

Panel 15: Faith and Spiritual Nourishment

Moderator: Joycelyn K. Moody

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On the Gender of Death and Bones: Popular Culture and the Identity of Santa Muerte

Since the early 2000s, images and shrines devoted to the Santa Muerte started to mushroom all across Mexico. Santa Muerte is a folk saint believed to be protector of criminals, drug traffickers, prostitutes, street vendors and single mothers. “Everybody is welcome”, say the altar keepers on the sexual and gender identities of the devotees. Transexual women and men, as much as same- sex couples have found a patron saint in Santa Muerte. In fact, the gender identity of Santa Muerte is as diffuse and fluid as that of the devotees: Santa Muerte is often presented as a protective mother, some kind of inversion of the iconic Virgen de Guadalupe, or as a sensual young woman. Yet, Santa Muerte possesses attributes and powers believed to belong to men.

Although popular religion has historically included some degree of sexual/gender anomaly, Santa Muerte is, as a cultural icon, representative of a larger process. This paper demonstrates the extent the devotion to Santa Muerte challenges dominant perceptions of gender and sexual identity, and the way sexual diversity is portrayed in the popular culture of contemporary Mexico.

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