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REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH IN MEXICO:  
LA SANTA MUERTE

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*Muerte Querida de mi corazón, no me desampares de tu protección.  
(Dear Death of my heart, don't forsake me from your protection).*

*Prayer to Santa Muerte*

*I don't know if God exists, but death yes...Death is stronger than life, as she puts an end to it. In view of a lack of meaning of life, there is an excess of meaning of death.*

*Testimonies of Santa Muerte devotees from Tepito<sup>1</sup>*

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The devotion to Santa Muerte or Holy Death is a new phenomenon, currently happening in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and the “Greater Mexico” in the USA. It seems to have started in the *colonia* Tepito in Mexico City in mid-twentieth century (1940s-1960s), as a private cult, which spread widely about twenty years ago, and reached an unprecedented popularity in the past ten years.

Santa Muerte is generally portrayed as a skeleton wearing a Franciscan monk’s cape, in a standing posture, or sometimes seated at a throne, with a scythe in her right hand and the earth or the scale in her left. She can also carry a candle, a book, or a spade, and is often accompanied by an owl, by seeds, and by coins. In addition, a particular Santa Muerte statue I acquired at the Mercado de Sonora in Mexico City in 2009 contains an image of Jesus on the cross, the Holy Ghost as a dove, pieces of “gold,” a lucky four-petal trefoil, and a horseshoe. Her scythe is adorned by a skull and a rose. Following the baroque logic of syncretic devotions, the more super-imposed symbols an object contains, the greater its power. Variations to her outfit include a Virgin Mary-like robe and veil, a girl’s first communion dress, or bride’s gown, an “Aztec” Santa Muerte, and a seven-colored one, among others, depending on the occasion and petition. On some images, her scythe is portrayed in the form of a human spine.

Public altars in Mexico have special persons in charge of caring for the figure, and often godfathers or *padrinos* that support them, they are regularly cleaned and renewed, and La Flaquita’s clothes are changed every month, as the Virgin Mary’s robes are changed in the Catholic tradition. La Santita is often adorned with long hair, jewelry, a crown, and in some places there is a tendency to her dulcification, as in the Iglesia Tridentina of self-proclaimed archbishop Romo, where she was re-named as The Angel of Death (El Angel de la Muerte), or by the influence of Santería in Veracruz, where she seems to have merged with the *orixá/oricha* or goddess Iemanjá/Yemayá from Brazilian Umbanda/Cuban Santería, where she is represented by a beautiful white young

woman, called The White Flower of the Universe (La Flor Blanca del Universo) or The Young Encarnated Death (La Joven Muerte Encarnada).<sup>2</sup>

Offerings to Santa Muerte include *veladoras* (votive candles), statuettes, flowers, incense, fruits, sweets, smoking cigars and cigarettes, as well as alcohol. Devotees often blow tobacco smoke on her in a sign of blessing, and kiss and touch her glass case at Enriqueta Romero’s altar. If they are lucky they can also touch her robe from an open side. These rituals, as well as the main two colors—red and black—evoke the devotion of the Roma at the Saint Sara-La-Kâli subterranean altar at Les Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer in southern France;<sup>3</sup> the cigars and alcohol, as well as the colors are reminiscent of Pombagira from the Umbanda religion in Brazil. Santa Muerte is portrayed in various forms and colors that have symbolic significance and are connected to the intention of the person’s offering. Usually she is represented by a statuette or even a human size statue, a candle, an *escapulario* (scapulary), medallion, trinket, ring, bracelet, or tattoo; she is portrayed on paintings and graffiti, as well as on various products such as T-shirts, incense, perfumes, oils, soaps, and aerosols. Her statue can be made of diverse materials, such as plaster, wood, bone, plastic or polyresin. The colors are red—for love, passion, and relationships, white—for purification, black—for and against black magic, the elimination of negativity and total protection, violet—for health and transmutation, gold or yellow—for money and prosperity, blue—for spiritual concentration and studies, and green—for legal problems and justice.

There are also variations, such as a Santa Muerte fully covered in dollar bills, La Flaquita as the Virgin of Guadalupe, and other “new” colors, such as amber—for the healing of drug addictions and alcoholism, brown—for enlightenment and wisdom, and rose—to reinforce love. Popular are also seven-color images and candles that encompass all of the above attributes, called La Santa Muerte de los Siete Poderes (Saint Death of the Seven Powers),<sup>4</sup> or Las Siete Muertes (Seven

Deaths), powers embodied in the different color energies that have a positive effect on work, health, loyalty, understanding, fortune, and forgiveness.

On a made in Mexico votive candle I acquired at a San Antonio *botánica*, the disposition of six different color La Flaquita images placed around a main one called Santa Muerte is very similar to a visual arrangement from Santería. The new Santa Muerte candles are most likely derived from the notion of Las Siete Potencias Africanas (Seven African Powers) from Afro-Cuban Santería, which portray seven saints syncretized with seven orichas or African Yoruba gods, namely Changó, Ochún, Yemayá, Obatalá, Orula, Ogún, Eleguá, placed around Jesus Christ or Olofi. Although in Texas Santería candles, as well as other unofficial saints' ones, such as Niño Fidencio, and even the "Reverse" black and red candle can be bought at any *botánica*, Hispanic neighbourhood *bodega* (grocery store), and even at the giant supermarket chain HEB, Santa Muerte candles have been removed from the latter. There is an increasing influence from Regla de Ocha or Santería in Mexico, especially on the Veracruz coast, which spread to other places such as Mexico City.

It is necessary to add that although some of her characteristics are rather stable, Santa Muerte is a living cult and, as other popular syncretic devotions, she is multivalent and in constant flux. Therefore, her attributes may change from place to place and from one time to another, as she is a depositary of human creativity and changing social circumstances. Devotees have appropriated La Santa Muerte and make her serve them in the way they want to be served, rather than obeying a fixed prescription imposed from above. If the Santita does not fulfill their wishes, she may be punished by placing her upside down, by burying her, or by taking away her hand until she fulfills the devotee's wishes, as other colonial saint statues were and continue to be treated by the populace.

This may also be the reason why Doña Enriqueta's center in Mexico City seems to be more

popular than that of Archbishop David Romo. Curiously, the majority of Santa Muertistas consider themselves of the Roman Catholic Faith and they incorporate her in their devotion as another saint, albeit the most powerful of them. She is often considered the messenger of God, his wife, or the Holy Spirit. Conversely, the Catholic hierarchy does not accept the devotion to Santa Muerte as part of their faith. We have to remember that as many Latin American religions, the Santa Muerte devotion is syncretic and borrows heavily from Catholicism, as well as other unorthodox cults.

This is visible in the liturgy that follows the Catholic model. The rosaries, masses, altars, and prayers for her are modeled on and accompanied by Catholic prayers, such as Hail Mary, Our Father, and Glory Be. Her names are even more varied and abundant than the colors, and they are in constant creation. Some examples are Mi Niña Blanca, La Madrina, La Doña, La Jefa, La Santa Niña, La Señora, La Flaca, La Flaquita, La Huevuda, La Calaca, La Dama Poderosa, La Comadre, Santísima Muerte, La Santita, Mi Rosa Maravillosa, La Hermana Blanca, and Mi Niña Guapa. Sometimes people give her human first names, such as Esperanza. Her altars may be fixed, as those in households, businesses, penitentiaries, and on the streets, or mobile, as in the case of ambulant vendors and carros de la muerte, or semi-mobile, such as on trucks, buses, or taxis. On her altars she may appear alone, or accompanied by Jesus, the Virgin Mary, a Buda, or an owl, among others.<sup>5</sup>

Although Santa Muerte acquired "bad press" through the media, as a pseudo-saint of *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) and other delinquents, her devotion is very widely spread among "normal" mortals, such as housewives and other working people. Nevertheless, her bad name requires a separate mention, as she is also found on *narcoaltares* (drug altars) belonging to high profile drug traffickers. In such a role is presented in Homero Aridjis' novel, *La Santa Muerte*, which describes a twenty-four hour celebration of the fiftieth birthday of a Mexican capo. In the book,

there is one chapter devoted to a Santa Muerte ceremony where, beside drug traffickers, ecclesiastical, civil and army dignitaries, as well as entertainment world stars are present, and which includes human sacrifice. Although this type of manifestation is the one that can most often be found in sensationalistic press articles, TV news, or soap operas, this does not seem to be the main aspect of the cult, which is individual and spontaneous, and pertains to people from all walks of life.

Currently, among hundreds of places of devotion, there are two main focal points of the cult in Mexico City. One in *colonia* Tepito in front of the home of Enriqueta (Queta) Romero, where she first publically displayed a life-size statue of La Flaquita in November 2001, and started a public rosary ceremony every first of the month, in 2009;<sup>6</sup> and the Iglesia Tradicional México-Estados Unidos, Misioneros del Sagrado Corazón y San Felipe de Jesús in the nearby *colonia* Morelos, led by its self-proclaimed archbishop, David Romo, where Santa Muerte is called Angel de Luz, Angel de Dios, or Angel de la Muerte, and Amabilísima Madre, among others. In this center, masses, rosaries, pilgrimages as well as weddings, baptisms, and confirmations are performed. They also established the first national holiday devoted to Saint Death on August 15, the same day when Catholics celebrate the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The Mexican Secretaría de Gobernación (Ministry of the Interior) revoked the permit to this church in 2005, alleging that they deviated from their original goals, perpetrating infractions to the Religious Associations Law.<sup>7</sup>

Both centers profess the adoration of Santa Muerte, but they approach it in different ways. The Parroquia de la Misericordia follows the Trent Holy Mass established by Pope Pio V, which was abandoned by Catholic Church in 1969, after Second Vatican Council. This devotion differs in some aspects from the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, and is not accepted by it, as since 2002 the Iglesia Tradicional includes Santa Muerte worship. Besides these two centers of devotion, all of

Mexico, the border with the USA, and other countries on the American continent, especially those directly to the north or south of Mexico, also have many places of worship of Santa Muerte. Her omnipresence has been reinforced by the transnational migrations and by the electronic media, pertinent to the postmodern world in which she originated. Her cult is mostly individual and heterogeneous but in Mexico it is also subject to numerous public displays, and is highly commercialized. I was recently surprised during a visit to the *Botánica Papa Jim's*, which is a huge religious goods supermarket in the Hispanic West Side neighborhood of San Antonio, Texas, to find among the myriad of aisles with different kinds of products, Santa Muerte statues and candles dominating the space. Her representations included a central altar with a seated La Madrina statue where diverse offerings were placed. In contrast, there were only a few small Virgin of Guadalupe icons, not very visible to the public.

I found a similar situation in other religious stores in San Antonio that include La Niña Blanca, such as *Botánica Elegguá*. Besides selling products, these stores also offer esoteric services of various natures, from *limpias* (“cleansings”) by *curanderos* to tarot and Santería's *diloggún* readings and Palo Mayombe rituals.<sup>8</sup> Different kinds of products and services are offered in the same place, which may lead to syncretic mixtures. Santa Muerte devotees usually consider themselves Catholic or Santeros, and practice a mix of different rituals. Nevertheless, not all of San Antonio *botánicas* include Santa Muerte products.<sup>9</sup>

What is the reason for such quickly spreading devotion to this bizarre figure? The cult of Santa Muerte, as other unofficial devotions, such as the ones to Niño Fidencio, Pedrito Jaramillo, or Jesús Malverde, is directly related to scarcity, liminality, and conflict. She is invoked for protection and strength, in the hope of transforming disorder into order in the private lives of individuals, their families, and their communities. Devotees ask her for love, employment, prosperity, good health, and protection from enemies or rivals. The follow-



ing poem of thanks to the Niña Blanca resumes the meaning she has for devotees:

*You have become in a very special being in my life  
I think about you every instant and  
my faith in you grows  
Since I know you I don't feel alone anymore  
I know that God sent you to me  
so I ask you with great love  
You want the best for your sons and daughters  
and you know what is in our hearts  
So my girl you already know well mine  
You know everything about me, you know all my  
needs and that's why I ask you  
with great love  
I carry you in my heart forever.<sup>10</sup>*

The difference with La Flaquita is that while the above folk cults are based on historical or legendary individuals, the personalized Santa Muerte, on the other hand, is a symbolic, all-encompassing figure. The cult of La Niña Blanca started to be widespread in Mexico City about twenty years ago, especially in the marginal neighborhoods of Tepito and Morelos among persons at the fringes of society who by their occupations were exposed to danger and death. This included prostitutes, criminals, inmates, street vendors, homosexuals and transgendered individuals, but later spread to many other occupations that deal with transitions, transgressions, and liminality, such as migrants, truck and taxi drivers, policemen, troops, prison guards, psychologists, and lawyers. It is also a cult directly related to drug trafficking, as its members daily commingle with danger and death. In this case, her powers may also be used to harm enemies or rivals in the trade.

The Mexican devotion to death has ancient roots related to human insecurity in the face of such uncontrollable events, as illness and massive death because of epidemics, wars, and catastrophes, Catholic and Native Mexican beliefs, and was well-developed before La Santísima phenomenon took hold. She was and still is embodied in

such colonial figures as San Pascualito Rey, Nuestra Señora La Muerte, and San Bernardo o Santa Muerte,<sup>11</sup> as well as in the pre-Hispanic lord and lady of death, Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacíhuatl. What is most significant though is that death's new avatar, Santa Muerte, was "born" in contemporary times, in the mid-twentieth century, she is of the feminine gender, and since ten years ago she is enjoying an unprecedented popularity among wide sectors of the population, in Mexico and among its neighbors north and south of the border. What are the reasons for this astonishing phenomenon, especially taking in consideration that Mexico already had its protective saint-queen in the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe? Although the population of Latin America, specially the Indians and the imported black slaves, has been subject to all kinds of mistreatment, hardships and even massive death since colonial times, and as a consequence developed many survival strategies including popular devotions, it is also true that such a fast and massive growth of a particular cult is uncommon.

Nevertheless, when we examine the lucrative movement of the drug traffic from Latin America to the United States, which passes through the Mexican border in these globalized times, especially since the opening of Mexico to international markets and the Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed on January 1st, 1994, and later developments such as the "War on Drugs" proclaimed by President Calderón, war that claimed an astonishing number of 65,000 victims in the six years of his presidency,<sup>12</sup> we start to see a larger picture of a country caught up in the middle of a war that hardly anyone is immune to. From criminals, troops, police, and special forces to small commerce and the service industry that suffers the consequences of the drop in tourism, great numbers of people have had their livelihoods threatened.

Similarly to La Pelona who is an ambiguous figure in Western terms--neither good nor bad--her devotees can also find themselves in an ambivalent and contradictory position, switching sides or collaborating with both, as in the case of

“agents of order” that work together with organized crime. I see Santa Muerte devotion as the last resource, after everything else, including religion with its protectors, such as God, Jesus, and the emblematic Virgin of Guadalupe, have failed. As one of my informants put it, “Santa Muerte carries out things for you that the Virgin of Guadalupe can’t.”<sup>13</sup> The insecurity, fragility, ambiguity, and anguish of everyday life experienced by millions of people in modern society give rise to the need for a strong, just, and fearless advocate, such as La Madrina (the Godmother) who will protect and defend them from the unpredictability of sudden attacks, kidnappings, stray bullets, hunger, and ruin, and who is *on their side*, no matter the social class or circumstances. As other syncretic cults of Latin America, Santa Muerte is a utilitarian devotion that is geared towards everyday protection and help in difficult life situations, a sort of saint of last resorts. As various other attitudes of different Latin American peoples in the face of aggression and difficulty, such as mockery, irony, play, or passive resistance, the devotion to La Niña Blanca is another survival strategy vis-a-vis tremendous life strides. It is enough to consult any Santa Muerte devotional book,<sup>14</sup> to realize that the prayers, rituals, and *amarres* (binding spells) are not geared towards an abstract salvation of the soul, but to everyday survival in all areas of daily life. A good example is “Una oración para invocar” (“A Prayer to Invoke [Santa Muerte]”):

*Lady of death*  
*Skeletal spirit*  
*Most powerful and strong,*  
*Indispensable in the moment of danger,*  
*I invoke you certain of your bounty:*  
*I beg to omnipotent god,*  
*Grant me all I am asking for:*  
*Make repent all his life*  
*The one who harmed me or gave me*  
*the evil eye*

*And may it turn against him right away;*  
*For the one who deceives me in love*  
*I ask that you make him come back to me*  
*And if he does not listen to your strange voice*  
*Good spirit of death,*  
*Make him feel*  
*The power of your scythe.*  
*In games and in business*  
*My advocate I name you*  
*As the best*  
*And any*  
*That comes against me*  
*Make him a loser:*  
*Oh, Lady of Death,*  
*My protecting angel,*  
*Amen!*<sup>15</sup>

In this invocation to La Niña Blanca, questions of danger, witchcraft, love, business, and good luck in gambling are included. Other prayers from *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* serve to counteract a whole gamut of specific problems that may occur in daily life. They include the “Prayer to Ask for Advice,” “Prayer to Solve Family Problems,” “Prayer to End a Family Conflict,” “Prayer of Financial Difficulties,” “Prayer for Abundance and Finances,” “Prayer for Health of the Body,” “Prayer to Take Away a Vice,” “Prayer to Protect Children,” “Prayer to Avoid Robbery,” “Prayer to Take Care of Work,” “Prayer for Business,” “Prayer to Protect a Business,” “Prayer to Cleanse a Business,” “Incantation for Good Luck,” “Prayer to Attract Good Fortune in Business and at Home,” “Prayer to Attract a Loved Person, and “Prayer to Enjoy Protection during a Trip”.<sup>16</sup>

These prayers, as well as *trabajos* or “works”—rituals geared towards the attainment of a goal—deal with every possible life affliction, including getting rid of evil spells, and freeing oneself from debt or making someone pay a debt. While prayers are petitions on a verbal level that may include some limited actions, rituals involve material objects, specific actions and words, spe-

cific days and hours of the week, and may be repetitious and extended in time. It is expected that a ritual for a singular problem that involves symbolic actions and several senses is more efficacious than mere words. In addition, special altars for homes and specific places, such as a business, a restaurant, or a legal office are a common practice. They usually include a color-specific Santa Muerte statue and tablecloth, a votive candle, a glass of water, flowers, cigarettes, incense, and alcohol, among other well-defined symbolic objects.

With individual and collective prayers such as novenas and rosaries, rituals, altars, and worn objects, the life of a devotee in Mexico City<sup>17</sup> seems to be encompassed by their worship of Santa Muerte. The prevalence of her scapularies, medallions, and tattoos, as an ultimate shield and identity symbol worn on the body, speaks to the great need for protection and help. In spite of three centuries of colonial rule of slavery and forced labor since the sixteenth century, it seems that Mexico has never experienced a crisis encompassing every social class on every level of existence, such as the one unfolding in the twenty-first century. Santa Muerte stands as a mute, albeit not passive witness to this predicament. Although it is true that images of death accompanied various societies for centuries, what is most surprising is that nowadays La Santísima does not only remind people of their mortality, but she became the most trusted agent of protection of the livelihoods for millions of people. This includes the paradox of Lady Death being recurred to in works against bullets, illness, and for good health which are meant to prolong life.

## Notes

1 Included in Alfonso Hernández Hernández, “Devoción a la Santa Muerte y San Judas Tadeo en Tepito y anexas,” *El Cotidiano* 169 (2011); translation mine.

2 Juan Antonio Flores Martos, “Transformismos y transculturación de un culto novomestizo emergente: la Santa Muerte mexicana,” Mónica Cornejo et al., eds, 10 *Teorías y prácticas emergentes en antropología de la religión* (Spain: Donostia, 2008) 63. <<http://www.ankulegui.org>>.

3 Sara-La-Kâli, a Virgin Mary-like statue paced in the subterranean crypt of the church at Les Saintes Maries-de-la Mer in southeastern France, is an unofficial patron saint and the object of veneration of the Roma who gather there by the thousands for her annual May festival (personal fieldwork, May 2008).

4 Arthemis Guttman, *Práctica del culto a la Santa Muerte* (2006, Mexico City: Editores mexicanos unidos, 2009) 21; Perdigón Castañeda 92-93.

5 J. Katia Perdigón Castañeda, *La Santa Muerte protectora de los hombres* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2008) 80-81.

6 R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 12-13.

7 Perdigón Castañeda 109, 114, 117.

8 *Curandero/a*--folk healer in the Native American traditions; *Diloggún*—sixteen-cowry divination system used in Santería; Palo Mayombe—Afro-Cuban religion.

9 For example, *Botánica Domínguez* and *Botánica Ven a Mí* do not carry Santa Muerte products or services.

10 Rocío, “Agradecimiento para mi Niña Blanca,” 22 Oct 2012 <<http://nuestrasantamuerte.blogspot.com>, 24 Feb 2010>. Translation mine.

11 For a detailed discussion of these figures, see Perdigón Castañeda, and Carlos Navarrete, *San Pascualito Rey y el culto a la muerte en Chiapas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1982).

12 *Noticiero Nocturno Univision*, 20 October 2012.

13 John Martin, personal interview, San Antonio, 20 November 2012.

14 Devotional books include *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, *Prácticas del culto a la Santa Muerte* *El libro de la Santa Muerte*, and *Los poderes mágicos de la Santa Muerte*, among others.

15 *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* (Mexico City: Editores mexicanos unidos, 2010)17-18; translation mine.

16 *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, 94.

17 In San Antonio, Texas, this cult is predominantly individual. No public ceremonies or events have been performed, as devotees are afraid of stigmatization.



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