed. Hallie Liberto, Social Theory and Practice, 42:2 (2016), 343–66 (p. 356). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?’, 343; emphasis in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Joel Feinberg, quoted in James O. Young, ‘Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63:2 (2005), 135–46 (p. 135). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?’, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?’, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?’, 355–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Matthes, ‘The Ethics of Cultural Heritage’, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive, 12 July 2018, ed. Edward N. Zalta, n.p.; <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/ethics-cultural-heritage/>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Matthes, ‘The Ethics of Cultural Heritage’. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Matthes, ‘The Ethics of Cultural Heritage’. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cynthia Vidaurri, ‘Did Disney Pixar Get Day of the Dead Celebrations Right in Its New Film “Coco”?’, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 21 November 2017, n.p.; available at <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/did-disney-pixar-get-day-dead-celebrations-right-its-new-film-coco-180967286/#JYSJeQGh8IhhlYSB.99>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Young, ‘Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation’, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Richard A. Rogers, ‘From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation’, *Communication Theory*, 16:4 (2006), 474–503 (p. 474). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Regina Marchi explores the opposing responses to the *Día de muertos* in the context of globalization, authenticity, ownership and commercialism. See Regina Marchi, ‘Hybridity and Authenticity in US Day of the Dead Celebrations’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 126:501 (2013), 272–301. For the *cosificación* of Kahlo see Sarah Krichel, ‘How the commercialization of Frida Kahlo has weaponized her legacy against her’, *National Post*, 19 July 2018, <<https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/how-the-commercialization-of-frida-kahlo-has-weaponized-her-legacy-against-her>> (accessed 9 February 2021); and for Che Guevara, see Rory Carroll, ‘Guevara's children speak out against commercialisation of iconic image’, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2008; available online at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jun/06/cuba>> (accessed 9 February 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rogers, ‘From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation’, 488. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Matthes, ‘The Ethics of Cultural Heritage’. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Matthes ‘The Ethics of Cultural Heritage’. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Unlike Octavio Paz who theorized monolithic perspectives about ‘Mexicanness’ in his seminal *El Laberinto de la soledad* (México D.F.: Cuadernos Americanos 1950), other Mexican cultural theorists and writers have shown how ‘lo mexicano’ is a constructed and a highly fraught term given that Mexican culture and identity is hybridized and diverse. Roger Bartra’s *La jaula de la melancolía*, for instance, is a deconstruction of *El laberinto* and argues that Paz’s philosophy of Mexicanness and his exploration of ‘foundational’ myths of Mexican national identity are social constructs bolstering dominant ideologies. See *La jaula de la melancolía. Identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (México D.F., Grijalbo, 1987). Feminist revisions of Paz’s female stereotypes such as those of *la chingada* and *la malinche* similarly serve to question innate conceptions of Mexican identity. See for example, Jean Franco & Gloria Elena Bernal, ‘La Malinche: del don a contrato sexual’, *Debate Feminista*, 11, 251–70; and *La Malinche, sus padres y sus hijos*, ed. Margo Glantz (México D.F.: UNAM, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. With over 56,000 daily readers, the local *Daily Echo* raised public awareness of the cultural practice. See Emma Joseph, ‘Day of the Dead fiesta returns to Metropole Market in Bournemouth’, *Daily Echo*, 20 October 2018; available at <<https://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/news/16996231.day-of-the-dead-fiesta-returns-to-metropole-market-in-bournemouth/>> (accessed 27 June 2020); Sam Hodgson,‘The Day of the Dead Metropole Market returns to Lansdowne’, *BUzz*, 22 December 2020, <<https://buzz.bournemouth.ac.uk/2020/12/the-day-of-the-dead-metropole-market-returns-to-lansdowne/>> (accessed 27 June 2020)**.**The Bournemouth festival strove to highlight that the Mexican festival was different from Halloween. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See The Brook’s online advertisement for its event, ‘Day of the Dead Family Festival–El Día de los muertos’, The Brook, n.d., n.p.; <<https://www.the-brook.com/event-details/9969405/day-of-the-dead-family-festival-el-d-a-de-los-muertos/>> (accessed 27 October 2019). The *Southern Daily Echo*, which has a daily readership of over 49,000 readers, brought awareness of the cultural practice and potentially encouraged readers and their families to attend a ‘family-friendly day of the dead “extravaganza” ’ (Rachel Adams, ‘Family-friendly “Day of the Dead” festival coming to Southampton’, *Southern Daily Echo*, 26 October 2018, n.p.; available at <<https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/17009085.family-friendly-day-of-the-dead-festival-coming-to-southampton>> [accessed 27 October 2019]). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, ‘Enriching lives: Arts and culture at the heart of our community. A five year strategy and 10 year vision for the borough’, June 2017*,* <<https://www.basingstoke.gov.uk/content/page/51493/Cultural%20Strategy.pdf>> (accessed 27 June 2019), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For the UK’s diasporic Mexican and Latin American diversity, see *Narratives of Migration, Relocation and Belonging: Latin Americans in London*, ed. Patria Román-Velázquez & Jessica Retis (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Conversation with author, 4 December 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Managing Director Nick Peek, email to author, 10 January 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Nick Peek, email to author, 10 January 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Juan Carlos Guerrero, ‘Marigolds, papel picado and alebrijes: The Visual Language of the Disney-Pixar Film “Coco” ’, *abc11*, n.d., <<https://abc11.com/entertainment/the-colorful-symbols-of-pixars-coco/4275720/>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See for example <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Inspired-Banners-Rainbow-Horizontal-Mexican/dp/B07DHRQ8DC/ref=sr_1_1?s=kitchen&ie=UTF8&qid=1551443756&sr=1-1&keywords=coco+banners>> and <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Authentic-mexican-papel-picado-meters/dp/B010B5BSUO>> (both accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Anon., ‘Make no bones about it: this is the hot look for Halloween’, *BBC News*, 27 October 2018, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-norfolk-45969051/make-no-bones-about-it-this-is-the-hot-look-for-halloween>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Bella Monsoon, ‘Easy Day of the Dead Skull Makeup Tutorial || Halloween 2018 || South African Youtuber’, 17 October 2018, YouTube video, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htfXsv7BJnw>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Chloe Metzger, ‘7 Truly Gorgeous Día de Muertos Makeup Ideas’, *Marie Claire*, 30 August 2017, n.p, <<https://www.marieclaire.com/beauty/makeup/news/g5007/dia-de-los-muertos-makeup/>>; and Anon., ‘Halloween Makeup Tutorials, From the Super Spooky to the Super Easy’, *Marie Claire*, 9 October 2018, <<https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/beauty/make-up/halloween-makeup-tutorials-398033>> (both accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Monsoon, ‘Easy Day of the Dead Skull Makeup Tutorial’; comment by user (Ubi Ogulu, 18 October 2018, 13:59) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Elicia Aragon, ‘Sexy Glam Sugar Skull Halloween Makeup Tutorial | Dia de los Muertos’, YouTube video, 16 October 2015, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FNX8  
    ODCmFc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FNX8ODCmFc)> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Aragon, ‘Sexy Glam Sugar Skull Halloween Makeup Tutorial’; comment by user (Javier Isco, 4 November 2017, 14:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See BBC Strictly Come Dancing, ‘Strictly Halloween: Day of the Dead dance: If you didn't enjoy this dance, you're dead to us 😉💀’, Facebook post; comment by user (Lisa Brook, 28 October 2018, 10:58); <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=559969851083442>> (accessed 18 January 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Appadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. BBC Strictly Come Dancing, ‘Strictly Halloween: Day of the Dead dance’, Facebook post; comment by user (Adele Noufaux Mason, 27 October 2018, 21:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Matt Bagwell, ‘Strictly Come Dancing’s Day Of The Dead-Inspired Opening Dance Blasted For “Cultural Appropriation” ’, *HuffPost*, 28 October 2018, n.p.; <<https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/strictly-come-dancings-day-of-the-dead-inspired-opening-dance-accused-of-cultural-appropriation_uk_5bd592f7e4b0a8f17ef8993f>>, (accessed 16 January 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ellie Henman, ‘ “Disrespectful”. Strictly Come Dancing Fans Blast Show as “Racist” after Mexican Themed Opening Dance’, *The Sun*, 27 October 2018, n.p., <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/7599037/strictly-come-dancing-fans-claim-show-dance-racist/>> (accessed 27 June 2019); Anon., ‘Strictly Come Dancing Viewers SLAM the Show for “Cultural Appropriation” after Day of the Dead Themed Opener’, *Mail Online*, 27 October 2018, n.p., <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-6324359/Strictly-Come-Dancing-Viewers-SLAM-cultural-appropriation-Day-Dead-theme.html>> (both accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Katie Reid (@KatieeeReid), 27 October 2018, Tweet, quoted in Bagwell, ‘Strictly Come Dancing’s Day Of The Dead-Inspired Opening Dance Blasted For “Cultural Appropriation” ’. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. While the appropriation of the *Día de Muertos* led to opposing views, the appropriation in the UK of Halloween—a US import—was not questioned. This may because of how both the Mexican and US traditions have diverted in terms of their religious/local roots: halloweenizing of the *Día de Muertos* causes offence to national religious beliefs whereas Halloween is perceived as a commercial, laic event. Cultural ownership may also have a bearing: the appropriating of one Western neo-liberal imperialist tradition by another Western neo-liberal imperialist counterpart is unproblematic whereas the selective appropriation of a non-Western culture is perceived as neo-imperialist. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Anon., ‘Make no bones about it’ [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Metzger, ‘7 Truly Gorgeous Día de Muertos Makeup Ideas’. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Marchi shows how whilst some have taken issue with the *Día de Muertos’* commercialization or halloweenization because it degrades its ‘authenticity’. Commodification does not necessarily entail exploitation and in fact revitalizes the Mexican practice (Marchi, *The Day of the Dead in the USA,* 109 & 115). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Deborah Shaw, ‘Transforming the National Body: Salma Hayek and *Frida*’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 27:4 (2010), 299–313 (p. 307). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Isabel Molina-Guzmán cited in Shaw, ‘Transforming the National Body’, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Vanessa Erazo, ‘This Is What Latino Film Critics Are Saying About Pixar’s “Coco” ’ *Remezcla*, 27 November 2017, n.p., <<http://remezcla.com/lists/film/latino-film-critics-review-pixar-coco/>> (accessed 27 June 2019); and Clarisse Loughrey, ‘Coco will Challenge the Way you Look at Death’, *The Independent*, 17 January 2018, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/coco-pixar-second-death-final-death-day-of-dead-dia-de-muertos-a8164491.html>> (accessed 27 June 2019). Critics could take issue with the idea of ‘accuracy’. *Coco* represents an overarching composite with individual elements that are recognizable to all those familiar with the tradition such as decorated cemeteries or altars, *ofrendas* or marigolds (Vidaurri, ‘Did Disney Pixar Get Day of the Dead Celebrations Right in Its New Film “Coco”?’). Whilst such mash-up of practices may be perceived by some as a rejuvenating process, so too can this ‘deterritorialization’ imply for others the loss of regional and intra-regional diversity. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Peter Bradshaw, ‘Coco review—charmer that could bring Pixar back from the dead’, *The Guardian*, 18 January 2018, n.p.; available online at <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/18/coco-review-pixar-land-of-the-dead-animation>> (accessed 21 December 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Matthew Turner, ‘Coco Review: this new Pixar movie atones for years of Mexican cartoon stereotypes’, *inews.co.uk*, 18 January 2018, n.p., <<https://inews.co.uk/culture/film/coco-review-pixar/>>; and Steve Rose, ‘Coco: the Pixar film that defies Donald Trump’s anti-Mexican rhetoric’, *The Guardian*, 15 January 2018, n.p., <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/15/coco-the-film-that-defies-trumps-anti-mexican-rhetoric>> (both accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Anon., ‘COCO, de Disney-Pixar desató la polémica, ¿estereotipan a mexicanos?’, n.d., *El Horizonte*, n.p., <<http://www.elhorizonte.mx/escena/coco-de-disney-pixar-desato-la-polemica-estereotipan-a-mexicanos/1799946>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Osvaldo Zárate Mont (@ozzyzarate), 28 October 2017, Tweet, quoted in Vanessa Erazo, ‘Pixar's “Coco” Opened in Mexico and the Entire Country Is Bawling Their Eyes Out’, *Remezcla*, 30 October 2017, n.p.; available online at <<https://remezcla.com/film/pixar-coco-mexico-theatrical-release-twitter-reactions-tears-love/>> (accessed 9 February 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Jorge Haro Serrato (@Georgieharo), 28 October 2017, Tweet, quoted in Erazo, ‘Pixar’s “Coco” opened in Mexico and the Entire Country Is Bawling Their Eyes Out. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Gwynne Watkins, ‘ “Coco”: How Frida Kahlo's Hilarious, Inspiring Cameo Happened’*, Yahoo! News*, 8 December 2017, n.p.; <[https://uk.news.yahoo.com/coco-frida-kahlos-hilarious-inspiring-cameo-happened-205601625.html?guccounter=1&guce\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly  
    93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\_referrer\_sig=AQAAAAKH1qoQtat8\_bZoCB6vt\_6cxG-ty0gcIbYLa1-kPCV6oVdp6DMqSFI\_f8AD7VRntv6WUa4gQ3f\_W\_tQuh3dMhyDf4\_keH  
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    km7EyGTpna](https://uk.news.yahoo.com/coco-frida-kahlos-hilarious-inspiring-cameo-happened-205601625.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAAKH1qoQtat8_bZoCB6vt_6cxG-ty0gcIbYLa1-kPCV6oVdp6DMqSFI_f8AD7VRntv6WUa4gQ3f_W_tQuh3dMhyDf4_keHfF80wZTEHKl0Hu9Tut5nW4Gt2LJ13CnIsaYlQWLL-l-ZfGX3ztG75EjCpG-1jDHMBGE3km7EyGTpna)> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. The sexing up of Frida Kahlo in Taymor’s biopic can now be understood in light of the broader context of the #MeToo movement. In 2017 Salma Hayek made public allegations which revealed that during the filming of *Frida*, a Weinstein-Indiewood production, she had been sexually harassed by Harvey Weinstein who also asked her to appear sexually alluring in *Frida*. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Cat Lafuente, ‘Things Only Adults Notice in Coco’, *The List,* 20 March 2018, <<https://www.thelist.com/114313/things-adults-notice-coco/>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. For the appropriation controversy of Teresa May’s fashion choice, see Deborah Shaw, ‘How Frida Kahlo became a Trinket for a Conservative Leader’, *The Conversation*, 6 October 2017, n.p.; <<https://theconversation.com/how-frida-kahlo-became-a-trinket-for-a-conservative-leader-85334>> (accessed 21 December 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Anon, ‘Salma Hayek: You Can’t “Barbie” Frida Kahlo! And Where’s Her Unibrow?’, *TMZ*, 3 November 2018, n.p.; <<https://www.tmz.com/2018/03/11/salma-hayek-slams-mattel-frida-kahlo-barbie-doll/>> (accessed 21 December 2020).There is currently a lawsuit against Mattel’s allegedly unauthorized appropriation and whitewashing of Kahlo’s image. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Sandra García, ‘Día de Muertos Barbie: Respectful Tribute, or “Obviously Cultural Appropriation”?’, *The New York Times*, 11 September 2019, n.p.; available online at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/11/us/dia-de-muertos-barbie-mattel.html>> (accessed 27 September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. García, ‘Día de Muertos Barbie’. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. García, ‘Día de Muertos Barbie’. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. García, ‘Día de Muertos Barbie’. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Anon.,, ‘V&A Frida Kahlo’, Gibson Thornley Architects, [<http://www.gibsonthornley.com/projects/va-frida-kahlo/](file:///C:\Users\cerib\Downloads\%3chttp:\www.gibsonthornley.com\projects\va-frida-kahlo\)> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Jonathan Jones notes: ‘Her artistic brilliance [is] overshadowed by her relics. She has passed into populist sainthood […] This exhibition overwhelms Kahlo’s living legacy with its excessive adoration of a dead woman’s stuff’. See Jonathan Jones, ‘Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up Review—Forget the Paintings, Here’s her False Leg’, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2018, n.p.; available online at <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jun/12/frida-kahlo-making-her-self-up-review-v-and-a-london>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Oriana Baddeley, ‘Frida Redressed’, in *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, ed. Claire Wilcox & Circe Henestrosa (London: V&A Publishing, 2018), 174–94 (p. 175). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Baddeley, ‘Frida Redressed’, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Baddeley, ‘Frida Redressed’, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. See ‘frida feminist Tote bag’, Mony26 shop, RedBubble, <[https://www.redbubble.com/i/tote-bag/frida-feminist-byMony26/40665726.P1  
    QBH](https://www.redbubble.com/i/tote-bag/frida-feminist-byMony26/40665726.P1QBH)> (accessed 16 January 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Baddeley, ‘Frida Redressed’, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Circe Henestrosa, ‘Appearances Can be Deceiving—Frida Kahlo’s Construction of Identity: Disability, Ethnicity and Dress’, in *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, ed. Wilcox & Henestrosa, 66–83 (p. 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Kahlo has been critiqued for misappropriating Indigenous culture in her work, life and fashion and for adhering to Mexican *indigenista* post-revolutionary ideology. Whilst promoting *lo indígena*, such an ideology is viewed as expressing a romantic vision of Mexican identity which ignores the realities of exclusion and racism which indigenous communities faced at the time. See Rebecca Block & Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, ‘Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in “Gringolandia” ’, *Woman’s Art Journal*, 19:2 (1998–1999), 8–12. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Henestrosa, ‘Appearances Can be Deceiving’, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Hettie Judah, ‘The Real Story Behind Frida Kahlo’s Style’, *The New York Times*, 15 June 2018, n.p.; available online at < <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/fashion/frida-kahlo-museum-london.html>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Baddeley, ‘Frida Redressed’, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Poppy Cory-Wright, ‘Review: Frida Kahlo: Making Herself Up, V&A’, *CultureWhisper*, 8 October 2018, n.p.; <<https://www.culturewhisper.com/r/visual_arts/frida_kahlos_wardrobe_v_and_a_exhibition_2018/10187>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Lee Sharock, ‘Review: Frida Kahlo at the V&A’, *FAD Magazine*, 30 July 2018, n.p.; <<https://fadmagazine.com/2018/07/30/review-frida-kahlo-va/>> (accessed 27 October 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Baddeley, ‘Frida Redressed,’ 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Claire Wilcox, ‘Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up’, in *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, ed. Wilcox & Henestrosa, 114–29 (p. 126). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Anon., ‘In Conversation: Perspectives on Frida Kahlo’, V&A Museum, n.d., n.p.; <<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/in-conversation-perspectives-on-frida-kahlo>> (accessed 27 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Email to author, 7 June 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Email to author, 7 June 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Wilcox, ‘Frida Kahlo,’ 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. *Día de Muertos* has become politicized by being appropriated, for example, by Voces de ausencia*,* feminist collectives, and members of the public. On November 2018, these groups bore crosses or dressed up as Catrinas, in honour of femicide and female victims of domestic violence and marched in protest in Mexico City. See Darinka Rodríguez, ‘Proponen crear el Día de Muertas el 3 de noviembre’, *El País*, 25 October 2018, n.p.; available online at <<https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2018/10/24/mexico/1540407307_544064.html>> (accessed 27 September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?’, 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Marchi, *The Day of the Dead in the USA*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Jayani Bonnerjee, Alison Blunt, Cathy McIlwaine & Clifford Pereira, ‘Connected Communities: Diaspora and Transnationality’ (2012) <[https://www.qmul.ac.uk/geog/media/  
    geography/images/staff/Connected-Communities--Diaspora-and-Transnationality.pdf](https://www.qmul.ac.uk/geog/media/geography/images/staff/Connected-Communities--Diaspora-and-Transnationality.pdf)> (accessed 27 September 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. ‘Covid masks’ with Catrina skeleton prints were produced such as those shown here <<https://www.clothmyths.com/product/Skull-Girl-Cartoon-Animal-Print-Breathable-Face-Bandana-Magic-Scarf-Headwrap-Balaclava/FBXHA01-lubsc02-nu/a2a8a870-39fc-4334-ab17-062cd2dcdc89.html>> (accessed 27 September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. *Día de Muertos* club party: Paradise Apocalypse has had to cancel its event until 2021. See <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/festival-of-the-dead-paradise-apocalypse-london-tickets-111305497740>> (accessed 27 September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. One Coventry art craft workshop allowed attendees to create their own Covid masks with *Día de Muertos* patterns. See <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/october-half-term-festival-of-the-dead-tickets-121182908341?aff=ebdssbdestsearch>> (accessed 27 September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Bertha Teresa Ramírez, ‘CDMX celebrará el Día de Muertos 2020 de manera virtual’, *La Jornada*, 20 July 2020, n.p.; <[https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/capital/2020/07/20/  
     cdmx-celebrara-el-dia-de-muertos-2020-de-manera-virtual-216.html](https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/capital/2020/07/20/cdmx-celebrara-el-dia-de-muertos-2020-de-manera-virtual-216.html)> (accessed 27 September 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. The author of this article is co-writing an article with Nuala Finnegan (University College Cork) exploring the impact of Covid-19 on the *Día de Muertos* practices. This impact will also be captured in our multimedia exhibition (2021) with the contributions of artists, the UK Mexican diasporic community, MexSoc Southampton/UK, University College Cork and Comunidad Mexicana, Cork.

     \* Disclosure Statement. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author [↑](#footnote-ref-104)