Chapter Five

The Mortal Remains of Emiliano Zapata

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On April 10, 2001, during the eighty-second commemoration of the death of Emiliano Zapata, Mayor Matías Quiroz Medina of Tlaltizapán, Morelos, called for the transfer of the “mortal remains of the cadillo of the south, to bury them in the mausoleum that Zapata ordered constructed in 1914 for himself and his generals.” Quiroz Medina added that Tlaltizapán was not just another town. Along with the mausoleum, it possessed “the blood of the cadillo fixed in the clothing he wore when he died,” as well as the best maintained museum of Zapatismo in the state. Moreover, he contended, the people of Tlaltizapán “venerate and respect the history that permits us today to have free governments, clear thoughts, and a country with dignity.” For all these reasons, he believed, Zapata’s place was in his mausoleum “at the feet of father Jesus.” A second speaker from the local government provided context for Quiroz Medina’s last comment by indicating that Zapata was a man of great faith who often attended the local church in the atrium of which his mausoleum had been built. This official also pointed out that other important leaders of the movement—Emigdio Marmolejo, Jesús Capistrán, Pioquinto Galis—had been buried there, and that Zapata should be permitted to “rest with his compañeros, who are waiting for him.”

In Cuautla, meanwhile, where Zapata’s bones lay beneath a statue erected for them in the late 1980s, there were several ceremonies in his honor. The city government turned out early in the morning to deposit a floral wreath at the monument. Moments later the governor of Morelos, Sergio Estrada Cajigal of the National Action Party (Partido de Acción Nacional, PAN), arrived with other representatives
of the state government to commemorate Zapata. They, too, left a floral offering. Shortly thereafter a scuffle broke out between representatives of the governments of Cuautla and Ciudad Ayala (previously Villa de Ayala). Both entities wanted to control the ceremony soon to be enacted by leaders of the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI). Unfortunately for anyone hoping for order or decorum, pilgrims from the town of Tepoztlán, Morelos, arrived during the spat and performed their own brief ceremony, which reverberated with cries of “Zapata vive, la lucha sigue, sigue” (Zapata lives, the struggle continues, continues). Ultimately, the folks from Ciudad Ayala won the field. They got their sound equipment and speakers’ table set up just before the head of the National Peasant’s Confederation (Confederación Nacional Campesina, CNC) and the leader of the state PRI arrived to make their speeches to a conspicuously small group of onlookers. One speaker claimed that in coming elections the PRI “will be the alternative that Zapata wanted.”

As if these events at Cuautla and Tlaltizapán were not enough, in the village of Chinameca, Governor Estrada Cajigal, who had made his way south from Cuautla, presided over the official, national tribute at the hacienda where Zapata had been assassinated in 1919. During that ceremony Secretary of Agrarian Reform Maria Teresa Herrera Tello, there to represent President Vicente Fox of the PAN, insisted that Fox knew that Zapata stood for a commitment to social justice, “which will be taken up again by the federal government.” Fox was not, she added, “trying to cancel the history of Mexico.”

Zapata was surely spinning in his grave. What did it all mean: the references to blood and body and Jesus Christ, the flowers and the boosterism, the claims and the monuments? Perhaps the most obvious part of the story involves political changes that had recently taken place in Mexico. After two decades of growing pluralism in a country once dominated by a single party, the PRI, in the summer of 2000 Fox finally turned the PRI out of the presidency it had occupied (under several names) for seventy-one years. The PRI was completely identified with the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) in which Zapata participated. The PAN, however, was formed in 1940 by Catholics and other conservatives in opposition to much of the revolutionary agenda. It had, therefore, never embraced the legacy and the myth of Zapata, which were deeply important to many Mexicans. With Fox in power it was an open question whether the revolution would persist even as rhetoric and symbol, which was all that remained of it.
In short, the 2001 version of the annual celebration of Zapata's death and accomplishments was clouded by political competition—and a political sorting out—of a kind never before witnessed in Mexico. The PRI could no longer control commemorations at Cuautla as it had once done, certain that all participants would march in lockstep, but if the PAN wanted a place in the feeding frenzy at Zapata's table—and Herrera Tello suggested that it did—it had some explaining to do about its traditional posture toward him. And then there were the other political players: the Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD) on the left, with its strong appeal to the nation's campesinos; the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN), Maya Indian rebels who took Zapata's name when they rose up in armed opposition in 1994 and still held territory in uneasy stand-off in the southern state of Chiapas; and myriad other organizations operating on local, state, and national levels around the country. On this day, most sought to make the case that Zapata was on their side, but apparently none of those cases was entirely compelling, for even Zapata's three surviving children went their separate ways. Both Diego and Ana María Zapata maintained their allegiance to the PRI, while Mateo Zapata exhibited his appreciation of the PAN by attending the ceremony at Chinameca.  

Another part of the story, of course, is Emiliano Zapata himself. In early 1911, Zapata and a small group of campesinos from in and around his home village of Anenecuilco, Morelos, joined a broad rebellion against the regime of longtime dictator Porfirio Díaz. For them, taking arms against Díaz meant fighting to stop expanding haciendas from infringing on their land and water rights. It also meant fighting for local liberties—for the right to make many of their decisions for themselves, decisions that had increasingly been taken out of their hands during Díaz's long rule. Together, land and liberty were critical to the preservation of the rural culture that Zapata and his collaborators valued. Zapata soon took over the leadership of this movement and Díaz, surprisingly, quickly fell. Zapata then began to discover, however, that land reform was not high on the agenda of leaders of the many other groups that had joined the revolution. In November 1911, this realization prompted him to produce, with the help of local schoolteacher Otilio Montaño, the famous Plan of Ayala, with which he laid out his demands to the nation and struck out on his own revolutionary path. The civil war deepened as one faction
battled another, and Zapata continued to fight for his principles for nearly a decade in this conflict that became known as the Mexican Revolution. In the process, he developed a national program and a national reputation. Then, on April 10, 1919, he was killed in an ambush at the hacienda Chinameca by revolutionaries loyal to Venustiano Carranza, who had been trying since 1915 to consolidate national power from Mexico City. Zapata was far from being a national hero when he died, but his program captured imaginations in this largely rural country, and his clarity and consistency with regard to his goals—unrivalled by any of his revolutionary competitors—would be at the center of the hero cult that soon grew up around him.

The final part of the story beneath the events of April 10, 2001, concerns the way in which that hero cult developed. For most people death and that which is considered sacred have been intimately related. Death is among the several moments of passage in an individual's life that are usually marked by ritual. It is sacred, perhaps, because it is understood as an occasion when the heavens and the earth meet as the deceased moves between them. Some scholars have contended—convincingly, I think—that it is the most important of those moments, even the very source of religious feeling, because of the fear that it generates, the mystery that presses for some sort of explanation.5

To remember their dead, most human societies have practiced forms of ancestor worship. An ancestor cult, of course, need amount to nothing more than a family coming together to remember an ancestor who has died, praying before an altar in the home, making a visit to a grave site. Some dead, by contrast, are of lasting significance for people outside their family circles. These might be tribal elders or national presidents, religious figures, artists, war heroes, entertainers—the possibilities are numerous—but those who fit in this category are generally considered to have (or have had) charisma. Max Weber defined charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Others have suggested that charisma derives from being near the center of power or important events. In the Christian context, the word means the "gift of grace."6 Those dead whose value to the living transcends their families serve as ancestors to communities—tribes, villages, regions,
nations—which unite around their memories. Often still conceptualized as heads of families, founding fathers, for example, these sacred, charismatic dead become part of the cultural glue that holds societies together. The ancestors of nations, in particular, have lately drawn a great deal of scholarly attention. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson demonstrates that people have been able to “imagine” national communities by conceiving a historical unity for a given population based on shared ancestors and other cultural roots. As symbols of national identity, such ancestors are frequently also agents of state power because government officials employ them in the effort to persuade the people they seek to rule of the legitimacy of their regimes.

These general observations are born out in Mexico. That Mexico has a well-developed tradition of ancestor worship is especially evident each year on the Days of the Dead, the first two days of November, when families remember their departed by building elaborate altars and feasting at their graves. Mexico also possesses a sizeable pantheon of national heroes: Aztec resistance leader Cuauhtémoc; the Virgin of Guadalupe; such leaders of the independence movement as Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos; the head of the mid-nineteenth-century liberal reform, Benito Juárez; and various founding fathers of the “revolutionary,” twentieth-century state.

It is my contention, of course, that Zapata is just such a Mexican ancestor; indeed, he is among the most prominent of them. If he was not a national hero at the time of his death, he was a hero in the regional arena, both before and after his death, due to his persistent expression of peasant demands. On the national scene, in 1920 a short rebellion removed Carranza from the presidency and ended a decade of revolutionary fighting. Almost immediately, during the brief, interim presidency of Adolfo de la Huerta, the men who now ruled Mexico started to cast Zapata in a more heroic mold. They recognized that he was the best symbol of land reform available, and they also realized that in order to consolidate their power they needed such a symbol. Zapata would help them express their intentions to address the agrarian issue, which may have been the single most important revolutionary demand. Whether they truly had such intentions—some did, and some did not—they began to borrow ideas from Zapata’s local cult, sponsor and attend commemorative events, and evoke Zapata’s spirit in their speeches. Zapata would not have supported many of their policies—like the drive to centralize governance,
which cut against his demand for liberty—but, after all, they would not have needed to exploit his image if they were willing to do all that he asked. Thus did Zapata gradually rise, due to his own record and the political aspirations of others, to the top of the Mexican pantheon.

But what, precisely, was the role of Zapata's body within this ancestor cult? Zapata's remains have played several major roles. First, his body was crucial to the establishment of the cult. The way in which the corpse was scrutinized in the time between death and burial was at the root of one of the cult's main religious manifestations: the belief that someone else had died in Zapata's place. In this line of thinking Zapata's survival enabled him, much like Christ, to return to help those who had faith in him. Zapata's cadaver was also of great value in that the site where it was buried became sacred ground and thus the place where rituals devoted to his memory were first undertaken on anniversaries of his death. The establishment of this sacred ground meant that claims made over his remains—largely those of the state, which controlled the rituals—probably gained from them a certain degree of holiness, or at least legitimacy, of their own. Despite the significance of the place where Zapata was buried, as the century progressed that site gradually lost some of its initial advantages. Interestingly, this seems to be testimony to the original power of the remains in establishing the cult. As the cult gathered adherents and spread, copies of the body proliferated and were appropriated by people unwilling, generally on political grounds, to let the state control the way Zapata was remembered just because it had his bones.

Over Zapata's Warm Corpse

By the time Zapata was killed his movement had endured nearly four years of declining fortunes. In late 1914 Zapatista troops occupied Mexico City, and for some months they ran a national government there in conjunction with the faction headed by Francisco "Pancho" Villa. It seemed then that Zapata and Villa were destined to win the revolution, but by the summer of 1915 they were on the ropes, and in early 1916 Carranza's Constitutionalist army was able to invade the state of Morelos. For Zapata that meant a return to a more decentralized, defensive guerrilla warfare. It also meant growing turmoil within his ranks and between Zapatista fighters and civilians as resources were stretched to—and beyond—the breaking point. Zapata sought to change his luck with a diplomatic onslaught designed to
cultivate allies, including discontented Constitutionalists who might help him beat Carranza. The search for allies led him to a Constitutionalist colonel, Jesús Guajardo, who was reputedly unhappy with Pablo González, the general in charge of pacifying Morelos. After some testing of the waters, Zapata met Guajardo on April 10 at the hacienda Chinameca. According to Salvador Reyes Avilés, author of the official Zapatista report of Zapata's death, Zapata ordered ten men to follow him and rode toward the hacienda, where Guajardo waited. As he approached the gate, wrote Reyes Avilés, "the guard appeared ready to do him the honors. The bugle sounded three times, the call of honor, and when the last note fell silent, as the General arrived at the threshold, in a manner most treacherous, most cowardly, most villainous, at point-blank range, without giving him time even to clutch his pistols, the soldiers who were presenting arms fired their rifles twice, and our general Zapata fell never to rise again." 9

The language of Reyes Avilés may have started the process of loading the corpse with meaning, but the Constitutionalists had the body. They threw it over the back of a horse and rode north to Cuautla. There Pablo González, who had helped set the trap, waited with witnesses who were prepared to identify the cadaver before a judge. Once that was done, the body was "injected" so that photographs could be taken the following day. "Those that desired to or might doubt" could thus see "that it was actual fact that the famous jefe [chief] of the southern region had died." 10 In the early hours of April 11, the injection finished, the body was presented to the public at the police station. It remained on display for nearly twenty-four hours, and thousands came to look. 11

In that looking began perhaps the most remarkable part of Zapata's posthumous saga. The Constitutionalists understood that the stakes were high. So did various Mexico City-based newspapers, which suggested that the body also be displayed in the capital to calm metropolitan fears of the southern Attila. After all, this was not the first time there had been rumors of his demise. Carranza took the position, however, that to do that "would be to do honor to his [Zapata's] unhappy memory." 12 Instead, González sent the photographs to the papers. In the most striking of these pictures, excited young soldiers propped up the bloated head of the corpse so the camera might leave no doubt (see Illustration 5.1). The bloodstained clothing Zapata had been wearing also apparently made its way to the city, where it was placed for a time in the showcase in front of a newspaper building facing the
Alameda Central, a downtown park. Back in Cuautla, the viewing done, just after five in the afternoon on April 12, Zapata’s remains were “placed in a pine box, without paint,” and carried to the cemetery while a movie camera recorded the scene. González, ironically, presided over the event, accompanied by other Constitutionalist officers. The pallbearers were men who had been jailed as Zapatistas, some of whom had helped identify the corpse. Also in the procession were three of Zapata’s female relatives, probably sisters and a cousin,
but they have been variously identified—one is sometimes described as his mother though she was long dead. Zapata’s body was placed in a simple grave site marked with a wooden cross that indicated his name and the day of his death. González ordered the gravediggers to bury the body deep, so “Zapatista fanatics” would not try to move it.¹⁴

“With respect to Zapata’s corpse,” reported the Mexico City daily Excélsior on April 12, the Zapatista captives of the Constitutionists who were asked to identify it “said they did not remember having seen that man before.” At first “no one imagined that the cadaver, bathed in blood and still warm” was that of Zapata, but then, “with terror painted on his face,” one prisoner made the identification. This article added that as Zapata’s body made its journey from Chinameca to Cuautla, “men, women, and children had emerged from the humble huts of the hot country” to watch the procession. “All of those that contemplated the cadaver agreed in asserting that it was that of Emiliano himself... and began to recall the outrages they had suffered at Zapata’s orders.”¹⁵ In describing the funeral, though, on April 14 the same paper noted that the locals were “dismayed and demoralized” by Zapata’s death, adding that “many, before viewing it [the body], doubted that the man they judged invincible had died.” Excélsior also indicated that the Carrancistas in Cuautla had had similar doubts. On hearing that the body was on the way, they had taken precautions, “given the possibility that Guajardo had fallen into the hands of Zapata... and it was the rebel leader who approached Cuautla with his troops.” Still, the author of this article was quick to point out that when Guajardo and his soldiers arrived, “all of the doubts were dispelled.”¹⁶ In general, the papers of the capital asserted that it was Zapata’s body, that his death meant the end of Zapatismo, and that his life could effectively be summarized as that of a “roving marauder” who suffered from “idiosyncratic personal cowardice.”¹⁷

Something was fishy. González, an arrogant and grasping invader from the perspective of most Morelenses, had taken great pains to inject, photograph, and display what he insisted was Zapata’s body. He seemed concerned that it might not stay put. Then there were those Mexico City journalists. For a decade they had expressed their nearly uniform opposition to Zapatismo and, over and over again, gotten even the simplest details wrong. Now they continued their name-calling and backed the Constitutionalist line as they could be expected to do, but not without expressing their doubts—however
fleeting—about the reality of Zapata’s demise. What were they all worried about? Was there evidence that it might not be Zapata? A prudently distrustful Morelense could only be thankful that so many locals had gone to see the cadaver.

A 1919 corrido (folk song) entitled, “Most Important Revelations of the Family of the Deceased Emiliano Zapata,” proves that rumors that Zapata had not died surfaced almost immediately. This corrido, urban in origin and anti-Zapatista in attitude, indicates that “someone revealed in secret/ that the dead man was missing/ a mole above the mustache” that Zapata had. In a 1928 publication, Carlos Reyes Avilés, brother of the scribe who wrote the official report of events at Chinameca, told of having met an old man in late 1919 who would not accept that Zapata had died. Then, in 1930, anthropologist Robert Redfield published a more detailed account of this train of thought, based on fieldwork he had done in 1926 and 1927 in Tepoztlán. “I know he had a scar on his cheek,” one of Redfield’s Zapatista informants told him, “and the corpse that was brought back from Chinameca had no scar. I saw it myself.” “Some say,” this man added, “that he [Zapata] is in Arabia, and will return when he is needed. For myself, I think he still lives.” Redfield also wrote that this argument was taken up in another corrido of the period. “The singers have circulated,” the bard asserted, “a phenomenal lie/ and everyone says that Zapata already/rests in peace in eternity.” But this was not the case. Rather, “since Zapata is so experienced/alert and intelligent/he had thought beforehand/to send another man in his place.”

In the decades that followed, the lasting significance of the viewing of the body periodically reached print. In 1938 a newspaper article written for the anniversary of Zapata’s death described an exchange in Yautepec, Morelos, during which a local doctor averred that some who had examined the corpse claimed it was missing the wart Zapata had on his left cheek. The doctor volunteered that this was because the wart had been removed by a bullet—the rationalist’s interpretation. In 1952, a piece in the journal Historia Mexicana indicated that many locals believed the body lacked a “mark that looked like a little hand,” a birth mark, that Zapata had on his chest. In 1968 a journalist spoke to a group of Zapatista veterans who speculated on the subject. Their doubts about Zapata’s demise, the report explained, were due to the claim that the most renowned identifier of the body, Eusebio Jáuregui, had immediately cried out that it was not
Zapata, “basing his claim on specific signs that he knew perfectly.” This explained why Jáuregui was executed the following day. Among the stories offered at this gathering was that a compadre of Zapata’s, his double, “offered to impersonate him.” Some of these men claimed to have seen Zapata shortly after Chinameca, “before he left the country”; others declared they saw him later, after he returned. Yet another suggestion, offered the following year, was that it was difficult to recognize Zapata because the way he was thrown over the horse for the trip to Cuautla made the blood rush to his head, swelling it. Whether people believed Zapata died at Chinameca, they returned to the corpse for much of their evidence.

More than fifty years after the ambush, in the early and middle 1970s, researchers from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) undertook an oral history project that recorded the impressions of aging revolutionaries. In these interviews the story of Zapata’s survival received its fullest treatment, and again the body was a central issue. One veteran pointed out that while Zapata was missing a finger, the body presented as his “had its fingers complete.” Another old Zapatista noted not only the finger but his belief that Zapata had had a black mole that the corpse was missing, as well as a scar on his calf where a bull had gored him before the revolution. Some now claimed that Zapatista sympathizers had told the Carrancistas the body was Zapata’s to avoid being beaten or killed. One interviewee described a group that saw the remains crying, for Constitutionalist ears, that they were “orphans” now that their father had been fucked” and saying theatrical goodbyes—it was a way of avoiding, presumably, Jáuregui’s end. But later, this witness added, “the word spread.”

Accounts of such reactions to the body continue until the present. In 1996 Excélsior reported on the ancient Zapatista Emeterio Pantaleón, who stated, “We all laughed when we saw the cadaver. We elbowed each other, because the jefe was smarter than the government.” Pantaleón then added material that had by then become conventional, referring to the finger, the mole, the scar. Though his advanced years made it just plausible that he had really visited the corpse, there was no danger that stories of Zapata’s trickery at Chinameca would die with Pantaleón and whatever other last representatives of his generation were still around: also in 1996, a far younger and much more educated resident of Morelos explained to me that it was quite possible that Zapata had avoided the trap.
The passing of accounts of Zapata’s body from one generation to the next was not the only way in which they traveled; by way of those newspaper and journal articles they also moved into Mexico’s urban culture. Although the idea that Zapata lived was never embraced by national officials, its urban manifestations are nearly limitless. For example, in acclaimed crime novelist Paco Ignacio Taibo’s *An Easy Thing (Cosa Fácil)*, first published in 1977, detective Hector Belascoarán Shayne accepts a client who is looking for Zapata. The client’s story begins with what was supposedly Zapata’s murdered body, “laid out on the ground and the flies eating at his eyes.” He argues, however, that Zapata had escaped and in the late 1920s joined Augusto César Sandino to fight the gringos in Nicaragua. “If you look carefully,” the man contends, “you can see him in some of those old pictures [of Sandino], kind of off to the side in one of the corners, like he doesn’t want to be seen, almost like he isn’t even there.” In the course of his investigation, Belascoarán Shayne has occasion to detail the indications that Zapata might have survived. There was the finger he had lost when a pistol exploded in his hand, the usual mark on his chest and wart on his cheek, and the compañero who looked very much like him. There was also the fact that his horse, who “loved him tremendously,” did not recognize the body. Belascoarán Shayne wanted badly to believe that Zapata was still alive and to look into his “living eyes” to learn “if the country the old revolutionary had once dreamed of was still possible.”

At the end of the novel, it appears, that is exactly what he does.

What emerged from the remains of Zapata, then, was a complex messianic drama. Zapata was a Christ figure or—perhaps a closer association—he followed in the tradition, important in Iberia, of the “hidden king” who had only apparently died and would eventually return to establish a golden age. For Christ, of course, the body at the time of death was a critical concern and the same has been true for many hidden kings: there were also difficulties in identifying the corpse of Portuguese King Sebastian, who ostensibly died in battle in 1578 but subsequently became the object of a powerful cult.²⁷

Zapata’s case fits into broader messianic patterns in other ways as well. Newspaper coverage at the time of his death, for instance, sought to modify outrage over the way he had been killed by suggesting that he had learned of the plot beforehand and tried to turn the tables on his assassins.²⁸ Perhaps building out of that story, local tradition consistently included the notion that Zapata had survived, either because he simply had a premonition or because he was
warned. That is a common element in stories of this kind.29 One INAH subject stated that a crying woman told Zapata of the trap just before he was to enter the hacienda at Chinameca.30 The man sent in his place is variously identified: Jesús Delgado, who traveled with him and pledged to die for him if necessary; Agustín Cortés, who had a large moustache like Zapata, but “was bigger and fatter”; Joaquín Cortés, a compadre from Tepoztlán; Jesús Capistrán, a member of Zapata’s staff and, again, a compadre.31 Some interviewees even supplied the words with which the double persuaded Zapata to make the switch. “I will only be missed by my family,” reenacted one, “but you, compadre, would be missed by the whole country.”32

Zapata’s post-Chinameca life had a detailed trajectory, as Taibo’s novel illustrates. His travels took him most often to Arabia, apparently because he had had a compadre of Arab descent, who was often mentioned in the stories. He frequently moved back and forth, however, between the familiar world and the distant, exotic one. In the 1970s, for instance, Zapatista veteran Serafín Plasencia Gutiérrez asserted that Zapata had gone either to Hungary or Arabia, where he learned “certain languages and was doing well. They loved him like a god.” Later, Zapata returned to Morelos and had a girlfriend in Cocoyoc; he dressed like a ranchero to call on her. Ultimately, though, he stopped visiting his home state. “The Arabs no longer let him come,” Plasencia explained, “because he had many enemies: all of the hacendados, all of the politicians, everyone here in Cuautla was against him.” He had died twenty or thirty years prior to the interview, “in his bed, over there in Arabia.”33 Emeterio Pantaleón, meanwhile, testified that Zapata lived a year in a cave close to a volcano. He then went to Tepoztlán, where he had a girlfriend. Still later, with a compadre and his wife Josefa, he went to Acapulco, where he boarded a warship bound for Arabia. There he died in 1967.34

Finally, Zapata’s continued existence meant that he could return to help those who believed in him—the messianic punch line. Writing in the late 1920s, American historian Frank Tannenbaum stated that the “Indians” of southern Mexico, “will to this day tell a stranger that Zapata’s spirit wanders over the mountain at night and watches over the Indians and that he will return if they are mistreated.” In particular, Zapata stood guard in those mountains to be sure that no one would try to take away campesino lands.35 Although Tannenbaum makes the post-Chinameca Zapata spirit rather than flesh, the sense of possible salvation is the same.
For many Morelenses, then, Zapata’s warm corpse proved that he was too strong and too smart to be ambushed. In doing that the body played a critical role in the launching of the cult, helping to make Zapata a point of discussion, a subject of interest, and a symbol that local, regional, and national identities could eventually form around. Whether Zapata died in 1919 remains something of a mystery in Morelos—a mystery that people sometimes take seriously. People have killed each other, one old Zapatista stated, fighting over whether Zapata died at Chinameca.36

The Body’s Place

Discussion of creating a monument to honor Zapata’s memory started during the 1920s. In 1927, the newly formed National Peasant’s League (Liga Nacional Campesina), acting on the proposal of its delegates from Morelos, announced a plan to build a monument to the “Martyr of Chinameca” somewhere in his home state. The monument was to be financed by contributions from the nation’s campesinos, through the purchase of a pin bearing Zapata’s portrait and the slogan, “tierra y libertad” (land and liberty). The Liga advocated a pyramid constructed of stones that would be sent from all of the nation’s ejidos (collective landholdings) and other peasant communities and organizations, each stone engraved with “a dedication or thought alluding to our agrarian struggle.” Atop the pyramid would stand a statue of Zapata, in which he would appear “supported on a mausole in the serene and self-confident bearing of one who is conscious of his strength.” At his side there was to be “a giant sickle,” also bearing the “land and liberty” motto. The preliminary sketch of the monument was done by world-famous muralist Diego Rivera, who also offered to make the model and oversee work on the project. The Liga desired to avoid “the vulgarities of bourgeois art,” and its leaders believed that this design—“very Mexican and very campesino at the same time”—would accomplish that goal.37 Although those who made these plans did not mention it, their conviction concerning the suitability of their project probably owed much to the mausoleum Zapata had ordered built in Tlaltizapán, which took the form of a small step-pyramid with neoclassical elements, painted mustard-yellow.38 (See Illustration 5.2.) The Liga did not indicate, however, whether its monument was to house Zapata’s remains.
5.2 The mausoleum in the churchyard at Tlaltizapán (Photo: Sam Brunk).

The monument the Liga envisioned never came to fruition, but the idea of honoring Zapata was in the air, and by late 1931 work on a statue was underway. This statue was to be placed in one of Cuautla's main plazas, which was called the Plaza del Señor (Plaza of the Lord) due to the presence there of the Church of the Señor del Pueblo. To make the plaza suitable for Zapata, a committee had formed to undertake its “beautification,” which included the “establishment of a garden, benches and electric lighting, all of the most refined, modernist taste.” Still, not everything would be modern: the renovations were to leave space for the traditional fair of the second Friday of Lent, for which Cuautla was regionally renowned. Thus was a new layer of revolutionary meaning being superimposed on a place with older associations in a way that again paired Zapata and Christ.

Most importantly, this statue was being built to contain Zapata's remains, and on April 10, 1932, the thirteenth anniversary of his
death, Zapata was exhumed and reburied. Cuautla woke on that day, claimed *Excelsior*, as it did on days of “great celebrations.” *Agraristas* (proponents of agrarian reform) began to arrive from around the state to a city adorned with triumphal arches that were decorated with slogans and portraits of Zapata (see Illustration 5.3). At dawn, federal forces with their military bands “traversed the principal streets,” playing marches, and in general there was “greater solemnity” than on the previous anniversaries due to the intention of moving the body. Jefe Maximo Plutarco Elías Calles, the power behind the presidency, did not attend the commemoration as expected, but many other important officials did. Vicente Estrada Cajigal, grandfather of Sergio Estrada Cajigal and head of the Department of the Federal District, presided over the commemorative event, officially representing both Calles and President Pascual Ortiz Rubio. It was he who, as governor, had initiated work on the statue. The acting governor of the state, José Urbán Aguirre, was also present, as were governors of other states, congressmen, and, of course, peasants and their representatives. The official newspaper of the revolution, *El Nacional*, characterized those present, in a front-page article dedicated to the event, as the leaders of “our social movement.”

The ceremony began with a parade of agraristas, federal forces, and government officials in their dark suits. Zapata’s remains were taken from where they lay—beneath a “sentimental” marble angel with drooping wings that had been placed over his grave sometime in the early 1920s—and put into a small black box “with some incrustations of gold.” (One Zapatista veteran who witnessed the ceremony later testified that the bones fit nicely.) The box was carried the short distance to the plaza by Zapatistas Emigdio Marmolejo and Andrés Pérez, one dressed in the everyday, white *calzones* of the Morelos peasantry, the other in his military uniform (see Illustration 5.4). As Zapata’s body was placed in a cavity in the base of the statue, a bugle sounded honors three times, recalling Chinameca in 1919, where the sounding of honors was the signal to fire as Zapata entered the hacienda gate. A police band then struck up the funeral march, and Estrada Cajigal followed by unveiling the plaque that renamed the square the Plaza of the Revolution of the South. The dedication of the statue followed. The work of Moisés Quiroz, it depicted a serious, sympathetic Zapata on horseback, dressed in his *charro* best, and beside him a man that *El Nacional* identified as a “humble Indian.” Zapata’s figure bent slightly to rest his hand on the young campesino’s
5. 3 Commemorating Zapata's death, April 10, 1928 (Centro de Estudios sobre la Universidad, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Archivo de Gildardo Magaña, photographs).

shoulder, apparently listening and offering advice or consolation in what can only be described as a paternalistic manner. Then the politicians spoke. Although his true feelings about Zapata were at best mixed, Estrada Cajigal gave a “panegyric to the southern hero.” Urbán spoke too, assuring the crowd, “Zapata is with us, converted into ideas, to make us better, and he lives in the heart of the people that extols and exalts him.” Finally, flowers were laid at the base of the statue on behalf of various states and officials. Leaving a lamp burning at the site, the prominent visitors and their retainers then retired to “an orchard on the outskirts” of town for lunch.42

Zapata’s remains had been moved, but they were not exactly laid to rest. The article in Excélsior, in the fall of 1931, which outlined plans for the Cuautla monument, indicated that this commemoration of Zapata on the part of the inhabitants of Morelos would be “without prejudice to the one of a national nature that was being considered for the hacienda of Chinameca, the place where [Zapata] was sacrificed.”43 Given the importance of death to hero cults in general
and to that of Zapata in particular, it is not surprising that many people felt that Chinameca had the greatest claim to a national Zapata memorial. But more than merely seeking some form of monument to Zapata, those who made claims for Chinameca also often argued that Zapata’s body should rest there as well. In October 1931, the state legislature of Guerrero (a state somewhat closer to Chinameca than to Cuautla) asked that the national government designate the days on which Zapata was born and died, respectively, as days of celebration and mourning, and that national, state, and local governments together purchase what remained of the hacienda of Chinameca, locate a statue of Zapata there, and move his body to that monument. This request apparently did not receive a final answer until 1936, when the Ministry of the Interior ruled that Zapata had already received enough honors, including, by then, the official addition of his days of birth and death to the ritual calendar. The ministry added that Zapata was already honored “in all of the nation’s communities” on April 10, but it did not explicitly address the idea
of moving his remains so as to make Chinameca a special focus of pilgrimage on that day.\textsuperscript{44}

Those who sought to gain for Chinameca a more prominent role in commemorating Zapata did not give up. In 1939 the practice began of honoring him there a day late, on April 11, so as not to be overshadowed by the Cuautla ceremonies. In the spring of 1940, officials and citizens of Chinameca wrote to President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) to remind him that it was in Chinameca that Zapata had died and to request, again, a statue to commemorate that event. In a recent visit to their village, they claimed, Cárdenas had promised them such a monument, which “would perpetuate his [Zapata’s] enormous sacrifice and remind us with veneration of the agrarian cause for which he happily offered his life.” In expressing their hopes that Cárdenas would comply with this promise before leaving the presidency at the end of the year, the letter resorted to flattery, indicating that he was the only agrarista president Mexico had ever had. On this occasion Chinamecans did not request Zapata’s remains. Perhaps they had decided it was best to take one thing at a time.\textsuperscript{45} Although the Cárdenas regime indicated that a monument was being planned, in 1941 the Chinamecans were at it again with a manifesto that charged, “not even a stone has been raised in this village to justify the place where the body of the southern hero fell.” By the following year, however, things were looking up. Chinameca was then in a position to invite President Manuel Ávila Camacho to the unveiling, at an April 11 commemoration, of a bronze bust of Zapata provided by the government of Morelos. It would be erected “precisely in the place where [Zapata] fell dead.”\textsuperscript{46}

The subject of moving Zapata to Chinameca also came up in 1965. This time the governor of Morelos, Emilio Riva Palacio, and the state legislature agreed that in the future April 10 would be observed at Chinameca, where Zapata, “victim of a betrayal, was assassinated, and that his remains should be moved to Chinameca from the place in which they were located.” The people of Morelos, the act read, “have manifested their desire that the epic deeds realized in the Morelian campaign be commemorated precisely where they took place, so that our children and youth do homage to our heroes in a way that is historically true.” Strangely, the act also indicated that in the future, August 9, the ostensible day of Zapata’s birth, would be celebrated at Chinameca too, though birth celebrations had always before been the province of Anenecuilco, where he was born. The government of
Morelos had decided, in other words, to place all of the commemorative focus of Zapata's cult on the place where he died, yet more evidence of the importance of death to Zapata's memory.47

Not surprisingly, many in Cuautla were unhappy with this decision. An editorial in the Cuautla newspaper El Eco del Sur asked what reason there could possibly be, after Zapata's remains had reposed so long in Cuautla, for "casting them aside in the rough, inhospitable ground of Chinameca." Why should he be taken from the place "where he was known so well and is still venerated and respected."48 Ultimately, arguments such as these won the day, or they have until the present. Chinameca did, however, receive a new, more impressive statue to the memory of Zapata's bloody demise, and commemorations there of the day of his death have gradually grown to rival those of Cuautla.

Tlaltizapán, another town in Morelos that has believed it had a right to Zapata's bones, has based its arguments largely on the establishment of his headquarters there and his consequent decision to honor the village in which he had chosen to spend so much time with the pyramid meant for his movement's illustrious dead. This claim was strong enough that the Constitutionalists may have briefly discussed burying him there in 1919.49 Two decades later, in 1939, a "Committee for the Transfer of the Remains of the Caudillo of the Revolution of the South, Divisionary General Emiliano Zapata" was circulating a petition, supported by the state legislature, to move the body to Tlaltizapán. The argument, at least as it was put to Cárdenas, was simply that Zapata should rest in Tlaltizapán because the mausoleum he built there demonstrated that such was his desire. In the plaza at Cuautla, the committee contended, the remains were "isolated from those of the group of dead Generals that belonged to his [Zapata's] staff." Prominent Zapatistas who still lived, the letter implied, also hoped to see Zapata at Tlaltizapán; indeed, the committee was headed by Zapata's nephew, Gil Muñoz Zapata, a Tlaltizapán resident who had fought in the revolution. The committee conceded that the lack of a highway leading to Tlaltizapán could be an obstacle but noted that Governor Elpidio Perdomo, a Zapatista, was working to get a highway built. Perhaps that was part of the reason that other towns in southern Morelos—Tetecala, Tlaquitltenango, Amacuzac, and Jonacatepec—also supported the initiative. This letter ended with the hope that Cárdenas's affinity for Zapata would prompt him to intervene in the issue, and Cárdenas
apparently did take some early steps in support of the initiative before he left office.\textsuperscript{50}

So far, though, Tlaltizapán has had to settle for building an infrastructure for Zapata’s cult without possessing the body. Like Chinameca, Tlaltizapán was trying to regularize its commemorations by at least the 1940s. Those events could, and did, incorporate the mausoleum, and in 1944 two commemorative plaques were added to that structure.\textsuperscript{51} Also in 1944, the federal government purchased the old house and mill complex Zapata had used as headquarters. The Zapatista Front—an organization created in 1940 by Zapatista veterans and their families, which worked to unify the veterans, spread the Zapatista creed, and guard Zapata’s reputation—then began the push to have the headquarters converted into a library, museum, and medical dispensary. Unfortunately, the process was slow: by 1955 the local chapter of the Front had started work on the building, paid for by the sugar mill, named after Zapata, in nearby Zacatepec, but the museum was not inaugurated until 1969.\textsuperscript{52} The “blood of the caudillo fixed in the clothing he wore when he died” has surely been the museum’s most celebrated holding since then, but there is much doubt about the authenticity of that exhibit. In the 1990s one newspaper account indicated that “the clothing he wore when they killed him, they say, has come to form part of private collections of ex-officials.” A second national paper offered a painstaking analysis of the clothing on display, noting that the supposed bullet holes were far too small. Also at the museum, on the patio, stands a bronze bust of Zapata, “on a pedestal built of stones, giving the impression that it is a trench behind which one finds the caudillo.”\textsuperscript{53}

The competition in Morelos for Zapata’s remains seems to have been driven by one part practicality and one part pride. Part of the motivation was that there would be public works projects connected to the body, as Tlaltizapán recognized in angling for a highway to facilitate the pilgrimage to Zapata’s shrine. State and national politicians made promises to Morelenses on April 10, and the community where Zapata was buried was bound to get its share and more. There were obviously commercial benefits too: a highway would increase trade year around, but with or without one, April 10 would be a good day for local merchants. On the pride side of the equation, having the remains would put a community, its inhabitants, and their revolutionary experiences on Mexico’s map.
But it was not just a matter of competition between different towns within Morelos. I have argued elsewhere at length that much of the lasting power of Zapata's cult comes from the way in which he has served, simultaneously, as ancestor of local or regional communities, on one hand, and of Mexico's national community, on the other. A 1970s interview with Prospero García Aguirre reflects the tension that the claims of differently conceived communities could generate, as well as the depth of feeling some veterans had with regard to Zapata's place of burial. If Zapata had truly died at Chinameca, García Aguirre said, adopting the present tense for effect, "they embalm him, take him to the United States, pass him through wherever, and come bury him at Tlaltizapán . . . because he designated it as his ultimate home, right? In Tlaltizapán he has his monument; they buried him like a dog [in the] cemetery [at Cuautla], like a dog." At least in the mind of this Zapatista, Zapata's corpse—if it was his corpse—was entitled not merely to national but international interest and acclaim. The body's final resting place, however, was a moral issue, and García Aguirre believed it should be emphatically, specifically, local. What he did not say, but what the behavior of many Morelenses suggested, was that part of the reason that national and international acclaim was crucial was because it would redound to the credit of the villagers who fought alongside Zapata and the region that had nurtured him. If the body remained in the national sphere much of that credit, much of its value for the inhabitants of Morelos, would be lost, along with its connectedness to specific events, locales, and people of the state.

Given Zapata's growing significance for the national community, it is not surprising that there has been considerable discussion about whether he should continue to be a Morelense for all eternity. The alternative to keeping him in his home state has revolved around a structure called the Monument to the Revolution. This monument was completed in Mexico City in 1938 on the iron frame that was all that existed, when the revolution broke out, of a Porfirián building intended to house the federal legislature. Its goal was to symbolically unify a revolution that had been, in fact, a bloody encounter between diverse factions. A single monument devoted to the abstract notion of the revolution would, its creators apparently hoped, help break down persistent regional and ideological differences and contribute to making the revolution understood as a coherent, national movement—a movement that was, of course, to be directed and controlled by the revolutionary elite that had emerged at the national level. It
made sense from this nationalizing and state-building perspective to move Zapata’s body to this building. There it would join the bones of its colleagues: between 1942 and 1976, Francisco Madero, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, Venustiano Carranza, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas were placed in the four massive piers of the edifice, which together support its huge dome.56

Carranza’s body was the first to be moved to the new monument, in 1942, and despite the fact that Carranza and Zapata had been mortal enemies and that Carranza had colluded in Zapata’s assassination, discussion began shortly over whether Zapata should rest there as well.57 In 1946, Avila Camacho’s office responded to a request for a new Cuautla statue in a hightanded fashion, indicating that a new statue was a moot point, because “the Federal Government is promoting the project of moving to the Monument of the Revolution erected in this capital the remains of those who have offered distinguished services to the Fatherland.”58 The names of Zapata and Carranza had, in the service of national unity, already been inscribed in gold together in congressional chambers. Pairing them in everlasting sleep probably seemed like the next logical step. Still, the federal initiative did not go anywhere at this time.

The most protracted discussion of moving Zapata’s remains to Mexico City took place in the 1970s. At the Cuautla commemoration of Zapata’s death in 1971 a campesino got the opportunity to speak, something that did not happen often at these events, which were well-scripted and dominated by the rhetoric of PRI officials. Supposedly taking the podium “outside of the program,” Facundo Salazar Solís rose briefly to propose the transfer, and his idea was “received with thunderous applause by the thousands attending.” The secretary general of the National Peasant’s Confederation, Alfredo B. Bonfil, then stood to offer his organization’s support of the initiative. Also quickly backing the motion was the Zapatista Front. Several of Zapata’s children were present as the request was made and, despite their frequent disagreements with the regime, Zapata’s sons Mateo and Nicolás soon came to support it as well. Moving Zapata’s body to the capital would, its proponents claimed, reflect and emphasize Zapata’s national and international significance.59

Four days later El Nacional weighed in on the issue. Telegrams, it indicated, had been pouring into the headquarters of the National Peasant’s Confederation from all over the nation to support the suggestion “of the campesinos of Morelos” that Zapata’s remains be
moved to the capital. The League of Agrarian Communities of the state of Oaxaca, for instance, called on President Luis Echeverría to heed the appeal to honor Zapata in this way, noting that it was a great coincidence that Zapata might be moved just as the current regime’s new agrarian legislation, with its great benefits for campesino families everywhere, was being promulgated. Another organization, El Nacional reported, took the position that Zapata was worthy of the honor as the “true caudillo” of the agrarian movement, which was the essence of the revolution. Elsewhere in the national media there was indignant repudiation of the accusation that honoring Zapata by moving him to Mexico City was intended as a substitute for action on agrarian reform.

Meanwhile, El Campesino, the official organ of the Zapatista Front, argued that “it is not just” that Zapata’s remains were not at the monument. Noting that the Front had raised this idea two years earlier to no avail, one editorial contended that Zapata had, after all, given the revolution its “basic ideology.” Echeverría’s agrarian reform law was merely the fulfillment of Zapata’s plan, and Zapata’s ideas had been translated into all major languages and honored in other nations. The editorial conceded that some people emphasized that Zapata was from Morelos and should remain there, but it insisted that since he was an international figure he should go to “the place that has been chosen as the most sublime site for present and future generations to do homage to the most distinguished men of the Revolution.” Zapata’s failure to take his place at the monument was now especially problematic since the body of Cárdenas, “the standard-bearer of the agrarian cause for which Emiliano Zapata gave his life,” had just been placed there. The leaders of this Zapatista organization, it would seem, were trying to carve out a more visible place for themselves and their cause at the national level through a highly politicized sacrality.

It was not just national opinion, though, that favored the move. On April 18 the Cuautla newspaper Poligrafía printed an article that traced the postmortem history of Zapata’s body. It referred to Zapata’s death as an act of betrayal and noted that “the cadaver still smelled of powder and blood, and already of decomposition” when they took it to the cemetery two days later. The author of this piece took the position that with a move to the Monument of the Revolution, “the national campesino will have taken a transcendental step in favor of his agrarian hero; but surely Cuautla will lose one of its characteristic and typical festivities of the last forty years.” Five days later
another piece in the same paper argued that Zapata, like those already present at the monument, had made Mexico better. He had given the revolution social content, and there had been many improvements for the peasantry. While some campesinos were still poor and miserable, in those cases Zapata represented the ongoing challenge. For all those reasons he belonged in Mexico City.63

In 1979 Nicolás and Mateo Zapata confirmed their willingness to permit the transfer of their father’s remains in light of the agrarian policy of President José López Portillo, which, they declared, had made Mexico’s campesinos the “objects of justice.”64 Not everyone, however, agreed. In October of that year, at the First Meeting of Independent Agrarian Organizations, which took place in Milpa Alta in the Federal District, peasant organizations not connected to the huge, state-affiliated National Peasant’s League came out against the nationalization of Zapata’s body. They were just in time, because Zapata’s move to the capital had been scheduled for the following November 20, Revolution Day. This was the ideal day, from the national government’s perspective, to place his remains in the Monument to the Revolution because on this anniversary the revolution is evoked and venerated as a coherent movement. The primary argument of the peasant organizations was that it was unacceptable for Zapata to be placed next to Carranza. “All of Cuautla will watch and keep guard that this accord is respected,” claimed one representative, “the general always wanted to be in the land where he was born, buried at the side of his generals.”65

A flurry of commentary followed. Morelos Governor Armando León Bejarano weighed in immediately, asserting that moving Zapata “is not an official request, but an old desire of the sons of the hero” that no Zapatista organization could oppose. The implication was that agreeing to the transfer was a litmus test of true Zapatismo, and León Bejarano was not above suggesting that people were appropriating Zapatista identity with scarce justification. He added that the government, though neutral, was willing to grant Mateo’s condition—Nicolás had just died—that Zapata not be placed with Carranza, but rather in the crypt of the agrarian reformer Cárdenas. As far as León Bejarano was concerned, it was now up to Mateo.66

An editorial in Excélsior, meanwhile, supported those who sought to keep Zapata in Morelos. Author Javier Blanco Sánchez wrote that if it was true, as he heard, that the citizens of Cuautla were dead set against the transfer of Zapata, “it would be the first gesture ever of
provincial rebellion in defense of the right to possess a historical treasure.” This, he believed, would be a positive step because letting the locals keep the remains of national heroes would foment patriotism. He also noted that León Bejarano’s statement that moving Zapata to Mexico City was an old dream of his son was nonsense. Rather, they had initially opposed the measure. In the same edition of Excélsior, a cartoon depicted a group of campesinos tilting the Monument to the Revolution into the air while one of them announced, “We prefer to take the monument to the remains of Emiliano.”

The representatives at the Milpa Alta meeting had sent a message to Mateo Zapata who, though a participant in the formation of independent peasant organizations, did not attend that gathering. While they respected Mateo’s decision to authorize Zapata’s transfer, they argued that the remains “are the patrimony not of his family, but of the entire people.” On November 20, Zapata’s body stayed where it was partly because, as he indicated in an interview on that day, Mateo Zapata had adjusted his stance. He had at first agreed to moving his father, he said, “on the condition that the federal government implement the Plan of Ayala.” Clearly he had decided that that condition had not been met. Instead, in the late 1980s the remains were placed beneath a new monument at Cuautla. This towering statue depicted Zapata standing alone, propping up a gun with one hand and in the other holding the Plan of Ayala. He looked much like a latter-day Moses, with the Plan of Ayala supplanting the Ten Commandments. (See Illustration 5.5.)

There were specific reasons, of course, for the timing of national initiatives to appropriate Zapata’s body. In the 1940s the idea made sense within the larger trajectory of revolutionary consolidation, as well as in a context in which the social reformism of Lázaro Cárdenas was yielding to the economic priorities of the Mexican Miracle decades (1940–70). While Cárdenas had taken revolutionary action, Ávila Camacho and his successors were more inclined to do homage than to act on social issues. In the 1970s the political motives were of a more defensive nature. In the wake of the 1968 massacre of student protesters at Mexico City’s Plaza of Tlatelolco, guerrillas began to operate in Mexico, some of them using Zapata’s image (as had the students). The political and economic stability of the miracle years was starting to corrode, and the uneasy Echeverría administration adopted a populist style in the hope of making itself palatable to those who opposed the PRI regime. Under such circumstances, the national
government apparently hoped to tighten its grasp on Zapata and send a message of revolutionary unity by getting his body into the Monument of the Revolution.

Why then was the transfer not accomplished in the 1970s? Ultimately, it was thwarted by Zapata’s resurrection. The government’s Zapata as founding father had presided, since 1940, over the pursuit of rapid industrialization to the detriment of policies intended to help campesinos, who remained the poorest segment of Mexican society. During that time Zapata was resurrected rhetorically over and over again to support government actions, but there were also rhetorical hints at a more ominous sort of resurrection—ominous at least
for the PRI. In April 1962, for example, the Cuernavaca weekly *Presente* indicated that the hypocrisy of that year’s death day speeches was so bad that “it appeared that the equestrian statue of the caudillo moved.”70 This kind of grumbling flowered into open, coordinated protest in 1972, when hundreds of peasants from Tlaxcala and Puebla marched on Mexico City to commemorate Zapata’s death. In the years since, April 10 has become a day of predictable ritual protest, as evidenced by the delegation from Tepoztlán that arrived at Cuautla in 2001.71 The rising tide of dissent in Zapata’s name, the anger over PRI authoritarianism that stirred the student protesters of 1968 and was deepened by the Tlatelolco massacre, and the increasingly effective organization of labor and peasant groups not connected to the PRI combined to make the nationalization of Zapata a touchy issue.

The Milpa Alta meeting reflected these trends, and the increased militancy around Zapata dictated that the government had to be cautious on the issue, as shown by León Bejarano’s profession of official neutrality. All this spilled victory for the position advocated at Milpa Alta.

Zapata was resurrected, then, in the sense that he was no longer caught in “the hollowness of the towering monuments or the frozen metal of the statues,” as Taibo’s Belascoarán Shayne puts it.72 He was no longer the straight man for government policy that he had become during the Miracle. But whether the remains were in Mexico City or Morelos, the state still did control them, which meant nothing it considered improper could happen at the podium in Cuautla on April 10. Those who have turned April 10 into a day of ritual protest and who, since the 1994 uprising of the EZLN, have wrested Zapata away from the central government, have done so without the body. Perhaps that means that in the last three decades, even as the way in which Zapata should be remembered has drifted to the very center of national politics, the importance of his body has diminished.

Before we rush to that conclusion, though, one last facet of the fighting over the bones demands consideration, and that is the sense in which Zapata’s body has proliferated over the years. Aside from the blood in the clothing at the Tlaltizapán museum, Zapata’s remains have not multiplied as have those of saints in Europe, where claims to fragments of such notables as St. Francis of Assisi are legion.73 Instead, Zapata’s body has merely been imitated. As evidenced by the examples of Tlaltizapán and Chinameca, not having the remains did not keep communities from seeking to honor Zapata, and to do so they frequently recreated the body in stone or bronze. In Mexico City
veneration of Zapata certainly muddled through without the corpse. There, April 10 commemorations began around 1930; they often took place at the Monument to the Revolution after that structure was completed. This was not sufficient, however, for the Zapatista Front, which in 1946 launched a campaign for a major statue in the capital, preferably along the fashionable Paseo de la Reforma, which already contained several monuments central to Mexico’s historical memory. The Front went begging for years before the city’s large equestrian statue of Zapata was finally unveiled, in November 1958, at Huipulco. Though Huipulco fell short of the Paseo in terms of location, it did become a significant center of Zapata ritual. Zapata’s presence in the capital was important in fashioning his image in that urban artists and writers, like Taibo, were increasingly inclined to play with his memory, with the result that he became hip in the 1970s. Along with his good looks, which made him perfect icon material, this explains much of his commercial and pop culture success. Another statue that became a regional rallying point on April 10 was the one at Cuatro Caminos in Michoacán, which Cárdenas initiated to commemorate his agrarian reform in his home state. In life Zapata had never been to Michoacán, but that was beside the point. Elsewhere in Mexico—in every corner of Mexico—though the statues were smaller, the outcome was similar: these reproductions of the body both reinforced the cult and gave it new avenues of expression.

Another way in which Zapata’s body proliferated was in the simulation of the cadaver, or its trappings, at provincial commemorations. This occurred at least during the 1950s in the state of Guerrero, where Zapata had enjoyed substantial support during his lifetime. On April 10, 1951, in Apango, Guerrero, an honor guard was mounted before “a simulated body of General Zapata.” A year later, the “humble peasants” of Zotoltitlán, Guerrero, “constructed a catafalque where the casket of the southern jefe was simulated” during a fourteen-hour “vigil for the caudillo.” According to El Campesino it was an “imposing” act in which “among copious flowers and the mourning veils, large candles constantly burned.” Village politics swirled around a similar catafalque in Tlalchapa, Guerrero, in 1955. The head of the local Zapatista Front complained that the municipal president neither attended the ceremony nor offered his support, and that the head of the ejido arrived late with “an insignificant floral offering.”

In more recent years the bodies have also multiplied at ritual protests. During the 1980s, April 10 marchers sometimes carried
crucified peasants—perhaps representing Zapata, perhaps not—as visual commentary on government policies. In the 1990s, the identification of the crucified figure with Zapata became explicit. In 1997, for instance, Excésior identified such an image as “a ‘Zapata’ crucified by NAFTA.” On a more somber note, some of the participants in the 1999 commemoration in Tlaltizapán traveled a short distance outside of town to San Rafael. There they honored Marcos Olmedo, who was killed in San Rafael on April 10, 1996, in an encounter between pilgrims and police charged with keeping them away from where President Ernesto Zedillo was presiding over “an agrarian act.”

Zapata’s actual remains have probably come to matter less than they used to. At Huipulco, at Chinameca, at Apan, the imitations of the body carried with them enough of the original body’s sacredness to give commemorations the necessary gravity. For those who marched in protest on April 10, in an increasingly urban and secular Mexico in which sacrality of all kinds was at something of a discount, a crucified Zapata made the political point well—better, in fact, than the old bones could. But if Zapata’s bones mattered less, that was a reflection of their success. They had established the cult on a firm footing that allowed it to grow and expand, and they remained the point of reference for the metaphorical bodies that materialized across Mexico. The body’s lasting value was reflected in the fact that the imitations mattered, whether for religious reasons, for political ones, or—as was usually the case—for both kinds of reasons together.

Conclusion

The villagers of Morelos who extracted a story with messianic implications from Zapata’s cadaver displayed their sense of the dead body as a revealer of mystery, an at least temporary bridge between this life and another, between what is known and what is believed, between the concrete and the abstract. Practices on the Days of the Dead demonstrate that many Mexicans understand ancestors to be mediators between the earth and the heavens, and the corpse is an ancestor in the making at a critical moment of passage. We might add, though the locals probably would not have, that Zapata’s remains were the passageway between Zapata as material individual and Zapata as embodiment of communities that are increasingly abstract, increasingly imagined, the larger they become. In his wonderful novel on
the life and death of Argentina’s Evita Perón, Tomás Eloy Martínez attributes to a president of that nation the quote: “We are all that [Evita’s] corpse. It’s the country.” Elsewhere, Martínez describes Evita’s body as having grown too large because of all the anger and expectation it had come to contain.\footnote{As reflected in the boosterism of Tlaltizapán and Chinameca—spiced with emotional claims about what Zapata would have wanted—communities soon started to compete over Zapata’s corpse. Controlling the bones was valuable in Zapata’s case because there has been rough agreement about what he represents. The contest has always been over who can claim him, over which community he centers, who defines that community, and whose interests or policies would thus benefit from association with the bones. Ultimately, people who could not control the body learned to make do with copies, but this is not necessarily a reflection of the body’s declining power: that those who sought Zapata’s blessing for their causes so often made their political points with or near simulations of his body is compelling evidence of its lasting power as a source of the cult.}

In basic function Zapata’s bones are not markedly different from the bones of noteworthy ancestors in other places. Nina Tumarkin, for example, contends that the embalmed corpse of the Soviet Union’s Vladimir Lenin demonstrated his saintliness, his immortality, and his lasting power through its incorruptibility. The mausoleum on the Red Square where his body was exhibited was the center of his cult, which was a useful prop for the young Soviet state.\footnote{In her analysis of the recent politics of dead bodies in Eastern Europe, Katherine Verdery finds that reburying and honoring the remains of the famous evokes cosmic concerns and “uses their specific biographies to reevaluate the national past.” She also notes that because of their materiality, corpses, unlike mere ideas, can be placed and thus “localize” a claim.} In Fallen Soldiers, meanwhile, George Mosse argues that European practices of honoring the war dead made the two world wars into sacred experiences, thus helping to justify unprecedented numbers of deaths, and placed the fallen-soldier cult at the center of nationalist thought. He adds that war monuments needed proximity to the dead to serve as places of pilgrimage.\footnote{In all of these cases, then, the body is somehow sacred, can pass that sacredness on to the place where it is buried or exhibited, and can for that reason play an essential role in beginning a hero cult. In each of these cases, too, the body becomes a tool with which to make political claims. Finally, we should note}
that each of these three authors indicates at least the rhetorical presence of the notion of rebirth or eternal life.

But how bodies do what they do and what they can mean differ from case to case, which is another way of saying that Zapata’s body is unique because of the historical and cultural context through which it moves. No other culture duplicates Mexico’s attitude toward death and the dead, reflected not just in the Days of the Dead, but in the more general artistic tradition featuring the calavera (skull or skeleton). Octavio Paz, Mexico’s most renowned twentieth-century poet, wrote that the Mexican is intimate with death; she or he, “jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.” In terms of historical context, Lenin’s situation is comparable to that of Zapata in that both died at the end of periods of revolutionary warfare in which it was perhaps predictable that their bodies would quickly be employed, by mythmakers, in service to new, revolutionary states. Even here, though, the differences are profound. The treatment of the two corpses, of course, was different. Lenin was an intellectual who died in power; he led a communist revolution, which broke with a dynastic past. Zapata was far more a man of the people. He died while still fighting in a revolution that simply deepened some facets of the liberal tradition established in Mexico in the middle of the nineteenth century. And, most importantly perhaps, though he presented the nation with powerful arguments on behalf of his cause, he led what was largely a regional movement and never got a firm grasp on national power. None of the other bodies mentioned in this chapter, whether Mexican or not, comes close to displaying a comparable tension between local and national meanings and claims. Zapata’s body excels here because of its context, and in that tension, I think, lies the lasting power of his cult.

Notes

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1. “Buscará Tlaltizapán recuperar los restos de Emiliano Zapata,” Unión de Morelos (Cuernavaca), 11 April 2001. The traditional definition of a caudillo is a strong leader on horseback who uses military force to compete for regional and national power.


8. We should not assume, though, that Zapata’s status as regional hero was automatic. For the argument that there was probably a rethinking of Zapata at the time of his death, see Samuel Brunk, “Remembering Emiliano Zapata: Three Moments in the Posthumous Career of the Martyr of Chinameca,” Hispanic American Historical Review 78 (1998): 467–68.


11. Excélsior (Mexico City), 11 and 12 April 1919; and, for the photographs, Enrique Krauze, *El amor a la tierra: Emiliano Zapata, Biografía del Poder*, no. 3 (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), 120, 122.

12. El Demócrata (Mexico City), 11 April 1919.


15. Excélsior, 12 April 1919.

16. Excélsior, 14 April 1919.

17. Excélsior, 11 April 1919; El Demócrata, 11 April 1919.


20. Salvador Martínez Mancera, “Perdura en el sur la leyenda de que E. Zapata no ha muerto,” El Universal Gráfico (Mexico City), 13 April 1938.


22. El Campesino (Mexico City), 31 May 1968.


24. Interview with Carmen Aldana, conducted by Laura Espejel, Tepalcingo, Morelos, 2 and 30 March 1974, Programa de Historia Oral, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora (hereafter cited as PHO), Z/1/32, p. 73; interview with Serafin Plasencia Gutiérrez, conducted by Laura Espejel and Salvador Rueda, Mexico City, 13 and 20 September 1974, PHO-Z/1/59; interview with Prospero García Aguirre, conducted by Laura Espejel and Salvador Rueda, Tlatenchi, Jojutla, Morelos, 16 August 1975, PHO-Z/1/17, pp. 11–18; and

25. Excélsior, 10 April 1996.


29. For the class of Russian princes who, Christlike, foresaw and embraced their own deaths, see Nina Tumarkin, Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 6, 84.

30. Interview with Prospero García Aguirre, PHO-Z/1/17.


32. Olivera, “¿Ha muerto Emiliano Zapata?”, 50.

33. Interview with Serafin Plasencia Gutiérrez, PHO-Z/1/59, pp. 87–89.

34. Excélsior, 10 April 1996.


36. Interview with José Lora Mirasol, conducted by Laura Espejel, Mexico City, 2 and 4 October 1973, PHO-Z/1/14, pp. 46–47.

37. Primer congreso de unificación de las organizaciones campesinas de la república (Puebla, Mexico: S. Loyo, 1927), 69–73. I would like to thank Tom Benjamin for pointing me to this source.

38. See Policarpo B. Arellano to Zapata, Tlaltizapán, 17 July 1915, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Archivo de Zapata (hereafter cited as AZ) 19:3:56; and Bibiano A. Trejo to Zapata, Tlaltizapán, 5 April 1915, AZ 7:4:33.


41. A charro is a Mexican horseman best identified by his manner of dress, which includes such elements as a broad sombrero; a short, embroidered jacket; and tight pants, often with buttons down the sides.

42. *El Nacional*, 11 April 1932; *Excélsior*, 10 and 11 April 1932; interview with Professor Juventino Pineda, conducted by Carlos Barreto M., 7 August 1974, PHO-Z/1/57, p. 29; Thomas Benjamin, *Mexico’s Great Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 126, 129. The photograph of the two pall bearers standing in front of the statue with the box comes from the Centro de Estudios Sobre la Universidad/Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Archivo de Gildardo Magaña, photographs, box 20, no. 0690. For Estrada Cajigal’s view of Zapata see the interview of Vicente Estrada Cajigal, PHO/4/12.


44. Report from the “Primera Comisión de Gobernación,” Mexico City, 17 November 1936 to Honorable Asamblea, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, Condumex, Mexico City, Archivo de Jenaro Amezquita, VIII-3, 9:852.

45. Ayudante Municipal of Chinameca, Ignacio González, et al. to Cárdenas, Chinameca, 2 March 1940, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Archivo de Lázaro Cárdenas (hereafter cited as ALC), 562.2/22; Oficial Mayor, Encargado de la Secretaría General de Gobierno, José Urbán to Juan Gallardo Moreno, Oficial Mayor de la Secretaría Particular de la Presidencia de la República, Cuernavaca, 22 May 1940, ALC, 562.2/22.

46. Manifesto of the Frente Revolucionario de Chinameca, Morelos y Pueblos Circunvecinos Pro-Estauta de Emiliano Zapata, Chinameca, 14 March 1941, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Archivo de Manuel Avila Camacho (hereafter cited as AAC), 135.21/21; Secretary General Jesús Flores López of the Frente Revolucionario de Chinameca, Morelos y Pueblos Circunvecinos Pro-Estauta de Emiliano Zapata to Avila Camacho, Chinameca, 11 March 1942, AAC, 135.21/21; Carlos J. Sierra Brabatta, *Zapata: Señor de la tierra, capitán de los labriegos* (Mexico City: Departamento del Distrito Federal, 1985), 89.

48. El Eco del Sur (Cuautla), 11 April 1965.
49. El Demócrata, 12 April 1919.
52. Secretary General de Gobierno, Ernesto Escobar Muñoz to Luis Viñals Carsi, Sub-Jefe del Estado Mayor Presidencial, Cuernavaca, 2 August 1944, AAC, 562.4/321; El Campesino, 1 September 1949, 1 January 1955, 31 August 1969.
53. Excélsior, 10 April 1995; La Jornada (Mexico City), 10 April 1999.
55. Interview with Prospero García Aguirre, PHO-Z/1/17, pp. 11–18.
57. Sierra Brabatta, Zapata, 84.
61. Día (Mexico City), 18 April 1971.
68. Excélsior, 15 October 1979.
70. Presente (Cuernavaca), 15 April 1962.
71. For a fuller discussion of the rise of ritual protest in Zapata’s name, see Brunk, “Remembering Emiliano Zapata,” 477–85.
72. Taibo, Easy Thing, 6. For Zapata’s adoption by students in 1968, see Elena Poniatowska, Massacre in Mexico, trans. Helen Lane, 1975.


76. *El Campesino*, 1 June 1951.


81. See Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 14, for the idea of ancestors as mediators.


