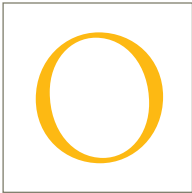


“We Will All Look Like This Someday”

Santa Muerte in Mexico City

by KATHRYN McDONALD



OVER THE PAST decade, La Santa Muerte, an unofficial Mexican skeletal saint, has prompted the curiosity of journalists, law enforcement, and popular culture in the United States and Mexico. 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*, or cloak, 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 reign of violence that has resulted from Mexico’s War on Drugs. 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 on an episode of *Breaking Bad* (“The Cousins”) portrays Mexican drug cartel members placing an iconic drawing of their meth-dealing rival, “Heisenberg,” at a Santa Muerte shrine, presumably petitioning for revenge. In the midst of all of this sensationalism, it seemed to me that several aspects of Santa Muerte devotion were overlooked.

La Santa Muerte in Context

I first met Santa Muerte in 2011, through the tinted windows of a twelve-passenger van, as an undergraduate spending a semester in the Yucatán Peninsula with eleven other Millsaps College students. Our driver signaled toward a large, skeletal statue on the side of the road. “La Santa Muerte,” he remarked, “she’s very popular right now.” The image of this tall, grim-reaper-esque statue cloaked in gold, nestled between Yucatecan hammocks and Chac Mool figurines, stuck with me for years. I spent the past summer researching Santa Muerte’s presence in Mexico City, concentrating on shrines and commercial spaces in Tepito, Colonia Morelos, and el Mercado de Sonora. I chose this topic for my thesis because I was troubled by the popular narrative of Santa Muerte as merely a “narco saint,” and by the fear that the figure inspires in people. The story I intend to tell is how Santa Muerte, a 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, or the intersections of all of these factors), and social mobility. 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, sexuality, wealth, empowerment, recovery, addiction, revenge, life, and death, to name a few. The figure’s flexibility and its followers’ attitude toward death, demonstrate Santa Muerte’s appeal as a spiritual tool, particularly for marginalized segments of Mexican society. In this light, Santa Muerte transcends the traditional sense of *religion*, and is instead a highly adaptable tool for combatting the inevitable force of death.

Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (2005) 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” (23–23). While approaches to mortality are essential to any discussion of Santa Muerte, the figure is often conflated with traditions such as Day of the Dead and Posada’s *calaveras* (most notably La Calavera Catrina). Given the vast commodification of Posada’s work and Day of the Dead imagery in both Mexico and the United States, this confusion is not surprising. Desirée Martín notes that with increased urbanization and aspirations of social mobility, many in Mexico have abandoned the Día de los Muertos tradition. Many Santa Muerte devotees do not celebrate Day of the Dead, at least not in the traditional sense. Martín remarks:



Santa Muerte dressed as Catrina.

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. (2014, 186)

Martín challenges her audience to look beyond the ubiquity of death imagery and more deeply at a national context saturated with death that makes a figure such as Santa Muerte possible. In addition to dangerous border crossings, drug war casualties, and femicides, the recent disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa,

Guerrero, 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 to understand the significance of death in the contemporary Mexican landscape. This “saturation of death” that I refer to has provided fertile ground for the emergence of figures such as Santa Muerte.

El Santuario Nacional de la Santísima Muerte

El Santuario Nacional de la Santísima Muerte, located in Colonia



Mercado de Sonora.

Morelos, was my primary field site. The sanctuary houses a robust, multi-aged, mixed-gender congregation, many of whom are working-class. One Sunday afternoon, Juan Carlos, a priest with whom I spoke regularly, enthusiastically reminded the congregants of the upcoming festival honoring the fifteenth anniversary of La Santa Muerte's apparition at the Sanctuary, formerly known as "the Chapel of Mercy," on August 15. They would march from the Sanctuary to the Zócalo, where there 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* tarps. "*Cuidado*," he insisted, and I thought of all of the stories I had heard about police destroying Santa Muerte shrines near the U.S.-Mexican border, hundreds of miles away.

"I want one of those," I told the shop-owner at the Sanctuary, pointing at a candle held by a man who was being spun around by a priest, getting his *alma* cleansed. She sold me a multicolored candle for 15 pesos, carved a star into the candle, sprinkled it with "the oil of Santa Muerte" as well as 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, chicharrones, 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 smoke 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 ached from spending several nights in \$12/night Airbnb accommodations. He spun me around, told me to open my eyes and look up at la Santa, and ask her for whatever I wanted. La Santa Muerte 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.

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 Lois Ann Lorentzen writes, "In a kind of homeopathic way, Santísima Muerte injects just enough death to ward away its coming" (2010, 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



Santa Muerte as a bride in the Mercado de Sonora.



Main shrine at El Santuario Nacional de La Santísima Muerte in Colonia Morelos, Mexico City.

enjoys whatever they do, and they use her as their mirror image—because to be alive is to die. The figure blurs the line between life and death, the line between self and Santa Muerte.

With all of these discussions regarding death, 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 was 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.

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 hung over, and now 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 said: “Because life is short?” “Exactly,” he replied. The ephemerality of life resonates with Santa Muerte devotees, as many live precarious lives

in which death figures prominently. For instance, the figure has a sizable following among the marginalized LGBT community, for whom harassment and violence are a constant threat, particularly in the case of 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, rather than a punishment, as it calls us to assume that this life is the only one we have. 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 the Mexican state.

Conclusion

Ideas about death would affect me long after I departed Mexico. As Judith Butler writes in *The Precarious Life*, “all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (2006). Many devotees and merchants whom I interviewed appeared to have been grappling with this in their views concerning Santa Muerte. For while it may appear that devotees are *worshiping* death, often they are clinging to a figure that mirrors their hopes and fears in life and provides them with the tools for *confronting* death.

I never made it back to Mexico City. The weekend of the Santa Muerte festival, my father passed away at the age of 54, and the “we” of loss, and of Saint Death, weighed heavily on my mind as I flew to Kentucky to make arrangements.

This research has reminded me that life is incredibly short. I have several things I hope to accomplish in the near future, and I look forward to the day when I can return to Mexico City and spend more time with devotees. But, as the saying goes, I would also like to “have a life.” As Juan Carlos once insisted, I should enjoy a cold beer, or maybe get off the couch and flail my arms about in an attempt to “dance”—Santa Muerte’s orders. ☀

Kathryn McDonald recently earned a master of arts from the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and plans to apply for doctoral programs in the fall. This article is based on her master’s thesis research, which was presented at the 36th ILASSA student conference.

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