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**Santa Muerte and the Politics of Malleability: the Angel of Death in  
Mexico City**

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**Santa Muerte and the Politics of Malleability: the Angel of Death in  
Mexico City**

**by**

**Kathryn Louis McDonald, B.A.**

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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## **Dedication**

In memory of my Dad, James Stephen McDonald (1959-2015)

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## **Abstract**

### **Santa Muerte and the Politics of Malleability: the Angel of Death in Mexico City**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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This thesis explores and critiques mainstream narratives of Santa Muerte, a marginalized Mexican spiritual figure, through ethnographic data collected in spaces of Santa Muerte spiritual commerce and devotion in Mexico City during the summer of 2015, with an emphasis on Barrio Tepito, Colonia Morelos and Mercado de Sonora. This thesis will argue that Santa Muerte's malleability, particularly with regards to gender; the embrace of physicality, and its followers' attitude towards death, demonstrate Santa Muerte's appeal as a spiritual tool, particularly for marginalized segments of Mexican society.



## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| List of Figures .....  | ix |
| Preface.....   | 1  |
| Chapter 1: Introduction .....  | 4  |
| Literature Review.....   | 7  |
| Structure of the Thesis .....  | 15 |
| Chapter 2: Santa Muerte, a Saturation of Death, and the Politics of Spiritual<br>Malleability .....                                  | 17 |
| Introduction to El Santuario Nacional de la Santísima Muerte .....   | 17 |
| The Angel of Death.....  | 21 |
| The Politics of Fluid Iconography and Spiritual Accessibility: Santa Muerte<br>and La Virgen de Guadalupe as Conflicting Canons..... | 25 |
| Parallel Figures in Precarity: Jesús Malverde and Juan Soldado as "Victim<br>Intercessors" .....                                     | 31 |
| Conclusion .....   | 35 |
| Chapter 3: Santa Muerte: Transformation, Embodiment, and the Gender Question<br>.....  | 37 |
| Doña Queta and a Cab Ride to Tepito .....  | 37 |
| The Angel of Death in Mercado de Sonora .....  | 40 |
| Gendering Santa Muerte through Embodied Processes.....   | 47 |
| Conclusion .....   | 51 |
| Chapter 4: Santa Muerte: La Cabronita de Tepito .....  | 52 |
| The Discursive Site of Tepito, Colonia Morelos .....   | 52 |
| "Tepito Existe Porque Resiste:" Slum Tourism Context .....   | 54 |
| "I am not guilty of what they say about me" .....  | 56 |
| Conclusion .....   | 61 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Chapter Thesis Conclusion: Constructing Lives through Petition..... | 63 |
| Future Possibilities.....   | 66 |
| Bibliography .....  | 69 |

## List of Figures

|             |  |    |
|-------------|--|----|
| Figure 1.1: | Google map image displaying the locations of my field sites: Mercado de Sonora (bottom center), Tepito (top center) and El Santuario located on Nicolas Bravo in greater Colonia Morelos. ....   | 16 |
| Figure 2.1: | Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and various skull paraphernalia in a Mercado de Sonora stall.....  | 17 |
| Figure 2.2: | Santa Muerte statues in El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte, Colonia Morelos, Mexico City. ....   | 21 |
| Figure 2.3: | The main altar at El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte .....   | 27 |
| Figure 3.1  | Doña Queta’s Santa Muerte shrine in Tepito.....  | 37 |
| Figure 3.2  | Santa Muerte as a bride in Mercado de Sonora .....   | 46 |
| Figure 3.3  | Jesús showing me some of his many Santa Muerte statues in Mercado de Sonora. The multi-colored figure he is holding is multi-purpose (the different colors represent several different types of petitions, such as love or money). The black, veiled statue is pregnant, and the Santa Muerte on horseback is almost warrior-like—the first exhibiting normative feminine characteristics, and the latter representing normative masculinity. These statues represent just a few of the many representations of the “gender fluid” Santa Muerte..... | 47 |
| Figure 4.1  | Photo from Adelheid Roosen’s website, creator of the Safari en Tepito concept. ....  | 55 |

## **Preface**

I first met Santa Muerte in 2011, through the tinted windows of a twelve-passenger van, as a Millsaps College undergraduate spending a semester in the Yucatán Peninsula. We were on a weekend field trip to Campeche, and our driver signaled to a large, skeletal statue on the side of the road. “La Santa Muerte,” he remarked, “she’s very popular right now.” This tall, grim reaper-esque statue cloaked in gold, nestled between Yucatecan hammocks, stuck with me, and when I returned to the United States, I wrote my senior capstone paper in Latin American studies about the commercialization of Santa Muerte. There was something special about the figure to me, most notably her accessibility and the permission she gives individuals to embrace sexuality and non-normative gender ideals. Perhaps subconsciously, this interest stemmed from my Catholic upbringing and education I was privileged enough to receive. As I read more about Santa Muerte’s non-judgemental nature, I thought about a high school teacher scrutinizing the length of my uniform skirt weeks before graduation and summarily issuing me a detention slip. I thought about religion instructors telling my all female class that women who engaged in pre-marital sex were disgusting to men, like pre-chewed Oreo cookies. I thought about all of the times we had been told that birth control and having sex for pleasure were the equivalents of “slamming the door in Jesus’s face.” In short, Santa Muerte interested me because she transgressed all of the strict gender norms I had learned as a young (lapsed) Catholic in the United States. The permissive and malleable nature of

Santa Muerte is part of what makes her so appealing to me as a researcher, and to her diverse set of followers.

I chose this topic for my M.A. thesis because I am troubled by the popular narrative of Santa Muerte as a mere “narco saint.” I tell the story of how Santa Muerte, an incredibly popular and controversial figure, has become a powerful survival tool for confronting the human realities of death, marginality (whether attributed to gender identity, sexual preference, class, race, and the intersections of all of these factors), and social mobility. However, I do not intend for this story to convey a self-congratulatory tone—such as “gringa ethnographer to the rescue!” I chose ethnography for my project because it provided the socially interactive, sensory, and immersive factors I felt were essential to telling this story. I have noticed a tendency in some academic work to make assumptions about Santa Muerte’s gender and connections to Día de los Muertos, either because they deemed these matters insignificant or because they failed to ask devotees about them. As brief as my field work was, I found that simply asking a small sample of devotees simple questions about Santa Muerte revealed a rich context that distributing surveys or digging through archives could not.

In fact, some of the very rhetoric surrounding Santa Muerte and Barrio Tepito that I reflect upon often inspired me to proceed with caution and awkwardness, making me complicit in the murky layers of negative discourse surrounding the figure (a theme that figures heavily in Chapter 4). On the other hand, I do not suggest that the devotees I spoke to are so radically different from me that we could never reach a mutual

understanding about the spiritual power of Santa Muerte. It is also important to acknowledge that all of my writing and observing is mediated through my privileged experience as a middle class, cisgender white woman, United States citizen, and academic, and that these factors often inevitably shape how I view the world and how my respondents likely viewed me. My goal is not to denote “authority” on the subject of Santa Muerte, but to contribute to a slim body of academic research regarding the figure that complicates the popular conflation of the figure with narco-culture and instead highlights how the figure enriches devotees’ lives, whether this is through confronting mortality by self-acceptance, financial aspirations, or living a pleasurable life.

## Introduction

The dramatic cover of journalist Michael Deibert's book, *In the Shadow of Saint Death: The Gulf Cartel and the Price of America's Drug War in Mexico* (2014), features an image of Santa Muerte wearing the Virgen de Guadalupe's familiar tilma, praying over a handgun. The image suggests a perversion of Mexico's patron saint, a conflation of Santa Muerte devotion with organized crime, and the unprecedented reign of violence that has resulted from Mexico's War on Organized Crime. In March 2009, the Mexican Army bulldozed approximately three-dozen Santa Muerte shrines near the U.S. border as part of a psychological war on 'narcoculture' (Campbell 2010). An opening scene in the popular television show *Breaking Bad*, Mexican drug cartel members place an iconic drawing of their meth-dealing rival, "Heisenberg," at a Santa Muerte shrine, presumably petitioning for revenge. In August 2014, *The Atlantic* published a brief online article about Santa Muerte titled "The Rise of the Narco-Saints: A New Religious Trend in Mexico," reducing the religious following to a drug-trafficking cult (this phenomenon is not, "new," by the way—the contemporary representation of Santa Muerte has existed for at least twenty years, and some would argue that the figure has pre-Hispanic origins). In the midst of all of this sensationalism, it seemed that several aspects of Santa Muerte devotion were overlooked. This project has undergone several revisions, taken several angles, and presented various arguments since its inception as a five-page proposal for summer funding during my first semester as a graduate student. However, one factor has remained constant: the Santa Muerte that is produced by popular culture, media outlets,

and dismissed by many as *brujeria*, superstition, and a “narco-saint,” is the reason I have written this thesis.

If there is one take-away from this project, it is this: Santa Muerte is many things to many people— a sign of peace, violence, motherhood, fatherhood, sexuality, wealth, empowerment, recovery, addiction, revenge, life and death—to name a few. The figure moves seamlessly between life and death, male and female—and this fluid, malleable quality will echo throughout my research. This thesis uses ethnographic data collected through interviews in spaces of Santa Muerte spiritual commerce and devotion in Mexico City during the summer of 2015 to argue that the figure’s flexibility, particularly with regards to gender; the embrace of physicality, and its followers’ attitude towards death, demonstrate Santa Muerte’s appeal as a spiritual tool, particularly for pathologized segments of Mexican society. In this light, Santa Muerte transcends the traditional sense of *religion*, and is instead a highly adaptable instrument for combatting the inevitable force of death.

In July 2015 I was making the final of many routine Sunday visits to the National Sanctuary of Santa Muerte located in Colonia Morelos in Mexico City. The crowd rivaled the size that would appear on the first Sunday of the month, in which the masses that occur are believed to be “stronger.” A group composed mainly of families with young children walked from their homes to see La Santa and are drinking Coca Cola and eating tamales. A man named Diego who regularly plays guitar and sings during mass sipped El Cabrito (an affordably priced brand of tequila), then walked around the perimeter of the church and spit it in the face of every statue. Fruit and flowers were regularly placed in



front of the altar, wilted and dead. The priest performed a ritual with the candles, rubbing oil on devotees. Congregants shared their cigarettes with the Santa Muerte statues. The place was very much alive and physically interactive—not necessarily an environment one would associate with a skeletal figure that is so closely associated with death. I often interviewed a priest named Juan Carlos, who had served at the church since its founding in 2000, and he would regularly encourage me to embrace the many pleasure of life—including money, drinking, dancing, and having sex, because life is fleeting. In a way, Santa Muerte acts as an agent of life. For once we learn to confront death with striking physical images such as Santa Muerte, it makes life a little bit easier.

The examination of any religious practice, official or otherwise, is bound to be fraught with complication, depth, and contradictions. The aforementioned characteristics are hallmarks of Santa Muerte devotion, and are what make the figure such a successful spiritual tool for a diverse population of devotees. Ideally, the end goal in studying spirituality is not to write the “definitive” piece regarding the subject, but to spark conversations by adding to a living body of existing scholarship and inspire response. Laura Pérez observes the following with regards to the discussion of the spiritual in

*Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities:*

Beliefs and practices consciously making reference to the s/Spirit(s) as the common life force within and between all beings are today largely ignored in serious intellectual discourse as superstition, folk belief, or New Age delusion, or when they are not, they are studied directly as exemplars of ‘primitive animism’ or previous ages of gullibility (18).

As the above quote demonstrates, academic discourse often dismisses and ignores spirituality as a serious field of inquiry. This thesis is not concerned with uncovering the

“truth” about spirituality and Santa Muerte—whether she is “real,” criminal, a victim of negative national discourse, or when the gestation period of the saint occurred. The efficacy of Santa Muerte as a malleable tool for devotees to move through systems of power, gender, and ideas concerning mortality is “real” enough. This ethnographic thesis employs first-person narration when describing the field, not to denote authority over the subject, but to demonstrate my perception of what I observed in Mexico City as an outsider and to honor the responses of my interviewees.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The slim body of academic research that references Santa Muerte lists several possible explanations for the figure’s origins. Some view it as a hybrid religion that merges Catholic symbolism with pre-Hispanic worship of the skeletal Mictlantecuhltli and Mictlancihuatl, Lord and Lady of the Dead (Campbell 2010). A possible genealogy lies in how death is perceived in the Mexican national imaginary, which is reflected in traditions such as Día de los Muertos. *Death and the Idea of Mexico* argues Día de los Muertos is one of the national totems of Mexico. Santa Muerte has become its own kind of national totem and also has a history as a romantic intercessor. Thompson suggests that “Oración a la Santa Muerte” originated as a spell to bring back a wayward lover, a prayer in the tradition of Latin American “erotic domination spells” (406). This Santa Muerte transcends traditional notions of masculinity, femininity, and sainthood. She is a figure that one can feel comfortable confessing their sexual or romantic desires to, rather than trying to suppress them. Santa Muerte’s capacity for romantic intervention is but one of her attractive and approachable characteristics in her current form(s). As a vendor in

Mercado de Sonora (Jesús) explained to me, there are seven standard colors of Santa Muerte votives representing distinct petitions: gold is for money, red is for love, purple is for employment, white is for peace and health, blue is for education (he promptly sold me a miniature blue figurine for my graduate school endeavors), and the multi-colored candles are all of these in one. However, these colors and their standard purposes are not fixed—for instance, I own a white Santa Muerte votive purchased at Fiesta. According to Jesús’s explanation, white candles tend to represent health and peace, but this one features a sort of “enchantment spell” designed for maintaining a lover’s attachment to the petitioner. These votives are a testament to Santa Muerte’s interpretive malleability and manifestations of devotees’ desires to have control over seemingly uncontrollable aspects of their lives (such as finding and maintaining love, for instance). While it is futile to assign fixed characteristics Santa Muerte or pinpoint the gestation period of the saint, the reason I chose Mexico City as a field site is because Barrio Tepito is where the saint transformed “from the occult to the public cult of Santa Muerte” (Chesnut 39). Regardless of the uncertain origin story, it is clear that this saint has become an immensely popular, malleable spiritual tool in the past two decades, particularly among marginalized populations in both Mexico and the United States that seek an alternative to orthodox Catholicism.

Traditional Catholicism encourages patience, waiting, and the appeal of Santa Muerte’s alleged ability to perform favors in a timely manner fits with modern society’s growing expectations for quick and reliable access to goods and services. The internet, smart phones, and fast food are but a few examples of modern convenience that permeate

modern life. This contrasts sharply with the patience one is asked to demonstrate when petitioning for aid from figures such as the Virgen de Guadalupe, and the expectation that one must live a virtuous life and wait to receive their reward in heaven. In the case of Santa Muerte, this expectation for quick solutions is applied to the realm of spirituality. The desire for resourcefulness and economic survival is demonstrated throughout the stalls of Mercado de Sonora—more broadly, in the unofficial economy of the market stalls, and specifically in the saturation of products designed to promote prosperity, such as sprays, candles, and oils that patrons are encouraged to rub onto each of their seven chakras. A devotee conveys his relationship with Santa Muerte: “If I ask for a lot of money, maybe \$70,000 (about \$US6,400), she asks me to reform. She sets the date and that’s it” (Jones 475). The specificity of his request and of the temporality with which he believes that Santa Muerte will honor his request demonstrates how this relationship would seem more appealing than more orthodox Christian views concerning the dynamics of prayer. Santa Muerte’s appeal lies in her professionalism (“She sets the date and that’s it”).

In all of the spaces where I conducted field work, both devotional and commercial, I encountered a breadth of Santa Muerte representations, ranging from feminine, to masculine, to gender neutral and gender fluid. In El Santuario, the central Santa Muerte altar contained a large statue of the saint that wore a different dress each month—in June, she wore a bright pink gown, and in July she wore white. In Mercado de Sonora, I once saw someone painting a large Santa Muerte figurine’s nails purple—a striking example of the great efforts Santa Muerte devotees make to personalize and

“pamper” her, often grooming her as though she were a doll. Often in these same spaces stood Santa Muertes wearing black robes, juxtaposed with more masculine figures such as Jesús Malverde. As a personification of an abstract concept (death), Santa Muerte does not bear any fixed physical features other than her skeletal figure, allowing devotees the freedom to “dress” her as they wish. Piotr Grzegorz Michalik ties the infinite possibilities for Santa Muerte’s forms to globalization: “The contemporary globalized culture bears a tendency toward transformation of each and every aspect of human life into a product which might be selected and optionally combined with other products in a custom way, similarly to shopping mall merchandise” (Michalik 4). This concept is applicable to the array of products that have emerged in response to Santa Muerte’s increasing popularity: statues, candles, calendars, t-shirts, magazines, bumper stickers—the list goes on and on. The vast selection of products has aided followers in shaping their identities and provided more ways to express their devotion. The freedom that devotees and merchants have to personalize and transform La Santa Muerte is immense, a freedom that can often cause violent opposition when applied to canonical figures such as the Virgen de Guadalupe.

The malleability of Santa Muerte lends itself to many contradictory elements. In *Borderlands Saints*, Desiree Martín provides a particularly salient, nuanced argument regarding Santa Muerte’s complexity, her illegibility, carefully avoiding essentialist arguments depicting her as either narco-saint or a champion of the subaltern. “Whether Santa Muerte is viewed as a solution in times of crisis or just another manifestation of crisis,” Martín writes, “she is popular precisely because of her controversial and

contradictory nature” (183). I noticed many of Santa Muerte’s contradictory elements during my fieldwork. Juan Carlos, a priest at the Sanctuary, was the most enthusiastic participant in my study. Every Sunday after mass, he would hang-up his green vestment in a closet, revealing a black t-shirt and faded jeans, light a cigarette and talk to various families and walk them to their cars. Even during my brief, two-month period of visiting El Santuario, I could tell that this place fostered a strong sense of active community participation. I began to recognize regulars in the pews who would stop to catch-up after receiving a blessing from Juan Carlos, and the prevalence of small children playing on the spiral staircase, or petting the resident black cat as their mothers warmed tortillas in the main office. Contrary to the overwhelming depictions in U.S. and Mexican popular culture and media outlets of Santa Muerte as a violent, terrifying figure who exclusively looks-out for the interests of drug cartels, to Juan Carlos and his congregants, Santa Muerte is “a powerful symbol of peace and light who does not discriminate.” I often asked, much to Juan Carlos’s annoyance, if he saw a link between Narco violence in Mexico and Santa Muerte devotion, whether the devotion was a response to a need for protection from this violence or as a facilitator of the violence. He shook his head and responded, “Violence happens everywhere,” as I fixed my perplexed gaze on a row of black candles that read “Muerte Contra mis Enemigos” (Death to my Enemies). This moment is indicative of the malleable, contradictory nature of the Santa Muerte figure.

Cladio Lomnitz writes in *Death and the Idea of Mexico* that the cult of death “could be thought of as the oldest, seminal, and most authentic element of Mexican popular culture” (Lomnitz 23-23). While theorizing attitudes towards death is essential

to any discussion of Santa Muerte, the figure is often conflated with traditions such as Day of the Dead and Posada's *Calaveras*. I was once in a souvenir shop at Teotihuacan with my roommate and she asked me if a t-shirt with a *Catrina* printed on it was Santa Muerte. Given the vast commodification of Posada's work and Day of the Dead imagery in both Mexico and the United States, my roommate's confusion was not surprising. Martín notes that with increased urbanization and aspirations of social mobility, many in Mexico have abandoned the Día de los Muertos tradition. Many devotees do not celebrate Day of the Dead, at least not in the traditional sense. Martín remarks:

Santa Muerte and Day of the Dead celebrations are linked through the deep connection between death, migration, and identity on either side of the border, evoking migrant crossings and deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border, the femicides in Ciudad Juárez and other border towns, the casualties of the drug wars, and the deep-rooted presence of Mexican communities in the United States (Martín 186).

Martín's observation challenges her audience to look beyond the ubiquity of death imagery and look more substantively at a national context saturated with death that makes a figure such as Santa Muerte possible. In addition to precarious border crossings, drug war casualties, and femicides, the recent disappearance of 43 missing students from Ayotzinapa would make an important addition to Martín's list of state-perpetuated violence. The summer I spent in Mexico City, I walked past countless images of the 43 missing students pasted to the sides of buildings and columns, with the caption "*Fue el estado.*" The prevalence of death imagery in Mexican popular culture is much more than smiling neon skeletons—one must also look to the saturation of death and violence in the Mexican recent past (as Martín suggests) to understand the contemporary significance of

Death in the contemporary Mexican landscape. This “saturation of death” that I refer to has provided fertile ground for figures such as Santa Muerte to emerge.

The contradictory nature of Santa Muerte is also evident in articles such as “Tears, Trauma, and Suicide,” which illustrates Santa Muerte not as a facilitator of violence and crime, but as a shield from it. Jones et. al observe how figures such as Santa Muerte can serve as a tool to cope with trauma. The article describes how a community in Puebla, Mexico with high crime and suicide rates among youth copes with these issues. One of these tools is spirituality—especially Santa Muerte. A man whose son has committed suicide struggles with alcoholism and describes Santa Muerte as a sort of maternal figure, who helps him home when he is drunk and asks for nothing in return. “With my body I beg you,” he prays, “to free me from all evil. No [more] fighting, no playing around, no more stealing from others or listening to the bad things they teach me” (Jones 475). Contrary to the popular demonization of Santa Muerte, this man’s petition and story depict a Santa Muerte that is empathetic and nurturing. While mainstream understandings of Santa Muerte depict the figure as one who perpetuates criminality, in this context, the devotee is employing Santa Muerte to *protect him* from participating in criminal activity. In other words, those who enlist Santa Muerte to help them reform and those who use her to endorse their drug trade show demonstrates how followers can manipulate their interpretations of the saint in myriad ways. As Santa Muerte straddles the fine line between life and Death, she encourages us to realize the fleeting nature of life and also to find redemption in life rather than the afterlife.



Santa Muerte is often viewed as a “syncretic” phenomenon, or a “hybrid religion,” implying that it has created an entirely separate “religion.” For others, the saint merely serves as a powerful addition to their spiritual repertoire. The Catholic Church condemns Santa Muerte because, in their view, she demonstrates a morbid and damaging fixation with death and idolatry. Despite this, many devotees exhibit a seamless, fluid relationship between traditional Catholicism and devotion to the unofficial saint. Often home altars and shrines will display Santa Muerte standing next to saints such as San Judas de Tadeo (the patron saint of lost causes)<sup>1</sup> and La Virgen de Guadalupe. For example, in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana*, Lorentzen et.al provide an ethnographic account of the devotional lives of a network of transgender sex workers from Guadalajara living in San Francisco. “Santísima Muerte, who is the most marginalized figure in this trinity,” Lorentzen writes, “is most like the women themselves and closest to their experience.” (6). This “trinity” that the authors refer to is Saint Death, Saint Jude (the patron saint of lost causes), and the Virgen of Guadalupe. While not all Santa Muerte devotees hold the same reverence for the Virgen, and vice versa, these examples demonstrate how the boundaries of these brands of spirituality are not fixed and often interact with each other. I observed both the differences and the overlapping qualities of Santa Muerte and the Virgen de Guadalupe often as I moved between devotional and commercial spaces dedicated to both of these figures. These similarities are not limited to the figures’ malleability—both represent powerful, nurturing figures

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<sup>1</sup> San Judas de Tadeo has inspired new devotion among disenfranchised populations in recent decades, particularly migrants, and joins Santa Muerte in the ranks of “narco saints.” (Hughes 5).

that devotees often assign maternal qualities to. In the corner of the main altar at the Sanctuary of La Santa Muerte, between the Mexican flag and Saint Deaths draped in black and gold cloaks, stood a bright statue of the Virgen. The devotees I spoke to expressed respect towards the Virgen, though it was clear that they were partial to Santa Muerte because of her approachable nature.

The narrow body of academic literature about Santa Muerte lacks discussions regarding the fluidity of life, death, and gender she exhibited during my fieldwork in Mexico City. Santa Muerte is often addressed using gender-specific pronouns, while she is regarded as a genderless angel. Her rejection of feminine passivity represents to some a certain low-class vulgarity that is synonymous with Barrio Tepito. She moves freely between life and death, confronting death while symbolizing human-like qualities.

### **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each exploring a particular ethnographic theme with regards to Santa Muerte, the figure's malleability, and the social aversion that accompanies it. Chapter 2 explores how Santa Muerte is used as both an instrument of life and as a tool to combat fear of death. Chapter 3 explores why this personification of death is gender fluid and theorizes the figure's connection to the body. As Santa Muerte's skeletal image demonstrates the physical reality of death, I demonstrate how the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy contributes to a gender analysis in which reason is characterized as masculine and the body as feminine. I describe the "physical" environment of the church, as it emphasizes ritual over text, suggesting a more

“feminized,” or open environment. In Chapter 4, I discuss a neighborhood that I have read much about, but have visited sparingly—Tepito. It is one of Mexico City’s most notorious neighborhoods, home to a high concentration of Santa Muerte shrines, including a famous shrine that is maintained by Enriqueta Romero, also known as Doña Queta. I demonstrate the social aversion surrounding Tepito and Santa Muerte, which are both regarded as “vulgar” and lower-class to outsiders, which meant that navigating the physical and discursive spaces of Tepito and Colonia Morelos were particularly challenging. My ethnographic data was collected in three main sites: El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte in Colonia Morelos, Mercado de Sonora in Venustiano Carranza, and Doña Enriqueta’s shrine in Barrio Tepito, and will be referenced throughout all three chapters (see Figure 1.1 for map).

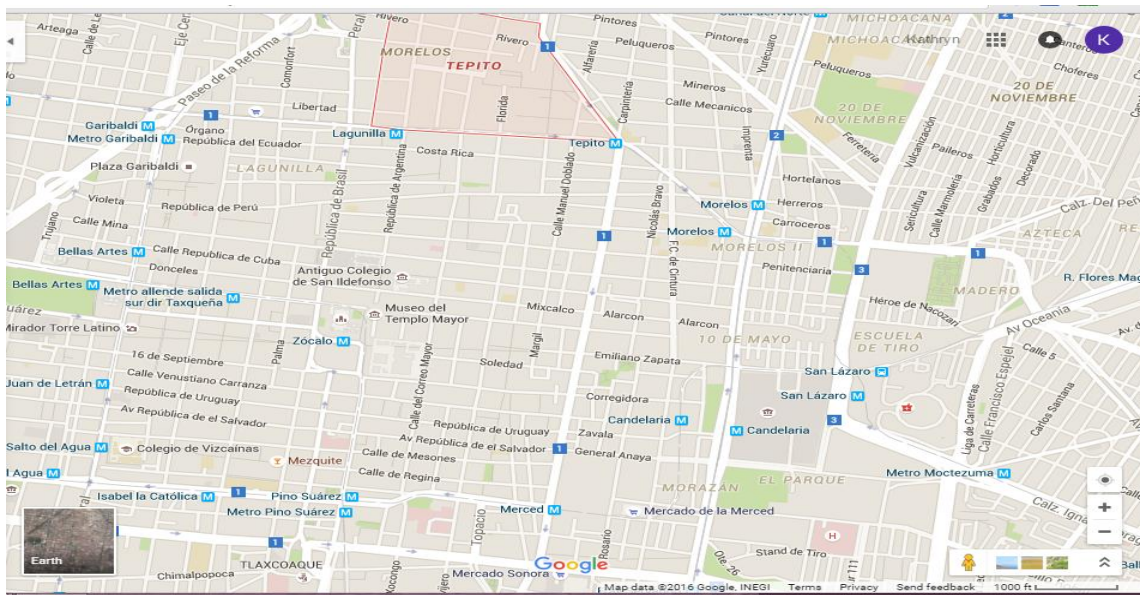


Figure 1.1: Google map image displaying the locations of my field sites: Mercado de Sonora (bottom center), Tepito (top center) and El Santuario located on Nicolas Bravo in greater Colonia Morelos.

## Chapter 2: Santa Muerte, a Saturation of Death, and the Politics of Spiritual Malleability

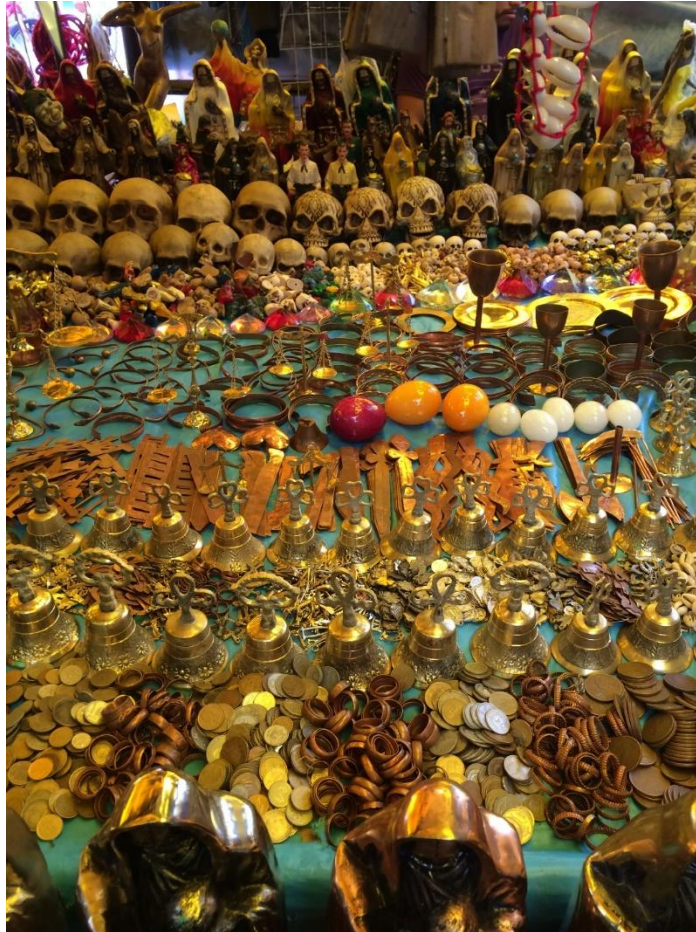


Figure 2.1: Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and various skull paraphernalia in a Mercado de Sonora stall.

### INTRODUCTION TO EL SANTUARIO NACIONAL DE LA SANTÍSIMA MUERTE

The first Sunday of June, I clutched handwritten directions and a bright pink flower dampened by palm sweat and inhaled the last puff of my cigarette before descending into the Mexico City metro. I was finally traveling to the heart of my Santa Muerte research, and my roommate (the only volunteer I could find to accompany me) was excitedly describing the brands of cameras she would like to find in the Tepito

market. As we switched on to the Ciudad Azteca line, the passengers thinned the closer we get to the Tepito stop. Inevitably, we became lost. We asked various shop-owners and policemen how to get to the shrine, receive conflicting directions and “cuidados.” It was election weekend in Mexico City, and the infamous Tepito market was less densely populated than usual, giving us a sense of unease. On a quiet street a couple of blocks from the end of the market, we encounter finally a Santa Muerte temple in Colonia Morelos: El Santuario Nacional de la Santísima Muerte.

The first thing I noticed about El Santuario was that it was brimming with life and physical interaction—not exactly the type of environment one would expect from a group that reveres a skeletal folk saint so closely associated with violence and death in the U.S. and Mexican imaginaries. The skeletal figure in the front window was unmistakable, draped in light pink robes with gold embroidery. A man wearing green vestments was saying mass at the front of the temple, while the pews were full of devotees singing and praying. Many families with small children were present, and the kids would play on the spiral staircase as though it were a jungle gym. The smell of incense and herbs permeated the Sanctuary. Various statues of la Santa, Jesús Malverde, and a woman with long black hair and a pale complexion abound. I was told that the statue of this woman was a representation of Santa Muerte as a “live” angel. A middle-aged man with a long, gray ponytail who played guitar and sang in Mass would pause between songs to swig tequila and spray it on Santa Muerte’s face as a way of “sharing” it with her. To the side, there was a tiendita, the type that one would find in most Catholic churches around the world selling rosaries, except this one was full of Santa Muerte merchandise, including prayer

cards, candles, statues, oils, and pendants. I introduced myself to the matron of the sanctuary, who was hard of hearing, and several of the women in the room. A small baby wearing a bow and glittery shoes rested on the couch with a black cat while her mother manned the counter, administering candles to various visitors seeking “limpias de alma.” The woman told me that this day was special. The Sanctuary holds mass every day, but the mass that takes place on the first Sunday of the month is “más fuerte.”

“I want one of those,” I told the shop-owner at the Sanctuary, pointing at a priest who was spinning a man around with a candle in his hand, getting his alma cleansed. She handed me a multicolored candle that reads “Death to my enemies,” at the bottom, for 15 pesos. She carved a star into the candle, sprinkled it with “the oil of Santa Muerte,” various seeds and herbs, then placed a red delicious apple on top of the candle. I placed the candle and the apple onto the altar. Some people brought the good stuff—tacos, chicharrón, Lucky Strikes. *Am I doing this right*, I wondered, and across the sanctuary I saw a middle-aged man with a ponytail puff his cigar onto Santa Muerte’s face. A shaman named Carlito introduced himself and gave me his business card. He rubbed an unlit candle on my seven chakras and my lower back, which aches from spending several nights in \$12/night Airbnb accommodations. He told me to close my eyes, then asked what neighborhood I was visiting from “Narvarte,” I replied, the location of my hard-as-rocks Airbnb bed. He spun me around, told me to open my eyes and look-up at la Santa, and ask her for whatever I want. La Santa seemed to be a very accommodating figure, so long as I brought her a better offering next week—so I meditated on that as Carlito rubbed more Santa Muerte oil onto my palms from a filmy Coke bottle.

The first day in this Santuario was significant, as it marked the beginning of my relationship with what would become my primary, most productive field site. The building houses a robust, multi-aged, mixed gender congregation. In search of Doña Queta's famous shrine in the heart of Tepito on Alfarería 12, I was instead directed to this temple after my handwritten directions (pre-searched on Google Maps in order to avoid bringing my cell phone), made me feel disoriented and I had to resort to asking strangers. This section of Colonia Morelos, which houses El Santuario, is a few blocks away from Tepito proper—where taxis are sparse, and the nearest metro stop is in the middle of the market. The alternative saint has become immensely popular spiritual tool in the past two decades, particularly among marginalized populations in both Mexico and the United States that seek an alternative to orthodox Catholicism. This chapter uses ethnographic data collected in spaces of Santa Muerte spiritual commerce and devotion in Mexico City, with an emphasis on El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte, during the summer of 2015 to explore the figure's flexibility and her followers' active "carpe diem" attitude—which I will refer to as a "saturation of death," the phenomenon that makes a figure such as Santa Muerte at least marginally possible in Mexico. The Virgen de Guadalupe, a powerful image of Mexican femininity and sanctity, serves as a contrasting figure and reference point to La Santa Muerte in parts of this chapter, and I show how there is often a vast difference in how the two images are circulated, used, and received. Further, this chapter describes parallel figures such as Jesús Malverde and Juan Soldado, as they further exemplify the precarity that is often associated with Santa Muerte.





Figure 2.2: Santa Muerte statues in El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte, Colonia Morelos, Mexico City.

### **THE ANGEL OF DEATH**

The most immediate feature one notices when entering a Santa Muerte devotional space is the overwhelming array of death imagery (see Figure 2.1). One Sunday afternoon, Juan Carlos, a priest with whom I spoke regularly, enthusiastically reminded the congregants of the upcoming festival honoring the 15 year anniversary of La Santa appearing at the Sanctuary, formerly known as “the Chapel of Mercy,” on August 15<sup>th</sup>. They would march from the Sanctuary to the Zócalo, where would be drinking, dancing, weddings, and mariachis. “Don’t worry,” he reassured the congregants, “I know all the police.” The apparent distrust of police in this part of town is not surprising—the stigma is well known. I could sense it as I emerged from the Tepito metro stop for the first time,



asking a policeman for directions to a certain street, whose sign was obstructed by a sea of blue Mercado tarp. “Cuidado,” he insisted, and I thought about all of the stories I had heard about police destroying Santa Muerte shrines near the US-Mexican border, hundreds of miles away. I address this social and structural aversion to both Santa Muerte devotion and to Tepito in more detail in Chapter 4.

I always came to my sites clutching a set of prepared questions, mainly regarding Santa Muerte’s gender, to which I overwhelmingly received the same response: “She doesn’t have a gender, she is an angel. The angel of Death,” Juan Carlos insisted. I was perplexed to receive this answer from nearly every person I interviewed, both in Mercado de Sonora and in the Sanctuary, given the prevalence of Saint Deaths wearing elaborate white gowns and Juan Carlos repeatedly referring to her in homilies as “mi niña.” This “angel of Death” concept echoes in Lorentzen’s work with Mexican transgender sex workers in San Francisco, many of whom explained that it was Santa Muerte who greeted Jesus when he died on the cross and welcomed him into the world of the dead (27). As Todd Ramón Ochoa notes in his study *Society of the Dead: Quita Manaquita and Palo Praise in Cuba*, the conversations with his chief informant, a healer named Isidra, would regularly refer to the Dead: “Isidra discerned the dead around her constantly. She saw the dead as synonymous with what was noteworthy in the everyday. To her the dead was the series of never-ending happenings that emerged out of life’s routines, prosaic though these could be” (Ochoa 27). Similarly, most conversations I had with Juan Carlos were situated in the concept of Death. It was often difficult to discern whether he was referring to Death or La Santa Muerte, like when he made the somewhat obvious observation that

Santa Muerte visits everyone. It seemed that they were one in the same. In this sense, many devotees embrace a concept (Death) rather than a specific individual who once walked the earth, such as official canonized Catholic saints.

Juan Carlos told me that people are afraid of La Santa Muerte, because they are afraid of death. “We will all look like this someday. All of us are going to meet La Santa Muerte” he insisted. Juan Carlos’s comments acknowledge that resisting death is futile, and that the best way to combat this inevitable reality is to become familiar with it. Santa Muerte serves as an active reminder of death, and rather than encouraging followers to suffer on Earth and receive their reward in heaven, the focus is on the present—on being resourceful with regards to one’s financial survival and enjoying the pleasures of life before it inevitably ends. As Lorentzen states in “Devotional Crossings,” “In a kind of homeopathic way, Santísima Muerte injects just enough death to ward away its coming” (27). To become familiar with Santa Muerte is to become familiar with death, to normalize it. For instance, a major way that devotees ease into a familiarity with death is through offering Santa Muerte objects that bring them joy, making the figure more approachable. In other words, these shrines assign human characteristics to the saint—un-ashed cigarettes dangle from her altars, vases of tequila quench her thirst, devotees take care to change her outfits. She enjoys whatever they do, and they use her as their mirror image—because to be alive is to die. The figure blurs the duality of life and death, the line between the two—and the line between self and Santa Muerte.

With all of these discussions regarding Death, there was little talk of the afterlife—the conversations often turn to life and its ephemerality. The devotees I spoke to in the Sanctuary were overwhelmingly concerned with the present, and never referred to what they thought would occur in the afterlife. An older woman who sold and rubbed “el aceite de la Santa” on the palms of visitors every Sunday at the Sanctuary told me that she had been a devotee of Santa Muerte for more than a decade. “My husband and I have always struggled to find work,” she shared, “and Santa Muerte has always helped us.” Here, there is no focus on being “good” or “pure,” but rather on survival and reaping the fruits of what life has to offer in the present. In other words, Santa Muerte devotion highlights the ephemeral quality of life and enables a brand of faith in the here and now as one anticipates death.

On one particularly slow afternoon in the Sanctuary, Juan Carlos asked if I believed in La Santa Muerte. I replied that I was not religious, but I certainly believe in Death as a powerful, motivational force. “What do you think La Santa Muerte expects of us?” I asked. Earlier, I had remarked that I was hungover, and his response seemed directed at me: “La Santa Muerte wants you to live. Drink. Dance. You want to have sex with your boyfriend? Do it. She does not care.” Stating the obvious, I replied: “Because life is short?” “Exactly,” he replied. The ephemerality of life resonates with many Santa Muerte devotees, as many live particularly precarious lives in which death figures prominently. For instance, the figure has a sizeable following among marginalized LGBT individuals, for whom harassment and violence is a constant threat, particularly with regards to transgender individuals. The nature of the informal economies that many of my

informants engaged in was precarious and uncertain, driving followers to cling to the ultimate certainty: Death. For once they learn to confront death with striking physical images such as Santa Muerte, it makes life a bit easier. Death is viewed as a life-enhancing gift, as it calls us to assume that this life is the only one we have, rather than a punishment. According to this logic, Santa Muerte's presence endorses pleasure-seeking behavior in response to a life that could end at any moment. It is a response to the structural circumstances of inequality that does not rely upon institutions like the Catholic Church or Mexican state.

#### **THE POLITICS OF FLUID ICONOGRAPHY AND SPIRITUAL ACCESSIBILITY: SANTA MUERTE AND LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE AS CONFLICTING CANONS**

As a result of the criminalization of Santa Muerte devotion, there have been many instances of law enforcement demolishing her shrines in poor *colonias* throughout Mexico. This crackdown engendered a significant backlash from devotees in 2010, hundreds of which marched in the Mexico City's main square chanting 'We are believers, not criminals'" (Campbell 2010). What the bulk of media attention chooses to ignore about the saint is that not all of her devotees are violent drug traffickers—however, this essentialist notion of Santa Muerte persists because it sells. In fact, the saint has become widely popular among people across the social spectrum, particularly working class families. Jaime Whaley writes:

Bad rumors try to limit the popularity of Santa Muerte [...] that she is the patroness of everyone who deals in things illegal; however, the saint is increasingly venerated by people who make an honest living, proof of which is the number of entire families that come to the prayer meetings.

(cited in Lomnitz 492).

I can confirm Whaley's assertion that Santa Muerte devotion has become a family affair. The essentialist notion of Santa Muerte as a "narco saint" conjures images of a masculinized cult—of rituals performed in private to facilitate violence and revenge. However, during most of my visits to El Santuario, I noticed that most of the individuals filling the pews had come with young children, many of whom played with toys during mass, while a handful would enthusiastically participate in the soul-cleansing rituals.

Given Santa Muerte's widespread reputation for criminality, it is tempting to dismiss her as a "vulgar" foil to the Virgin of Guadalupe, or for some to essentialize the Virgin as a potent symbol of female submission. After all, the class and gender dynamics between these two symbols are often quite apparent. In *Borderlands Saints*, a woman who sells smuggled sneakers in Tepito says that the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, "would not sympathize with a life like hers, caring more about well-off, educated people with nice clothes" (Martín 209). However, as I moved between devotional and commercial spaces dedicated to both of these figures, I discovered that these two brands of devotion were not mutually exclusive. The main altar at the Sanctuary of La Santa Muerte powerfully represented this overlap. Between the Mexican flag and multiple Santa Muertes draped in black and gold cloaks, stood a bright statue of the Virgin Mary (see Figure 1.3). The devotees I spoke to expressed respect towards the Virgin, though it was clear that they were partial to Santa Muerte. For instance, the devotees maintained a degree of distance from the Virgin's statue at the altar, never touching it or puffing smoke in its face—I assume out of respect-- while they appeared to be more comfortable interacting with Santa Muerte. Two different levels of respect are on display here—the reverence one might

exhibit to their grandmother (the Virgen) and the comfort one might exhibit with a favorite Aunt or cousin (Santa Muerte).



Figure 2.3: The main altar at El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte

Santa Muerte devotees paradoxically assign human characteristics and a personality to the figure (as though she is a living being), while also recognizing her as death personified. Santa Muerte and the Virgen de Guadalupe converge in their evocation of life. However, devotees approach these figures' representations of mortality in different ways. Blake describes one example of these approaches in *Chicana Sexuality*

*and Gender*, in which she analyzes a respondent's (Rivera Reyes) view of the Virgen: "Rivera Reyes's conception of La Virgen suggests a model of the ideal self, 'the most beautiful woman ever,' which she strives to achieve [...] In considering La Virgen as a living being, like herself, Rivera Reyes identifies what Irigaray and Anzaldúa consider the divine within oneself" (105). While Santa Muerte emphasizes Death as an incentive to enjoy life's pleasures and support oneself through whatever means, the Virgin serves as an ideal, whose guidance and purity eases one from the transition from death into a reward in the afterlife. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the producer of life, and Santa Muerte is the one who takes it away, reminding devotees of the death within oneself—both a warning of the fleeting nature of life and redemption. In other words, Santa Muerte straddles both life and death— her devotional spaces produce an interactive environment and a preference for actively *confronting* Death rather than merely accepting it.

Due to the dearth of firsthand analysis of Santa Muerte's gender other than her status as an angel, I once again use the Virgin of Guadalupe as a reference point regarding religious iconography and barometer of femininity in the Mexican context. Laura Gutiérrez writes of the Virgen's commercial nature and femininity:

The overwhelming presence of the Virgen de Guadalupe in all forms of commercial objects across the United States and Mexico, as well as in non-commercial makeshift canvases, primarily human skins (tattoos) and static walls (murals), helps one to easily argue that this image is perhaps the most recognizable one associated with *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) and Mexican femininity on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border (31).

While the image of Santa Muerte is viewed as a threat to outsiders, circulating images of the Virgin that deviate from the original image is often considered blasphemy. While

Santa Muerte merchandise circulates similarly, a uniform image of the saint does not exist, and visual personalization of Santa Muerte is encouraged and celebrated, rather than considered blasphemous. “Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Politics of Cultural Interpretation” by Socorro Castaneda-Lliles concisely describes the origins of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s image, while also attesting to her surprising malleability through the work of Chicana feminists. On the surface, the Virgin can appear as nothing more than a symbol of repressed female sexuality and passivity. Sandra Cisneros echoes this sentiment in the beginning of her boldly titled essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess”: “I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture’s role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable” (cited in Castaneda-Lliles 169). Towards the end of the essay, Cisneros describes a transgressive vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as a woman who is sexually empowered and has pubic hair like hers. Despite mainstream feminist assumptions that feminism must take a particular form that does not include “passive” women such as the Virgin, many Chicana feminists have found powerful ways to morph the image in unique ways, as Castaneda observes: “A common thread in Guadalupe discourse in Chicana feminist consciousness is the juxtaposition of Our Lady of Guadalupe’s potential to empower or suppress their own sexuality” (168). A particularly powerful example of this phenomenon is Alma López’s controversial piece *Our Lady* (1999). The women posing as Our Lady, a victim of rape who had suffered from shame and guilt for years, remarked that after she posed for the piece she carried no shame anymore (174). As Lopez’s art demonstrated, interpretations of the Virgin are not as static as commonly believed—yet these transgressive



interpretations of the Virgin are often violently opposed on both sides of the U.S.-- Mexican border.

There is often a vast difference in how Santa Muerte and the Virgin's images are circulated, received, and used. Regarding the controversy that Alma López's exhibition sparked, Gutiérrez observes that the "intense investment in these particular meanings...is revealed by the violence of responses to the contemporary artist's revisioning (34). As we have seen, personalizing an image of the Virgin can be a risky endeavor and blasphemy not only to the Mexican and Mexican-American Catholic communities, but also to the Mexican state. "Sexualizing the Virgen de Guadalupe," Gutiérrez writes, "is the same as de-Mexicanizing the artist" (35). In contrast, much of Santa Muerte's appeal lies in her malleability. This spiritual personification of death flourishes because of her seamless transition between virginal goddess, violent warrior, benevolent mother, scantily clad woman, and seeker of vengeance. "Sometimes it wears a long dress, like a woman, and then you need to tread lightly and fearfully," a devotee remarks to Navarrete, "and other times it appears like a priest [padrecito] saying Mass..." (cited in Lomnitz 489). The main difference here is that users of the Santa Muerte image are encouraged to interact with the figure by providing it with alcohol, touching it, and dressing her how they wish. The experience of visiting a Santa Muerte shrine encourages a tactile, physically intimate experience--the most striking example of this that I encountered was when Diego, the guitarist at the Sanctuary would "share" his tequila by spitting it in the statue's face then puff cigar smoke on her to the same end. The figure, in many ways, is remarkably more accessible than the Virgin. In the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, hundreds file into

the back of the church, where there are moving walkways for the sake of efficiency, and electronic signs reminding visitors not to use their flash as they clutch their smartphones, trying to capture an image of the most significant religious symbol in the America. In contrast, much of Santa Muerte's appeal lies in her accessibility and flexibility. One can approach her, intimately interact, and not be physically monitored.

**PARALLEL FIGURES IN PRECARIETY: JESÚS MALVERDE AND JUAN SOLDADO AS “VICTIM INTERCESSORS”**



Figure 2.4: A small altar to Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde in Colonia Morelos.

The saturation of death in the modern Mexican landscape, aside from the more obvious festive Death associated with Day of the Dead, has created fertile ground for parallel figures such as Jesús Malverde and Juan Soldado emerge. Jesús Malverde often

accompanied Santa Muerte in both commercial and devotional spaces throughout Mexico City, as though he represented her embodied, masculine double (see Figure 1.4). Both of these figures are closely associated with the stories of their deaths and their devotees tend to be marginalized individuals who believe the saints to provide them protection from perilous occupations and living conditions.

Many versions of the Jesús Malverde legend depict him as a sort of bandit Robin Hood figure. Widespread versions of his story describe his body being lynched from a tree by the governor of Sinaloa as punishment for stealing and as a warning to passersby who were considering breaking the law (*Folk Saints of the Borderlands* 40). The image of his body dangling from a tree serves as a mode of control, while also reminding people of their own mortality in an effective and memorable way. Beyond the legend of Malverde's death, little is known about his life, or if he ever actually existed. The same could be said of Juan Soldado, who was accused of raping and murdering an eight year-old girl named Olga Camacho in Tijuana during the 1930s. It is unclear when people began to revere Juan Soldado and believe in his ability to perform miracles, as many of the locals rioted around the time he was arrested, calling for his execution. Shortly after he died, his mother placed a sign by the place where he was killed, asking passersby to say an "Our Father" for her deceased son (Griffith 40-1). Similarly, El Tiradito, a shrine located in one of the oldest Mexican-American neighborhoods in Tucson, is dedicated to "the soul of a sinner buried in unconsecrated ground" (Griffith 105). There are many stories concerning the origin of this shrine, but most of them point to love triangles in which a man was caught sleeping with someone else's wife.

What Jesús Malverde, Juan Soldado, and El Tiradito all have in common is that Griffith refers to them as “‘victim intercessors,’ because they are believed to intercede on behalf of petitioners as saints do, yet nothing is known of their lives save for the fact that they died suddenly and even violently” (Griffith 40). All of these examples demonstrate the malleability of “folk” religion (as there are several different versions of each story), similar to Santa Muerte, and the salience of death in the culture of this border region and in greater Mexico. The folk saints’ deaths become another mode of existence, as they are immortalized through the retelling of their stories. The evolution of these stories mimics life in the sense that it is not static. Of course, the chief difference between Santa Muerte and these figures is that Santa Muerte is more of an abstract, personified version of Death—she does not represent a specific person.

The emphasis on Jesus Malverde, Juan Soldado, and El Tiradito’s deaths aside, while reading Griffith’s work on these figures, it becomes apparent that malleable manifestations of religion serve as a tool for survival, protection, and improving quality of life for those who believe. Examples of how these folk saints are believed to have served as stewards of devotees’ survival and well-being are peppered throughout *Victims, Bandits, and Healers: Folk Saints of the Borderlands*, in which Griffith mentions that he has heard of adolescents who inhabit the storm drains of the border city of Nogales, Sonora and consider Malverde their patron saint. Many of them make a living through drugs, prostitution, and whatever means are available to them (74). Malverde is often associated with those who live on the “dark side” of the law, however, not all of his followers are criminals or desperate children—many are working-class Mexicans.

Griffith describes the story of a young oyster diver who got tangled-up in his rope and was in danger of drowning. In a vision, he saw the face of Malverde, and then freed himself. In return for Malverde's protection, he has helped take care of the chapel in Culiacan for at least eleven years (*Folk Saints* 75). What the "sewer kids" and the oyster diver have in common is that they are drawn to Jesus Malverde because of his perceived ability to protect those who frequently teeter on the edge of life and death and live outside of any mainstream modes of subsistence. The children's occupations make them vulnerable on a regular basis because they put them at risk of violence, starvation, abuse, and disease. The oyster diver's occupation is also perilous because of his regular exposure to drowning and hostile weather conditions. Juan Soldado, Jesus Malverde, and El Tiradito's appeal lies in their flaws, proximity to danger, and perceived victimhood, as these qualities humanize them, even if they never existed. The precarity of these saints and their devotees' lives is similarly reflected in many Santa Muerte devotees. As Lorentzen observes, "Santísima Muerte not only accepts you as you are [...] but she may not even be interested in being worshipped by those who do not dare to live such challenging lives. In this sense, she is only for the worthy, among a population that has historically been deemed unworthy by religious and social norms" (28). While the devotees I interviewed in Mexico City did not share stories of living in sewers or sex work, what they did share were struggles—mainly financial in nature, sometimes involving love, or grief—and a simple desire to get by and enjoy life. Their requests to Santa Muerte that they shared were remarkably common, contradicting the monolithic vision of Santa Muerte devotees either as romanticized "peasants" or Zeta members

seeking a blessing for their latest shipment of heroin. The responses of my informants, in other words, through focusing on financial matters and the pursuit of pleasure, filled-in the gaps between these two extreme portrayals of Santa Muerte petitions.

## CONCLUSION

During my last weekend in the Sanctuary, a group of women inched closer to the main Santa Muerte shrine on their knees, crying and holding each other. I wondered if their display of sorrow was a response to losing somebody. As the women cried before Santa Muerte, I was talked to Juan Carlos on the side, as he tried to convince me to return for the August 15<sup>th</sup> festival. I told him maybe I would, though my bank account said otherwise. Ideas about death followed me throughout my brief research project, and would affect long after I departed Mexico City. “My guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’” Judith Butler writes in *The Precarious Life*, “for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Butler 20). I never made it back to Mexico City, and would soon experience the same devastating experience of loss that the women at the Sanctuary appeared to exhibit. The weekend of the festival, my father passed away at the age of 55, and the “we” that Juan Carlos had always expressed when referring to Saint Death weighed heavily on my mind as I flew to Kentucky to make arrangements.

This chapter has argued, through ethnographic research in Mexico City, that Santa Muerte’s popularity lies in the figure’s malleability, flexibility, accessibility, and an active rather than passive attitude towards death. The figure differs from canonical religious saints

such as the Virgen de Guadalupe in all of these respects. This embodiment of death does not discriminate, and the universal appeal of this message has caused the figure to transcend U.S. and Mexican national boundaries, serving as a powerful spiritual tool for marginalized devotees to move through systems of power.

### Chapter 3: Santa Muerte: Transformation, Embodiment, and the Gender Question

You are the mother of the children, because everything that begins also ends, and everything that lives, dies. We believe in you, because you are just, because you take both the rich and the poor, the young and the old.

*Death and the Idea of Mexico* (Lomnitz 493).

#### DOÑA QUETA AND A CAB RIDE TO TEPITO



Figure 3.1: Doña Queta's Santa Muerte shrine in Tepito.

After spending a routine early Sunday afternoon at El Santuario Nacional de la Santa Muerte in Colonia Morelos, I hail a taxi to Alfarería 12: the most famous Santa Muerte shrine in Mexico City, perhaps the world, located in the heart of nearby Tepito



proper. The cab driver is perplexed when I tell him about my Santa Muerte research, lectures me about rampant theft and crime in the barrio and offers to wait for me while I conduct interviews at the shrine, because the metro is too far away from the site and it will be very difficult to catch another licensed taxi in this area. This is when I am most notably reminded that I am an outsider, that these experiences are all mediated through my middle-class, white, and United States background. I cannot pretend to know everything about my subject, much less that I was an expert in navigating these spaces. I chalk this experience up as ethnographic data, demonstrating the simultaneous accessibility of the Santa Muerte figure and the disorienting nature of Barrio Tepito to outsiders. Contrary to the classic, ethnographic model of the researcher as a “fly on the wall,” the moment I stepped into the taxi, my body participated in an entanglement of scripts constructed about me, about the inhabitants of Tepito, and about Santa Muerte. Of course, this taxi driver wanted to protect me, and perhaps earn some extra money. My twangy Spanish and female body, wearing a cross-body purse messily stuffed with notepads and an unused pink pepper spray keychain, projected a stark vulnerability to this individual. I was visiting the shrine of a saint that many petition to for protection, yet the script that many Mexicans have constructed about this figure and this untouchable collection of city blocks—as *the* epicenter of theft, drugs, and rape in the nation—dictates that I merit concrete protection in the form of this cab driver.

Doña Queta’s shrine on Alfarería 12 is a somewhat compact, yet quite visible space, facing the street. Colorful, mass produced sugar skulls one can purchase in tourist shops from Monterrey to Chichen Itza lined the base of the altar, juxtaposing a more

palatable commodification of death (in this case, Day of the Dead images) with a jarringly realistic Santa Muerte, complete with long, dark locks (see Figure 2.1). The large Santa Muerte statue towered over several smaller Santa Muerte statues, with several framed images of the figure hanging on the sides. A few visitors stopped by to deliver Cokes and multiple loose cigarettes as I approached the altar. In the corner stood a small merchandise stall where nearly every item had the metallic sheen of a newly minted peso. Gold Santa Muerte figurines and candles, as a vendor in Mercado de Sonora once told me, are used for petitions regarding money. The monetization of Santa Muerte, as my ensuing interactions with Doña Queta would demonstrate, are a key factor in the figure's widespread popularity.

Embarrassed about my pricey chaperone, I made a beeline for the merchandise stall at the shrine, where a bored looking older gentleman was sitting at the counter. I asked if I could interview him, then he insisted that I speak to Doña Queta, the matron of the shrine, who is more knowledgeable on the subject. She emerged from the back of the building, an older woman with a thick gray streak in her hair, wearing a checkered blue apron, decorated with countless pieces of jewelry bearing the Santa Muerte's image. I shook her hand, thrilled to finally meet the woman I had read so much about in the slim body of research regarding Santa Muerte. "Shake my hand like you have some balls!" she laughed, then forcefully cupped my hands in hers. When I asked her what she likes the most about Santa Muerte, she gushed, "She is beautiful. The most beautiful saint there is—and I make good money selling her things," as her dangling Santa Muerte earrings swung from side to side. I absorbed the queerness of the scene's attributes—the apparent

matriarchal position of Doña Queta, whose picture hangs behind the central Santa Muerte statue, her essentially telling me to “grow balls,” her insistence that the Santa is a genderless angel (a typical answer), and then gushing about the figure’s beauty. Her frankness regarding the success that Santa Muerte has brought to her modest business—a small, yet potent shrine enveloped in the heart of Tepito, coupled with a shop selling various Santa Muerte merchandise—is not at odds with her devotion. Financial aspirations are a hallmark of Santa Muerte devotion, and selling her merchandise is an example of the image directly benefitting both vendor and purchaser who typically seeks Santa Muerte’s aid with monetary interests in mind. As brief as my visit to the shrine was, meeting Doña Queta seemed as though I was meeting an avatar of La Santa Muerte—a laid back, cursing woman who looks after the community, but also engages in a sort of commercial exchange. Before returning to the cab, I told her it was a pleasure to meet her. She told me she was there every day, and that I could come talk to her whenever I wanted. I could tell that she was accustomed to this sort of encounter—journalists and academics come from all over to visit her. Her openness made me feel ashamed as I climbed back into the cab, snapping back into place.

#### **THE ANGEL OF DEATH IN MERCADO DE SONORA**

If Doña Queta’s modest Santa Muerte stall in Tepito exemplifies the juxtaposition of devotion and monetization of Santa Muerte, Mercado de Sonora, located in the Venustiano Carranza delegation of Mexico City, demonstrated this juxtaposition on a larger scale. The market was a labyrinth housed under a mustard yellow roof, featuring a

large mural of Calaveras, witches, Christmas trees, Frankenstein, the Mexican flag, and sombreros. The periphery was lined with quesadilla and agua fresca vendors, and public restrooms blaring banda music. Men and women dressed as clowns roamed the pavement, especially on Saturdays, trying to make children eyeing the toys laugh. The first layer of the market was saturated with jewelry (such as red “mal del ojo” bracelets), ceramics, and clothing. Then there were children’s toys and party supplies, a brightly covered quilt of Minions, Frozen characters, and stuffed animals made in China—all most likely counterfeit items. The next layer smelled strongly of animal dung. This was where small puppies, kittens, and chicks sat under bright lamps without adequate water while a man with a mullet tried to sell them. Vendors defied market “rules” plastered on the wall regarding the sale of animals right in front of it. The market fostered a strong sense of competition. Several vendors sold similar items, and shouting contests ensued between stalls when courting passersby. “50 Años de Existir Mercado de Sonora” a fading banner bearing the image of Santa Muerte read, indicating a robust network of informal economies that has endured such crises as Mexico in default, resulting in the “Lost Decade” of the 1980s, and the devaluation of the peso in the 1990s. The sonorous sea of entrepreneurship became a contact zone for what Kathleen Stewart, when referencing totalizing systems such as neoliberalism and globalization, refers to as “an immanent force [...] rather than dead effects imposed on an innocent world” (1). Resourcefulness and a drive to make ends meet pulses through the market, a place where one can find whatever they are looking for if they would only ask, even if that is only a 5 peso trip to the restroom or a customized taco on the market’s periphery.

The most important section in the market for my research was the densely populated space of spiritual commerce, located in the far left corner close to the restrooms. As Santa Muerte is often considered a “narco” saint or a saint of the lower classes and is policed by numerous sectors of government, I wondered if this set-up was deliberate. As I navigated the maze of herbs and oils, several vendors shouted “Que buscaba?” and women handed me flyers about the chakras and soul-cleansing services. The scent of herbs, oils, and incense wafted throughout the market. The aisles boasted remedies for several ordinary ailments—such as nausea, financial problems, or a broken heart. One particular stall contained a life-size statue of La Santa Muerte clutching what appeared to be love letter, standing next to what one vendor (who was not a devotee) referred to as her “husband.” In the same stall, one packet of herbs in particular struck me, featuring a woman on top of her male lover, promising “complete dominance over your man.” A desire for quick results, dominance and sexual pleasures fits seamlessly into this line of devotion, as it encourages an active confrontation of the limitations of ordinary existence through pleasure, rather than passively waiting for rewards in an afterlife that may never materialize. Within the parameters of institutional Catholicism, sexual passivity is a virtue, particularly with regards to women and their lack of sexual agency. Rather than characterizing the Catholic Church as a monolithic, controlling entity, I am arguing that the proliferation of figures such as Santa Muerte demonstrates that no one institution can discipline an individual to such an extent that there is no room for agency or varying interpretations. Such petitions represent an earnest belief in Santa Muerte’s powers to resolve ordinary problems, though they are not the types of petitions

one might recite during a formal Catholic Mass before a resounding chorus of “We pray to the Lord.” The genderless Santa Muerte is a fitting outlet to voice romantic and sexual desires to, as the figure does not exhibit any fixed allegiance to normative gender constructions.

Throughout my research in Mercado de Sonora, I encountered several more subtle details regarding Santa Muerte and gender, despite a widespread disinclination for my informants to discuss the topic. My first day at the site, I approached a woman who appeared to be in her twenties, for an interview. She directed me to her neighbor, Jesús. This could have been because she was not a devotee (a common occurrence in the market) or because she assumed that an older male figure would be a more suitable candidate for sharing knowledge about Santa Muerte. Once I got to know Jesús, he invited me to the back of his store for a cigarette as he removed the plastic covering from his latest arrivals (see Figure 3.3). He, like most interviewees, was uninterested in discussing Santa Muerte’s gender, or lack thereof. He was the first devotee to insist that Santa Muerte is an angel that does not have a gender. However, many of the figurines he showed me exhibited overwhelmingly normative feminine characteristics. A few of these figures were pregnant, some wore elegant ball gowns, wedding dresses, and pink. Some appeared more like the grim reaper, wearing black robes and holding a scythe. Lomnitz remarks on the frequency of Santa Muerte figures wearing white gowns: “These are all signs of purity and redemption that contrast with traditional representations of Death as a child of sin and as a messenger rather than redeemer” (406). As Death is depicted as a transformative experience rather than punishment in this context, the same could be said

for the figure's gender, as it varies from peaceful and pure to violent and "masculine." If death comes to everyone, why would it have a gender? It is as though each time death "penetrates" a living being, it changes its gender each time. Further, this "gender" is not necessarily possessed by Santa Muerte, but rather is projected onto the figure. This "projection" could come in the form of a mirror image of the devotee. For example, in Lorentzen's "Devotional Crossings," the author argues that Santa Muerte's feminine form and marginality causes the figure to resemble the transgender women who pray to her (6). Though the author takes Santa Muerte's "femininity" for granted, she describes the appeal of praying to a saint that one can relate to. Santa Muerte represents as a "blank canvas," in this sense, serving as an extension of the devotee's desires. Another example of a devotee projecting gender onto Santa Muerte appears in "Tears, Trauma and Suicide", in which Jones et. al, in observes a community in Puebla that has struggled with violence and drug addiction. One informant, Alvaro, provides a memorable description of his close relationship with "Mother Death:" "Twice I've dreamt of The Virgin [the Santa Muerte]. Once I was drunk. [. . .] she told me that I didn't have to be laying there, that I needed to stand up and go home, that my family was waiting for me. So she gave me money, she said: 'I'm not asking you for anything in exchange, I just want you to stand up and go' (Jones 475). In this example, Santa Muerte exhibits motherly qualities, such as "tough love," and fulfills Alvaro's desire for a spiritual guardian, a Santa Muerte that is presumably female. While Santa Muerte's gender or "personality" may be irrelevant to many, the figure can fill in a gap for the devotee through acting as a mother, a girlfriend, a companion, a business partner—whatever form the devotee wishes.

As my previous observations and examples demonstrate, the Santa Muerte figure itself does not exhibit gender in a direct way—that is to say, none of my informants explicitly labeled her as either male or female. However, a common thread that persists through the figure’s many forms, interpretations, and roles is that Santa Muerte grants devotees something radical that institutional Catholicism does not offer: *permission*. In the figure’s most infamous manifestation, Santa Muerte gives devotees permission to traffic drugs. The figure gives devotees permission to love who or what they want to or identify as a woman when that individual was born a man. It gives devotees permission to embrace sexuality, dancing, cursing, and pursuit of monetary gain. This notion of permission relates to gender because it is something that traditional Catholicism seldom grants to women and LGBT individuals. Perhaps this is why Santa Muerte is often referred to as “La Cabrona”—a reclamation of a gendered insult that demonstrates the appeal of a figure who does not care what one thinks of it. Defiance is a hallmark of Santa Muerte devotion—defiance against living a repressed life, against institutional Catholicism, and the notion that the only suitable “feminine” religious icons are those that exhibit purity and motherhood—and once someone gives themselves permission to defy these socially constructed values, being called a “cabrona” is not offensive—it is empowering.





Figure 3.2: Santa Muerte as a bride in Mercado de Sonora



Figure 3.3: Jesús showing me some of his many Santa Muerte statues in Mercado de Sonora. The multi-colored figure he is holding is multi-purpose (the different colors represent several different types of petitions, such as love or money). The black, veiled statue is pregnant, and the Santa Muerte on horseback is almost warrior-like—the first exhibiting normative feminine characteristics, and the latter representing normative masculinity. These statues represent just a few of the many representations of the “gender fluid” Santa Muerte.

### **GENDERING SANTA MUERTE THROUGH EMBODIED PROCESSES**

In observing how gender works around Santa Muerte commercial and devotional spaces, I saw many women carve-out their own ways against religious and economic structures of power through the malleability of the folk saint. With Doña Queta, for instance, when I visited her shrine in Tepito, the gentleman working at the front counter immediately directed me to her, demonstrating that she was in control of this commercial

and devotional space. She had become somewhat of a local celebrity—journalists and academics from around the world have visited her to learn more about the figure that had transformed her modest business in a marginalized section of the city into a destination. Santa Muerte has empowered several women that I met in Mercado de Sonora to use her image as a resource for upward mobility, even if they are not themselves devotees. Though I did not encounter any women in my research who mentioned working in precarious informal sectors such as sex work, drug dealing, or women who identify as queer or transgender, the saint has a reputation for protecting these women who struggle to navigate the stigma attached to them and the systems of power stacked against them.

While the commercial spaces I visited in Mexico City (Mercado de Sonora, Doña Queta's shrine/tiendita) demonstrated how Santa Muerte can act as an agent of social mobility and female empowerment, the situation at El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte in Colonia Morelos was a bit more nuanced, as it is chiefly a site for worship that maintains a semblance of Catholic gender hierarchies where the clerical authority is granted to men. I never inquired about the men's priesthood status—whether they had ever been ordained as priests by the Catholic Church, or if they worked at another parish besides this unofficial Santa Muerte church, but my hunch was that they did not. The Masses retained the formula of a standard Catholic Mass, including traditional markers such as Communion, the recitation of "Padre Nuestro," and the sign of peace. What is unique about these Masses is the incorporation of Santa Muerte on the altar, in the homilies, and into a ritual blessing portion of the Mass where the priest rubs Santa Muerte candles and oil onto the congregants. The loose replication of the Catholic

mass demonstrates how Santa Muerte and Catholicism are not mutually exclusive, though the latter would refuse to acknowledge a harmonious relationship between the two. What is interesting about this space is where it allows Catholic culture to give. On one hand, the incorporation of a figure that personifies death and accepts “vulgar” behaviors such as premarital sex, drinking, smoking, drug use and cursing, is incredibly transgressive and an example of the figure’s malleability. One might think that the looseness of this structure would embrace female clergy, but for some reason, this is a realm where normative gender roles stick. It is likely that in the face of intense scrutiny of Santa Muerte from outsiders, this particular environment would like to maintain some semblance of familiarity and validity for Catholics who could incorporate Santa Muerte into their spiritual repertoire. While the men said mass, the women kept the church running. I noticed that a large portion of this particular congregation was female. Women greeted devotees at the door to bless their hands with “el aceite de la Santa.” The altar accumulated several offerings throughout the week, particularly perishable food and flowers, but I never saw a dead flower or ants surrounding a rancid quesadilla. Women cleaned, cooked, maintained the shrine, and ran the small store. It is the often overlooked labor of these women that is essential to the survival of faith communities. The reproductive labor, through performance, constructs the Santuario as a normative space in practice, while the general discourse surrounding Santa Muerte often contradicts normative gender roles.

The importance women’s actions, muteness and caretaking abilities in the Santuario rather than traditionally male leadership and speaking roles reminds one of

early examples of women's roles in Christianity. The first two chapters of Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion* theorize the concept of "the mystic" and, to a lesser extent, "religion." He describes the "the mystic" as that which is inexplicable, visible, and ineffable. In the context of medieval Christianity, the church assigned more importance to holy messages provided by literate men rather than the mystic visions of women. Here, men were associated with reason and women with their bodies and senses. While these women may not necessarily be having visions, their contributions to the space of the Santuario are enacted through their essential, yet invisible labor. However, Santa Muerte devotion itself suggests a partial feminization, as its hallmarks could be seen as tapping into the "irrational mystic," a devotion that centralizes on bodily concerns and ritual, while this devotional space maintains normative Catholic gender roles where men are trusted with knowledge and speaking roles and women enable this Church structure to persist. The normative gender roles exhibited in the Santuario reflect in what Judith Butler refers to as the "existential dialectic of misogyny," in which "reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject" (Butler 50). This structure was evident as the female workers I attempted to interview (with the exception of Lupe, an older woman who distributes and sells aceite de La Santa at the entrance of the Santuario) would typically direct me to male informants such as Juan Carlos and a shaman named Carlito, as though they perceived them as the keepers of the knowledge. This also may be a function of traditional Mexican gender values, where women are expected to defer to men in situations of power. Paradoxically,

my analysis rests on a marriage of normative gender roles working around Santa Muerte in this particular space, and simultaneously the figure's lack of gender or gender fluidity.

McDowell observes that women are seen as "closer to nature, as irrational, as polluters, as sacred as inferior because they menstruate and because of their ability to bear children. Men, on the other hand, are seen as civilized, rational, and superior, mind to women's body, even, indeed, unbodied or disembodied" (44). Through exploring the tactile, physical nature of Santa Muerte shrines, we see how Santa Muerte is intimately tied to the interaction of bodies rather than the denial of their physical properties. As thousands visit the incorruptible bodies of saints and laud the purity of several female saints, Santa Muerte, as she paradoxically represents the absence of flesh, allows devotees to embrace pleasures of the flesh. This is memorably reflected in Juan Carlos's assertion in Chapter 2 that Santa Muerte wants us to "drink, dance, and have sex," because life is short. This is oppositional to traditional female gender roles in Catholicism, which encourages female passivity devoid of sexual desire (particularly in the form of Marianism). In a sense, Santa Muerte's acknowledgement of the abject reality of death and embracing a body that is worn down by life's pleasure and precarity is radical.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has demonstrated how one can approach questions of gender regarding a genderless angel through the lens of embodiment, how gender functions in spaces dedicated to Santa Muerte, and analyzes both the disruption and continuation of

normative gender roles in these settings. The trip to Doña Queta's shrine showed how Santa Muerte has provided social mobility to several women and how Tepito and the saint publicly are believed to pose a danger to outsiders. Santa Muerte's presence in Mercado de Sonora exhibited how the saint interacts with informal economies and the customizable nature of the merchandise throughout the market suggests gender fluidity. The section regarding El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte demonstrated the nuance that occurs in a site that functions as a church rather than a tienda, including the persistence of normative gender roles. This chapter has argued that Santa Muerte devotion is full of contradictions and malleability with regards to gender, as the discourse that surrounds Santa Muerte attests to her transgressive nature, while gender continues to function in a more normative manner with Santa Muerte mass settings such as El Santuario.

## **Chapter 4--Santa Muerte: La Cabronita de Tepito**

As a local Tepiteño intellectual has declared: “They want to scare the Mexico City public about Tepito, without realizing that Mexico is becoming the Tepito of the world. Tepito is the synthesis of Mexico.”

*Death and the Idea of Mexico* (Lomnitz 496).

### **THE DISCURSIVE SITE OF TEPITO, COLONIA MORELOS**

It was late May 2015, and various members of my cohort had gathered in La Catedral de Mariscos #2 in East Austin for a friend’s birthday celebration. Anxieties mounting about our upcoming fieldwork, a classmate and I walked outside for a post-meal cigarette to excitedly discuss our impending departures. When I mentioned Tepito and my interest in the production of classed social stigma regarding Santa Muerte, he paused, racking his brain for unsolicited suggestions. “Have you thought about dying your hair black?” he asked, placing the focus on my features and my place in the specter of Tepito, rather than my research itself, as though I could somehow fool others into believing I *belonged* in this space, like an “undercover” journalist in a cheesy action film. This would not be the first, nor the last, frustrating yet well-meaning exchange regarding my research and how I fit into it, from an International Oversight Committee representative urging me to avoid places that “looked poor,” to a fellow graduate student from Mexico City telling me not to wear short skirts while waiting to board a flight from San Antonio. In addition to these personal interactions, the internet provided several cautionary tips for visitors seeking good deals in Tepito’s famous black market. One of these resources was *Chilango.com*, which describes itself as “the ultimate guide to Mexico City and pop culture,” an online



magazine geared towards a middle to upper-middle class, educated audience. The website contains an article titled “Tips para ir a Tepito,” a list of ten suggestions for visiting the neighborhood to find bargains in the neighborhood’s famous black market, which is saturated with goods such as refurbished Apple products to bundle deals for underwear and bras. The article advises shoppers to speak with a “neutral” accent, to keep cell phones hidden because “Instagram can wait,” and to visit between the hours of 10 am and 4 pm. This anticipation and preoccupation with how I disciplined my body in these settings was something I inhabited and confronted throughout my research, disciplining me from various directions except from the actual sites I would visit on a regular basis. This chapter will reflect upon my travel through the discursive layers of Tepito, Colonia Morelos, and their unofficial “patron saint,” which would often place me as an object in the study, as complicit yet critical of the very voyeurism and abundant caution I was there to examine.

The first two chapters of this thesis describe distinct physical sites such as El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte, Mercado de Sonora, and Doña Queta’s shrine in Tepito, Colonia Morelos. This chapter places Santa Muerte in both the discursive and physical sites of Tepito, Colonia Morelos, demonstrating how navigating the durable layers of social aversion attached to these spaces both discursively and physically became a significant labor in my research process. It roots Santa Muerte, a figure that is deeply embedded within the specter of Tepito that is emblematic of the vulgarity, poverty, and violence that is often associated with the barrio.

## **“TEPITO EXISTE PORQUE RESISTE:” SLUM TOURISM CONTEXT**



Figure 4.1: Photo from Adelheid Roosen’s website, creator of the Safari en Tepito concept.

During my stay in Mexico City, I rented a room in a modest apartment in Colonia Navarte from a twenty-something, leftist Mexico City native named Eder, who was deeply involved in volunteer organizations that worked with low-income communities in the city. As I browsed Airbnb months before my departure from Austin, his listing struck me, as the price was affordable, the location well connected, and he would only accept reservations that exceeded two weeks for people who “truly wanted to get to know Mexico City.” His page encouraged potential visitors to see “the other side” of Mexico City, listing numerous attractions that fit his bill, including Lagunilla Tepito. Eder’s apparent preoccupation with “authenticity” and traversing invisible, classed “borders” throughout this mammoth city intrigued me, especially given his firm middle class location of safety in Colonia Navarte. We began to communicate weeks before I arrived, devising vague plans to visit Tepito, Colonia Morelos with his friends. Unfortunately, Eder severely injured his leg the day before I arrived in the contact sport of crossing

Mexico City streets, and would stay with his mother in La Condesa, another comfortable middle/middle-upper class neighborhood, for the majority of my visit. Eder spoke to me primarily in English, a marker of his middle-class, educated background.

Eder would occasionally visit the apartment to check-in with my roommate and me. One afternoon in early June, before I had made my initial trip to Tepito, he hobbled into the common area on his crutches, suggesting that I look into the recent wave of what he referred to as “black tourism” and “Tepitours” in the city. “It’s the type of shit the tourism industry doesn’t want you to see,” he excitedly explained. Despite Eder’s enthusiasm, our thorough internet search yielded zero results as to how one might procure a “Tepitour.” For this type of tour, it seemed, one had to know someone in order to gain access. This inaccessibility marked a sort of unspoken gatekeeping, if not only a lack of internet access, or a general stigma associated with Tepito and tourism.

The dearth of accessible “Tepitours” caused me to lament the fact that I only had time to conduct my brief field work over the summer, as it caused me to miss a popular performance installation-tour by a few months: Safari en Tepito (See Figure 4.1). In response to widespread fascination with Barrio Tepito, Adelheid Roosen, a Dutch artist, conceived of Safari en Tepito: a temporary exhibit offering tours to the neighborhood from February-March 2015. A local theater company, Teatro el Milagro, provided actors for the project who would stay with “adoptive parents” from the barrio for the duration of the project and act-out “typical Tepito scenes” for tourists against the backdrop of local homes and Santa Muerte shrines. These histrionic scenes, as Eder told me, were

frequently the subject of laughter and heckling by several Tepito residents as they watch the reproduction of their neighborhood as a stage. Through a controlled, secure environment, visitors had a chance to contact a mythologized segment of the city that is infamous for crime while also leaving with the satisfaction that they had partaken in something forbidden and “exotic,” even if these tourists were from Mexico City themselves. In addition to this satisfaction, visitors could take home t-shirts that read “Tepito Existe Porque Resiste”—aligning the barrio with a sexy resistance against middle-class values and romanticized piracy and poverty. While this project demonstrated an attempt to temporarily lift the stigma of the barrio, depicting the complex history of the neighborhood and its lively black market as points of interest, the name of the tour creates no naïve illusion that this place is “just like their neighborhood.” For instance, one could assume that a visit to Coyoacán, through its art museums, gated driveways housing imported cars, and Frida Kahlo’s blue house, hardly qualify as a “safari.” The use of the term “safari” carries significant baggage, reifying the notion that Tepito is a wild, lawless place, whose inhabitants are irrational, vulgar, and uneducated, like animals. Fittingly, “irrationality,” vulgarity, and superstition are very common critiques of Santa Muerte devotion.

#### **“I AM NOT GUILTY OF WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT ME”**

Two weeks into my fieldwork, my partner visited and uneasily accompanied me to browse the market and chase potential Santa Muerte leads in Tepito one Sunday afternoon. I repeatedly offered him sips of a michelada as big as my face to take the edge off. Weaving through the thick crowd, I scoured stalls that might capture his interest—

counterfeit *Adventure Time* merchandise, pirated DVDs—anything to alleviate his visible anxiety. My michelada beckoned me to a public restroom, where he finally decided to browse a large selection of handsome leather belts. Following his belt transaction, I was itching to be productive and popped the question: “It’s getting late in the afternoon, can we please walk to Alfarería 12? Or take a cab?” I pulled-out my crudely written directions in a false display of confidence, and for a few minutes, he obliged. We inched to the outskirts of the market, landing on a street corner facing an empty street with a small elementary school in the distance, and it was clear that the durable reputation of crime in the neighborhood had activated an acute sense of trauma in him. A native of Monterrey, he recalled the multiple times he had been robbed in broad daylight in his city during peak drug war violence, and his friends who resided in Mexico City telling him not to visit Tepito, because in a best-case scenario, he would be robbed. As with many attempts to explore Santa Muerte, this interaction placed me back at square one—framing Santa Muerte through the lens of narco and random violence. He had even lied to his mother about the day’s activities, telling her that we would spend the afternoon in the Centro and Mercado de Sonora. We argued about logistics until I was on the verge of tears, as the sky dimmed and we approached Chilango.com’s cutoff time for acceptable hours to visit Tepito. “Maybe I should just find someone else to go with me,” I spat, and he agreed. The incident would mark not only my first significant altercation with my partner, but one of many moments that would dampen my confidence in my research. The durable specter of Tepito was so powerful it had incited minor conflict in a personal

relationship, indicating how navigating negative affective responses or even trauma would unintentionally become a significant labor in the research process.

My preoccupation with finding “the” Santa Muerte shrine (Doña Queta’s shrine on Alfarería 12) that day had caused me to initially overlook the wealth of texts before me. Around the corner from where my partner and I had engaged in a brief argument stood an elaborate Santa Muerte altar. A short woman who appeared to be in her twenties opened a pack of Delicados, inhaled a few puffs, then perched the remainder of the lit cigarette on the altar’s tile ledge. Having left my cell phone and camera at home (because, as Chilango.com advised, “Instagram could wait”), I scribbled furiously once the devotee finished her intimate interaction with the altar. I noticed a familiar collection of items typically found in Santa Muerte altars—chicharrón, cigarettes, candy, flowers, red delicious apples, and virtually every alcohol one could think of—beer, tequila, mescal, and whiskey. Upon further inspection, I discovered a generous offering beneath the statue: a glass ashtray containing a few seedy, stale-looking marijuana nuggets. Behind the center statue there was a painting of a woman holding a giant basket of bread in front of shelves of skeletons and skulls. The Santa Muerte statue at the center wore black robes with gold embroidery, cradling a baby in black swaddling clothes. A framed photo of a young man who looked to be in his late teens or twenties and Jesus looking over him sat between bottles of liquor. Here, Santa Muerte was visually exhibiting a maternal quality one might readily associate with the Virgin. I speculated that this maternal vision of Death comforting a child and its juxtaposition with the young man’s photo indicated that this altar was a memorial of sorts. Further, the overlap of a Death

that is motherly and nurturing, while simultaneously embracing habits often deemed “vulgar” demonstrates the permissive nature of Santa Muerte devotion, and how the figure fulfills certain devotees’ needs for a guardian that reflects their truths and vices, rather than the lofty feminine ideals that figures such as the Virgin of Guadalupe represent. On the other side of the concrete-encased altar, a bright mural of Santa Muerte faced the street. This positioning seemed strategic, as the mural featured a “letter” to passersby:

To those who do not believe in me  
I write this letter to you  
So you don’t insult me  
And don’t judge me  
Since I am one more work (*sic*)  
Of your creator  
I am not guilty  
Of what they say about me  
If that bothers you  
Remember I am the Spirit of Light  
That leads you to Jesus Christ

-1/Nov. 2014 (translation, mine)<sup>2</sup>

This letter conveys a very defensive tone, and it seems that whoever commissioned this mural was tired of defending their devotion against outsiders’ criticisms of Santa Muerte.

Written in first person, the mural seemed to argue that Santa Muerte is very

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<sup>2</sup> Original Spanish version: “A tí que no crees en mí / Te escribo / Esta carta / Para que no / Me no insultes / Ni me juzquez / Más de tú creador / Yo no soy culpable / De que me / Digan / Si es que / Te molesta / Recuerda yo / Soy el espíritu / de luz que te / lleva a Jesu Cristo”

misunderstood, like Barrio Tepito, and is often essentialized as criminal and violent. The lines “I am not guilty / Of what they say about me” call a number of accusations to mind, such as the widespread belief that all Santa Muerte devotees are thieves and murderers. The mural then appeals to Christianity by insisting that Santa Muerte (and presumably, death as a general reality) is just one of the many works of God, but she is special because she represents the agent that delivers one to Jesus in the end. The message that Santa Muerte is death personified is relatively straightforward: death is a fundamental reality of human existence, therefore, one cannot think about God without thinking about death. Despite this, many outsiders continue to view Santa Muerte with fear and critique the phenomenon as an elaborate, irrational superstition.

The Tepito mural, as an ethnographic text, exhibited Santa Muerte devotees’ agency in the face of pervasive stigma and fear of the figure—a text that I, coincidentally, stumbled upon after having an intense argument with my partner regarding safety in her presence. It was a stigma that I was highly critical of, yet ultimately involved in. It was this fear and caution that had caused me to leave my iPhone and camera in my room, preventing me from taking a picture of this significant mural. This stigma aside, Santa Muerte’s message was hauntingly inclusive. It essentially assured passersby “You may discriminate me, but I will not discriminate against you,” a statement that conjures images of Santa Muerte escorting her critics into the afterlife. In this sense, Santa Muerte quite memorably “gets the last word.”



## CONCLUSION

In previous chapters, I have greatly stressed the flexibility *within* Santa Muerte devotion itself—the malleability of her image, a flexibility with regards to gendered interpretations, the permissive nature of the figure, and a brand of devotion that merges the impending reality of death with the here and now. However, all of this talk of flexibility juxtaposes with the relatively fixed, durable layers of social aversion that characterize most outside interpretations of Santa Muerte and the neighborhood where she thrives—greater Colonia Morelos and its most infamous section, Barrio Tepito. This chapter was necessary to my thesis because an analysis of Santa Muerte in the context of Mexico City is incomplete without rooting the figure in a neighborhood that is popularly characterized by fear, piracy, violence, and vulgarity. One might argue that this approach comes too late, as providing geographic and discursive context for negative depictions of Santa Muerte seems like an important place to start, rather than end, my argument. However, I prefer an inside to outside approach, as an important feat I faced in this project was bringing Santa Muerte and her devotees' truths into the foreground. The layers of social aversion to both Santa Muerte and Barrio Tepito, Colonia Morelos I had to navigate rendered me a reluctant ethnographic subject. Excluding the cautionary measures I took in my field work and my peers' inclination to criticize my field site rather than discuss my chief research questions would be a disservice to this thesis, because all of these factors reinforce the persistent specter of Santa Muerte and Tepito, which is why I chose to pursue this research in the first place. I would not argue that I

ever fully penetrated the murky layers of negative discourse that surround both Santa Muerte and Tepito, as the many precautions I took rendered me complicit in both the voyeurism and fear that I examine, but instead I use these layers as a vantage point to indicate just how powerful the specter of Tepito remains in the Mexican popular imagination.

## **Conclusion: Constructing Lives through Petition**

My last day in Mexico City, I was standing in the entrance of Museo de Leon Trotsky, a small residence where Trotsky temporarily resided and was killed while in exile from Russia. It was forty five minutes until closing time, and I filed behind fellow stragglers examining photos of the revolutionary leader in a hospital moments after his attack, his head wrapped in bloody gauze and eyes glued shut. I walked to the study where he was quietly assassinated, examining the open books on the ledge of the desk, and a faded map of Mexico. The courtyard housed a small fountain, full of glimmering pennies and pesos—small investments, it seemed, in wishes and hope. I thought about the power of death to erect places and their public significance, whether it was in the form of a museum where a public figure died, or a small cemetery overgrown with weeds. I thought, further, about the morbid curiosity and voyeurism that death inspires in people, such as the urge to visit the very room where a revolutionary was painfully and slowly killed over political disagreement. Finally, I tossed one of my few remaining pesos into the fountain, thinking about how I had spent two months observing private petitions in action at various Santa Muerte shrines. Petitions are everywhere—and the hope that they represent, whether it comes in the form of tossing a penny into a public fountain or placing a lock of hair at a Santa Muerte shrine, illustrate the myriad ways in which the ephemerality of life inspires us to latch onto symbols and beliefs that encourage us to build lives worth living. Sometimes, it would seem, I was not just conducting research on Santa Muerte. I was reflecting upon the undisputed reality of life and death, and the

behaviors that this fact inspires in people. In the case of Santa Muerte, the attitude seemed to be “bring it on.”

This use of Santa Muerte as a survival strategy in the face of impending death would figure prominently in my first and second chapters. The hospitality that many of my respondents exhibited and their openness to share their ideas regarding Santa Muerte, including how she had provided them a vehicle for social mobility and had encouraged them to embrace earthly pleasures, solidified my view that many Santa Muerte devotees were so willing to share their truths precisely because they had been marred and sensationalized by popular culture, stories about the drug wars, the media, and police. Many Santa Muerte devotees inhabit precarious petitions, and the ephemerality of life ultimately draws devotees to spiritually efficient figures such as Santa Muerte, as many not have the time to sit and wait for rewards in an afterlife that may never materialize when death and poverty are constantly looming threats and/or realities. This focus on mortality demonstrates how, while crafting relationships with La Santa Muerte as a particular angel or saint is important to many individuals, La Santa Muerte figures prominently as an *approach* or a tool in navigating human realities rather than a deity to be worshipped. In other words, while it may appear that many devotees are *worshipping death*, often they are clinging to a figure that mirrors their hopes in life and provides them with the tools for *confronting* death.

Aside from providing devotees a framework for confronting death, Santa Muerte appeals to many because of her immense possibilities for personalization. The Virgin of

Guadalupe serves as a useful reference point for contrast, as her image is relatively fixed and reproductions that deviate from the original are considered blasphemous and are often met with fierce opposition. In contrast, Santa Muerte's malleable nature is part of what makes the figure so popular. Choosing a figure that mirrors one's identity and pleasures is not considered a contamination, but rather an enhancement of the figure. This is particularly true with regards to gender, as Santa Muerte does not fit into normative gender constructions, which is part of why she has become so popular among LGBT individuals. This malleability, however, often opens the door for myriad contradictions within Santa Muerte devotion. While Santa Muerte's nature is not fixed and many celebrate her transgressive approach to normative gender and religious values, sites such as El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte demonstrate how even in the shadow of such a permissive figure, normative gender constructions persist *around* the figure, where women engage in most of the reproductive labor and the men conduct Mass.

As both my introduction and final chapter indicate, the overwhelming layers of social aversion and fear that surround Santa Muerte and the urban neighborhoods where she thrives would serve as both a starting and an end point for my thesis. The sensationalism attached to both Santa Muerte and Barrio Tepito, Colonia Morelos was the main reason I chose to spend time getting to know Santa Muerte and what makes her appealing to a small sampling of devotees. However, in order to achieve this, I would have to navigate the enduring layers of social stigma that Santa Muerte and Tepito inspire, and would feel lost many times along the way. As the structure and content of my thesis would show, this journey was anything but linear—often, I would find myself a

victim of the very fear I was there to look past, and often felt stuck in this state, like I had returned to square one.

### **FUTURE POSSIBILITIES**

Shortly after returning to the United States, I visited my sister in the compact university town of Oxford, MS. One Sunday morning after eating breakfast, we browsed an antique mall for a new dresser. As we scoured the maze of dusty Coca Cola memorabilia and pastel, faded still lifes, I spotted a blue Santa Muerte candle perched on top of a handsome black dresser that resembled one of the mass-produced candles I had purchased from Fiesta for my “archive.” I joked to my sister that Santa Muerte was following me, a menacing reminder of impending deadlines. I share this quotidian anecdote to illustrate Santa Muerte’s migration and widespread dispersal across the United States. I also share this story to show how I am not finished with Santa Muerte—or, rather, Santa Muerte is not finished with me. The frustrating thing about research, and ethnographic research in particular, is that it often reminds one of how little they know. Within this imaginary zone of “the field,” one constantly pursues—and often overlooks—openings that can lead to a deeper understanding of their project, while raising infinite new questions. I would often lament that two months was too short a period of time to establish powerful ties with respondents and gain a rich understanding of my topic. Many people come to mind that I wish I had talked to, or had talked to more. However, this thesis is not the end. While the realization that such an investment of time in research can yield so many unanswered questions is humbling and unpleasant, it is also liberating as it opens the doors for future possibilities and projects.

One of these projects that I would like to pursue in the future concerns religious freedom—the construction of what religious freedom entails, and who reaps its benefits. However, as recent news has shown, one’s religion can often criminalize them in the eyes of the law, and this is apparent from the heavy policing of Santa Muerte devotees. Throughout the United States, particularly in the Deep South, state legislatures have been churning-out so-called “religious freedom bills” that essentially promote legally sanctioned discrimination (particularly against LGBT individuals) in businesses, employment practices, and courthouses in the name of protecting religious freedom. As I write this, the governor of my home state of Mississippi just signed one of these bills into law, and it will be interesting to see who merits “religious freedom” in the execution of this law, and who remains marginalized as this “freedom” morphs into a mode of control. With religious freedom and police surveillance in mind, I hope to explore not just how Santa Muerte fits into this language of “religious freedom” in the United States, but also parallel figures such as Jesús Malverde, who also have a reputation for inciting social aversion and are often associated with drug cartels.

As this project has taught me, in the simplest of terms, life is incredibly short. I have several itches left to scratch, many of which are academic in nature, and I look forward to the day that I can return to Mexico City and track down Alfonso Hernández, an unofficial historian of Tepito and tour guide, or spend more afternoons talking to Doña Queta without having to worry about the supervision of a taxi driver. But, as the saying goes, I would also like to “have a life.” As Juan Carlos once insisted—I should enjoy a

cold Indio, or maybe get off the couch and flail my arms about in an attempt to “dance”--  
Santa Muerte’s orders.



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