

SANTA MUERTE, PROTECTION,
AND DESAMPARO
A View from a Mexico City Altar

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Abstract: From the mid-1990s, devotion to Santa Muerte (Saint Death) became highly visible, not only in Mexico but also in the United States. Its evolution has coincided with the expansion of organized crime, creating the impression that the icon belongs to a coherent "narco-culture." This article contextualizes ritual practices at a single altar in Tepito, a Mexico City neighborhood historically specialized in informal and illegal commerce. Its monthly prayer service, which dates to September 2001, now balances the needs of its congregation with a kind of response to accusations against devotees in the mass media. Ironically, the range of gestures that share Santa Muerte iconography encompasses laments and high-minded indignation over blanket attribution of violent intentions to a population, but also a language for making threats. The average devotee is always affected by the likelihood that new acts of violence will be styled as religious.

From the mid-1990s, when Santa Muerte (Saint Death) became a matter of public discussion, journalists and scholars have treated the phenomenon as an example of folk religion: an artifact of a colonial syncretic process, stimulated to grow by the psychic strains of violence. But though it has the aura of something very old, it also feels new and dangerous, part of an emergent narco-culture. This article describes public ritual and interpersonal routines of Santa Muerte devotees in Mexico City over the last decade and reflects on how they connect to changed living conditions and the politics of survival. It foregrounds the evolution of a specific altar in Tepito, the black-market neighborhood near the historic downtown. Devotees, who remain strangers to each other, join in an urban spectacle when they congregate at Alfarería Street, which is the object of perpetual news coverage, most of it unsympathetic. Newcomers can readily participate in the monthly rosary here because it builds on the habits of people raised Catholic. But experimentation with other spiritual traditions, especially Santería and Mexican *esoterismo*, makes the gathering undeniably transgressive, infusing it with certain countercultural and defiant pleasures. Moreover, constant oblique reference to violence and illegal activities, together with the spectacle's power to convene an emotional crowd, disturbs nondevotees already preoccupied with danger. The questions "why *this* folk saint," "why now?" are met with the thought that there

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is some relationship to organized crime—"it's a narco thing"—but no one seems able to say just what that relationship is.

The Alfarería Street congregation was born in 2001, and its liturgy has gradually woven available rhetorics around an increasingly well-defined set of social problems. The ceremony overall has also gained coherence through its orientation to a mass-mediated accusation: that the Santa Muerte cult embodies a hidden will to do harm, that the devotion has an invisible leadership that is cruel. Countless personal uses of the iconography to frighten nondevotees nourish the suspicion that an organized, malevolent cult exists. But the most widely circulated prayers and the very organization of the monthly rosaries in Tepito show that devotees' main preoccupations are with frustrated access to law and involve ways of thinking about protection: protection from the injustices of institutions as well as from magic spells and violent people. Not coincidentally, the central concepts in the emergent liturgy—*amparo* and *desamparo*, protection and loss of protection—have both juridical and religious origins, though many devotees understand them from their use in informal-sector politics. There is a vocabulary of protection that crosses easily from the clientelistic politics of survival to otherworldly concerns and back again. It places questions about worldly political intermediaries and questions about supernatural forces in the same discursive frame.¹

This article moves from the formal rosary to the mass-mediated contexts in which it is a performance, and finally to how the devotion's reparative uses coexist with appropriations of it as a means to instill fear. The Tepito rosary has gradually accommodated challenges from two directions: the needs of congregants, and accusations or worried questioning of nondevotees, represented by and answered through reporters and other visitors. I suggest that this congregation's dramatic growth happened in the wake of these accusations. Ironically, mainstream portrayals helped create a subject position that many new devotees found compelling. It was indignation over the assignment of blame for rising violence that made many go "out in public" to defend Santa Muerte's reputation. Now when devotees recognize each other in public, a kind of generic dialogue often happens that can be read as both an orientation to an accusing outside world and a friendly theological debate. The self-fashioning of the devotee in these moments orients the concluding discussion, which returns to the paired concepts *amparo* and *desamparo*. Heavily used in prayers, they provide a key to how the Santa Muerte cult is a space for thinking about who protects whom, and from what. Throughout, I shall ponder the role of accusations of malevolence in opening cultural spaces where it makes sense to use the image to dress up and glamorize real violence.

THE ROSARY

Arriving to Tepito by subway on the first of any month, you see more and more skeletons: other riders carrying statuettes from their home altars—skeletons in

1. Chesnut (2012) offers the most extended description of Santa Muerte devotion across the United States and Mexico of any work in English. In Spanish, the most inclusive works are Perdigón Castañeda (2008) and Gil Olmos (2010).

red robes, black robes, sparkling gold-sequined robes; some are over a meter tall. They are made from plaster or resin and distributed through wholesalers near the Sonora market, or carved from wood at home or in a prison cell. Groups of young men arrive, entire families with children in tow, grandmothers in pairs and trios, *santeros* dressed in white robes and white headscarves. They carry their statues on trays that serve as portable altars and bring floral arrangements and feed sacks full of presents.

It is impossible to miss the Tepito station: it is marked with a stylized boxing glove as a logo. You get off here and climb the stairs from the cool, brightly lit, and spotless green and grey tile station into the cluttered and noisy world above. The working day is ending for the vendors in the *tianguis*, or street market, and they are packing up their merchandise. You walk right up the middle of Manuel Doblado over the patched and unpatched pavement, the bottle caps pounded into the asphalt like studs in an old leather jacket. Two blocks up, past lingering vendors hawking Santa Muerte posters and bongos and Vietnamese cigarettes and spiral bamboo shoots in drinking glasses, you come to the Avenida del Trabajo. Taxis dart in to scoop up shoppers leaving the electronics market with flat-screen televisions. Fortunately there is a median. If you can reach the median, you can look north and see the crowd forming on Alfarería Street. From the same point, you can also see what remains of the Casa Blanca, where Oscar Lewis did much of the research that led to *The Children of Sánchez*.

A group of mariachis is getting out of a cab along with the man who has hired them. He is in a hurry. There might not be enough time for all the groups to play before the service starts. They carry their bulky instruments over the heads of the devotees, past the shuttered warehouses and the offices of Mayen's Private Security Agency, where the head of a Doberman is painted on the metal doors. Hearing the sound of drums, you can just barely see the plumed headdresses of "Aztec" dancers called *concheros*. Someone is launching bottle rockets, the noisy ones used to announce big politicians and religious processions. Arriving from the north, you would pass a new altar to the Immaculate Conception, decked out with neon in a futile attempt to compete with the Santa Muerte phenomenon. It is the joint project of three parishes that come together kitty-corner in the Colonia Morelos. Walking over from the east, you might observe a mural dedicated to the area's premature dead. Alfonso Hernández, Tepito's *cronista*, or chronicler, says that block used to be called the Elephant Cemetery: the bodies of people who died sleeping on the street were often found with feet so swollen that they looked like the ends of logs, round, and flat on the bottom. Old *teporochos*—drunks. But the people in the mural are young and alert.

From about six o'clock, the crowd is so dense it's hard to avoid bumping into children and stepping on tiny altars set up on the curbs.² In the wake formed by

2. In recent years, the service has begun at five o'clock so that attendees can leave the area before dark, and so the area is crowded by around three o'clock. This account is a composite of rosaries led by Yurek Páramo in 2003–2004. Elizabeth Juárez of the Colegio de Michoacán identified several lines of prayer as having been adopted from "Universal Soul," used in yoga circles, and from the "33 Taos" used by spiritualists.

the mariachis, two reporters lug heavy video equipment, hoping to set up close to the main altar. In the crowd, pockets form where people are handing out roses and carnations, apples, bracelets, and scrolls of paper. Others go along placing cigarettes and scrolls and candies on the sidewalk altars, and on portable altars on trays and in backpacks worn turned to the front, or videotaping the entire scene for home viewing. And then they come to a clearing, a semicircle of open space in front of the altar case covered with dozens of floral arrangements. Around it, a long line has formed. Devotees are waiting their turn to leave an offering to La Grande, the human-skeleton-sized Santa Muerte at the center of the commotion, and to introduce her to their home statuettes, which mutually charges them with energy. The mariachis tune up on the patio to the left of her vitrine, behind a fence that keeps the crowd from crushing into the area where a woman, Enriqueta's mother, is handing out tamales. First they play "Las mañanitas" then "Amor eterno." A woman in a washing smock moves from group to group along the edge of the clearing. This is Enriqueta—Queta or Quetita. She reluctantly accepts small gifts for her personal altar: "Todo es para Ella [it's all for Her]," says Queta, meaning that everything is for Santa Muerte. She embraces scrawny, unhealthy boys and burly, tattoo-covered men. They whisper things in her ear bashfully. "¡Ay mi niño!" she exclaims. They are all "mi niño." They treat her, *la madrina*, the godmother, with utter reverence.

At eight o'clock a man tests the microphone. He asks people to stop handing out presents, because the rosaries will now begin. He makes a few announcements and mildly disciplinary comments: "There are people in the audience who are saying that I am not a real priest and have no authority to give a mass. I want to remind those of you who are Catholic that this is not a mass, but a rosary, and no priest is required. There is a rumor going around that you can get special protection by stealing the hand from someone else's statuette. This is false, I repeat: false."

Since 2001, Enriqueta has had arrangements with a series of male prayer leaders, each of whom made contributions to the evolving service, though the basic form has remained the same. First, the prayer leader always asks God for permission to address Santa Muerte directly:

Lord, before your divine presence, God all powerful,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we ask your permission to invoke
 Santísima Muerte, our Niña Blanca,
 we wish to ask you from the bottom of our hearts,
 that you destroy or break any spell, hex, or darkness
 present in our persons, our homes, work, and travel.³

The leader begins, and the crowd repeats three times: "Spirit of Santa Muerte, for the hours that are passing, come: we are calling you."

The rosary form, which orders most of the event, is legible to the majority of devotees raised Roman Catholic. In Catholicism, rosaries retell moments in the life of Christ, and one is encouraged to find correspondences with moments in

3. All translations are by the author.

the lives of mortals. Each of these moments also corresponds to a divine mystery, in which the divine is experienced in earthly being. They are “mysteries” because it is impossible to explain in earthly terms how the divine makes itself felt. The service at Alfarería Street has always used the sorrowful mysteries as a template. Distinct from the joyful mysteries (the nativity), or the glorious mysteries (to do with the resurrection), the sorrowful mysteries tie the sufferings of mortals to the process leading to the crucifixion and to the virtues that one gains as a result of analogous trials. These theological connections are left implicit, while ideas specific to Santa Muerte and to the congregation’s problems have been elaborated upon over time.

The main correspondences between mysteries and specific real-world problems at Alfarería Street were in place by 2003. The first sorrowful mystery, the agony in the garden, which traditionally teaches remorse for one’s sins, was dedicated to prisoners. The second—the scourging at the pillar—set aside a moment to pray for the hospitalized, those given poor prognoses, and those “consumed by poisons,” that is, addictions. The third, the crowning with thorns, was suggested as a time to pray about work problems and for the unemployed, while the fourth was concerned with protection from “deception, spells, and envy.” The final mystery—the crucifixion—invites prayers for the recently deceased, and the prayer leader frequently reads aloud names passed to him on slips of paper. The mysteries are packaged with many repetitions of the *Padre Nuestro* (Our Father, or Lord’s Prayer) and gently modified Hail Marys.

A closer look at the text of the first two mysteries gives a sense of how the praying self is positioned in relation to thorny matters of illegality and violence. In the years since the formal fieldwork on which this description is based, there has been an intensification of prayer on behalf of people mixed up with the wrong kind of company, in hopes that they will be able to disentangle themselves. The mystery that is offered on behalf of prisoners avoids further stigmatization of the accused and acknowledges that false convictions are common.

Santísima Muerte,
 we pray to you for each and every one of the prisoners,
 for those who justly and those who unjustly
 groan in the jails and in the prisons,
 that those who are incarcerated justly, do not cease to follow you
 and receive your light and your energy,
 and so that you open the doors for those who are there unjustly,
 and show them the way out.
 We pray to you for our incarcerated brethren,
 that they do not fall backward, and that they always
 have faith in you, in your light, in our force, in your strength.
 We beg you Santísima Muerte for intercession, and from our Holy Mother Mary,
 let us live in this world with fervent desire for heaven.

After another *Padre Nuestro*, the prayer concludes:

Señora Blanca, Señora Negra, we sit at your feet to ask you and to beg you,
 make him feel your force and your power and your presence
 in the face of all those who are trying to destroy him;

Señora, be our shield against all evil;
with your protecting scythe cut all the obstacles that hold him there.
Open the closed doors; show him the way.

The second mystery, which has over time incorporated language from twelve-step programs—particularly their conception of addiction as disease—takes care to foreground the suffering of the families:

Santísima Muerte, I ask you humbly
to look upon and contemplate the great anxiety that I carry
on behalf of the person who is slowly consuming himself in vice.
And knowing that for you, nothing is impossible,
today I implore you, today I beg you,
give him back his state of health,
so he doesn't depend on any kind of drug
so that his body recovers its power, and he,
his will to never consume it again.

Perhaps it is not obvious how much care the organizers have taken with how the praying individual is defined in the prayer. While it is a commonplace that Santa Muerte gives protection to wielders of violence—be they judicial police, private security companies, cartel enforcers, or unaffiliated violent entrepreneurs—the choice of pronouns is sensitive to many positions into which anyone may be thrown. For example, the praying “I” of the second mystery is a witness torn by a family-dissolving behavior: “I ask you humbly to look upon and contemplate the great anxiety that I carry for the person who is slowly consuming himself in vice.” The prayer performs awareness of the dilemmas of life’s moral and legal gray zones. It is also consistent with a careful balancing of intimacy and anonymity among rosary participants, in the exchanges of gifts and gestures that occur in the crowd beyond the order of the formal service. These exchanges, which evolved with little guidance from the organizers, can be read as cautiously enacting an early Christian ideal of fellowship among people who are mutually mistrustful and must remain so. We shall return to these gestures in the final discussion of the problem of danger, and whether the aggregate of devotees should be thought of as a coherent group.

After the mysteries comes a prayer that seems to have been created at Alfarería and which by mid-decade had become very well known across the city:

Santísima Muerte, we believe in you
because we know that you have existed since the beginning of time.
We believe in you because you are fair, and do not discriminate.
You take a young person just as you take an old person,
a rich person just as a poor person.
We believe in you, because you are the mother of all cycles.
All that begins must end, all that lives, dies.
We believe in you because we are sure
that one day we shall meet, and so may we have you within us,
instead of being against you.
We were all born to have a holy death [*muerte santa*]. Amen.

The last part of the traditional rosary—though not the last part of the event—is a modification of the Litany of Loreto, a chant that originated in thirteenth-century processions. The chanting goes nicely with walking, but standing, people get tired, especially children, resulting in fidgeting and some impatience. It consists mainly of the prayer leader calling out the Virgin Mary's many names (Mother Most Pure, Mystical Rose, Queen of the Apostles, etc.), and with the crowd ritually responding, "pray for us" (*ruega por nosotros*). It serves here as a transition, another opportunity for splicing in more references to Santa Muerte: "Blessed Santa Marta, pray for us." Saint Martha, or Martita, is one of Santa Muerte's many names. In particular, women who live with parents or husbands who disapprove of Santa Muerte will furtively share this tip: "Just get a Santa Marta image. Santa Muerte is inside Santa Marta, she will understand and no one else needs to know." References to Saint Martha are code for Santa Muerte.

Hermana Blanca [white sister], *pray for us.*

Santísima Muerte, *pray for us.*

Santísima Muerte [louder], *pray for us!*

Santísima Muerte [loudly], *pray for us!*

The effect of the building chant is quite powerful. In effect, the service has built up to Santa Muerte. There is a pause during which the silence is nearly total. We resume with what is to be the tail end of the conventional rosary.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, *spare us, O Lord.*

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, *graciously hear us, O Lord.*

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, *have mercy on us.*

The final line of the standard Catholic rosary, "Christ graciously hear us," is skipped, and the prayer leader continues seamlessly:

Before your *amparo*, we invoke you

Santísima Muerte and the Holy Mother of God,

don't dismiss the prayers that we are making to you, in our need,

deliver us from all the dangers.

But the event is hardly over. After a final set of traditional *pedimentos*, we arrive at two important added segments: the *cadena de la fuerza* and the blessing of the images. The leader says: now, let us make our final petitions; let us remember those who were not able to come here tonight; here we make room for all the petitions that have not yet found their moment in the service. Let us ask Santa Muerte to protect us from all harm, saying:

Santa Muerte, because there is no power like yours, I ask and I beg:

From my enemies, *protect me Santa Muerte*

From those who stalk me, *protect me Santa Muerte*

From weapons, *protect me Santa Muerte*

From illness, *protect me Santa Muerte*

From damage and errors, *protect me Santa Muerte*

From falling into disgrace, *protect me Santa Muerte*

Repeat three times: *protect me Santa Muerte, protect me Santa Muerte, protect me Santa Muerte.*

Now the leader asks any skeptics who may be present to keep a respectful silence. For the duration of the *cadena de la fuerza*, each person present is encouraged to take the hand of the next, to form a chain through which energy can flow. *Enriqueta*, or someone honored by her invitation, is the first in this chain, touching the altar itself. Eyes closed, we are asked to imagine *Santa Muerte* as a white light, to feel her coldness and how very, very close she is, to look directly at her, without fear, in our inner space, with the eyes of the soul. The leader invites the congregation to concentrate on what they want to say to her; to imagine her as intensely as possible:

Ask her; thank her; that's the best way to have her truly hear us; not by going to mass, not by shouting; concentrate; imagine, in this moment, that you have her directly in front of you and that she is a radiant, white light, that's *Santa Muerte*, now you can say all you've wanted to say to her; silently let's tell her: O *Santa Muerte*, angel of God, I give you infinite and sincere thanks for the favors you have conceded to me, in this day of prayer and reception I pray for my loved ones and for my enemies too; in this special moment, bring out before God what you have lodged in your heart . . .

A long and total silence follows. If the *cadena de la fuerza* was not the moment anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) might have called *communitas*—the heightened sensation of unity among participants—then the last moment surely must be. During the first decade of rosaries at this altar, the services began at dusk. Very bright lights were aimed just above the heads of people gathered in the street. Then, during the blessing of the images, nearly everyone raises high above their head a statuette brought from home, up into the light. Suddenly, the images are illuminated and colorful, and the crowd appears to be not a mass of living persons but a crowd of grinning skeletons. In this form, the congregation becomes dazzlingly visible to itself and irresistible to the camera. Over the next days, nearly identical pictures will show up on television news, in newspapers, and on websites, recharging a cycle of publicity already in motion. This congregation never operates unaware of this surveillance, or ignorant of what has already been said about *Santa Muerte* in that other space of address to the general public. The service proper ends:

Santísima Muerte, Señora Nuestra,
Queen of the dark and the cold,
we draw close to you to ask for your protection, our lady,
protect us and shield us from our enemies and our stalkers,
from traps and vengeance; shield us with your cape.
Señora, you who see in the dark, protect our persons, our houses,
and our families in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit . . .

It is easy to see that this congregation's prayers concentrate on a cluster of practical concerns. Of the five mysteries, at least three can be read in terms of impaired access to rights and resources formerly promised by the state. The prayer for the prisoners, for example, imagines redemption for the rightly imprisoned, but also acknowledges that many are falsely accused and improperly convicted (or imprisoned with no conviction). This is linked to a more general problem: the expectation that due process will fail, and the sense that legal good standing is

a kind of luxury. In parallel fashion, testimonies about Santa Muerte's hospital interventions that circulate in the crowd often allude to sloppy diagnoses, premature discharge, and other forms of neglect on the part of overburdened hospital staff. The general petition for protection from errors is not vague in a lifeworld where bureaucratic errors can be devastating, given the difficulty of appealing decisions made by institutions and the near impossibility of using the courts to do so. The expectations are common sense in informal commerce and in parts of the city where housing has been created informally. In both, one's use of a place is legally precarious from the beginning, and exceptions to the laws governing use of space are bought and sold, as shall be discussed in the final section.

PUBLIC RELATIONS DILEMMAS

The prayers offered at Alfarería Street do not provide a one-to-one representation of the overall range of meanings and uses of the Santa Muerte image in greater Mexico, or even in the congregation. Yet there is a logic to what is shown and what is excluded. The positive gestures and prayers included in the Alfarería Street services must be understood as performances given in contradistinction to the representations and personal uses of Santa Muerte that Enriqueta has chosen to exclude. This section reflects on selected moments in which the mass media came to use the figure of Santa Muerte or images of devotees to index the problem of rising violent crime. In this context, Enriqueta's choices make more sense. Without offering a full chronology of media episodes and liturgical choices, I suggest that the Tepito rosary, aware of its own visibility, inserts personal devotion into a chain of public speech acts that started before the congregation even existed.

When she opened her altar in 2001, Enriqueta already knew that powerful communicators—the church, the crime pages, and even the more humanistic and scholarly writers—were fixating on whether people with Santa Muerte images were malevolent. From the mid-1990s, new people were drawn to the image, and devotees new and old began to use the iconography in more conspicuous ways. Soon, organized Christianity and secular crime writers, despite their different vocabularies, were warning that the visible devotion indicated something larger, hidden, and dangerous. Regardless of its basis in devotional practices at that time, allegations of a link between “the cult” and violent crime were practically destined to be confirmed. Because it lacked—and still lacks—a central authority or doctrine, anyone could take up the iconography and experiment without censure.⁴ New devotees, drawing on several registers—including horror movies—

4. There are limits to what the majority of devotees are willing to recognize as authentic imagery. In 2007, entrepreneur David Romo of the Iglesia Católica Tradicional México-USA led a handful of parishioners to Mexico City's cathedral carrying a department store mannequin with a scythe, calling her the “Angel of Santa Muerte.” Romo lost credibility among devotees in the capital principally because “anyone could see that it doesn't look like her,” and secondarily because his processions, which provoked Cardinal Norberto Rivera, appeared to be a publicity stunt meant to draw larger numbers of alms-giving parishioners to his chapel in the Mixcalco neighborhood. Romo was convicted as part of a kidnapping ring in 2012.

could elaborate upon existing Santa Muerte lore as they explored the potential for self-fashioning. This plasticity, widespread beliefs about *esoterismo* (the occult), and a growing power to quicken fears, undoubtedly made the icon attractive to “violent entrepreneurs” and illegal organizations weaving together tentative corporate mythologies.⁵

There are several ways to reconstruct how the pre-1990 Santa Muerte was transformed into the elusive focal point of the current range of practices. In *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, Claudio Lomnitz suggests that the long-standing practice of making offerings to the old image passed through a sort of gestation period before the crime wave of the 1990s, and that the key crucible for this was the prisons. There is much evidence to suggest that this is correct, and I would go as far as to speculate that senior inmates took instruction from esoteric/spiritual healers and influenced young people sent to prison in large numbers in the mid- and late 1990s.⁶ Nevertheless, for my historical starting point, I wish to look beyond the devotees’ origins and cautiously choose a gruesome 1989 scandal: the notorious case of the *narcosatánicos*. I choose this because the press coverage was so very successful in finding readers and because it was such a well-developed iteration of a public story that brought obscure “sects” into a common narrative framework with stories about the world of the cartels. This episode can be thought of as having provided a template for interpreting Santa Muerte, not only to tabloid readers but, importantly, to a generation of journalists, and not only to mainstream readers but potentially to devotees in formation.

Adolfo Constanzo, a charismatic Cuban santero raised in Miami, infiltrated the social networks of politicians, celebrities, and narcotraffickers promising greater personal success if they participated in his personal version of Palo Mayombe, a religion of the African diaspora. Eventually his followers carried out a series of murders styled as ritual sacrifice, torturing victims and using body parts to make ointments and jewelry that would protect Constanzo’s followers from police and rivals. His circle fell apart in the wake of their sacrifice of Mark Kilroy, a college student from Texas. Under pressure from the US government, authorities reluctantly investigated the ranch in Tamaulipas where the ritualized murders had taken place.

The essayist Carlos Monsiváis characterized the group’s combination of violence and ritual as an “aestheticization of the real” that “appropriates the irrational where it already exists” (i.e., in *esoterismo* and in *Santería*), though he points out that Constanzo also took cues from a thriller about Satanists called *The Believers*.⁷ The leader wields the image, instrumentally, to intensify followers’ “mental instabilities” (Monsiváis 1994, 156). This, in Monsiváis’s model, leads to dependence upon the glamorized leader, who may convince himself as well as his followers that he has specialized knowledge about a higher “metaphysics of

5. The term *violent entrepreneurs* comes from Volkov (2002). Kristensen (2011) describes security experts’ hypotheses about use of Santa Muerte by cartels, for example, in styling executions as sacrifices.

6. Dansker (2012) offers a close-up of the poetics of Santa Muerte devotion among inmates in juvenile prisons.

7. Directed by John Schlesinger, 1987, United States.

crime." For Monsiváis, all of this was contained by the rules of narcotrafficking, which are rational and banal beneath the gruesome theatrics.

Santa Muerte per se was marginal in Constanzo's ritual—there was a small statuette in photographs from the Tamaulipas ranch, and journalists did not much comment on them at the time. But Constanzo's way of weaving together spectacular cruelty, "religious" or esoteric storytelling, and the drug business made an enormous impression, and it remains a reference whenever one of these themes is associated with the others. When the kidnapper Daniel Arizmendi—El Mochorejas, or Ear Chopper—was captured in 1998, the media made much of the fact that he had a Santa Muerte altar in his hideout and drew lines backward to the narcosatánicos.⁸

The next moment defining the arc of transformation could be the 1992 overhaul of the Ley de Culto Público, the law regulating religion in public. Until about this time, the Catholic Church scolded parishioners about using Santa Muerte but tolerated it as a trivial misunderstanding of doctrine among the uneducated. Associated with the esoterismo of traditional healers, Santa Muerte images were kept discreetly throughout most of the twentieth century, as Oscar Lewis registered in his 1961 *Children of Sánchez*. The image did not seem particularly threatening then; the few printed prayers in circulation aimed at controlling relationships with lovers and personal enemies.

The Church consolidated its posture of intolerance toward Santa Muerte in the 1990s, under the authority of Cardinal Norberto Rivera. In flyers distributed via the diocese and parish authorities, parishioners were warned that the cult was a mask for Satanism and that good Catholics were at grave risk if they dabbled. To parish priests and others less worried about demonic possession, there was an accompanying explanation: death cannot be holy, because Christ overcame death. The Church abandoned its earlier toleration in part because of the threat of proliferating charismatic sects. Under the new laws, it became easy for any group to acquire a license and open a storefront "church." This was also a factor in an explosion of Evangelical and other new congregations.

During this same time period, new images of an angry-faced Santa Muerte entered circulation alongside the bony and indifferent older ones. These accompanied new, more transgressive prayers. Evangelical pastors and parish priests were no doubt among the first to be aware of her growing popularity in neighborhoods with high crime rates. Both Catholic and Evangelical groups added to the tabloid stories about cults and narco-culture. They claimed that Santa Muerte could be behind the increase in violence and crime, propelling it by promising favors in return for sin. By 2003, Cardinal Rivera ordered a campaign inviting the well-meaning to give up their Santa Muerte images. Building on the idea that Santa Muerte is a vindictive spirit, his offices circulated flyers regarding safe ways of disposing of an image and set up a special location at the foot of the Cristo del

8. A short story by Homero Aridjis (2004) offered the most elaborate rhetorical links so far between cartel violence and Santa Muerte. The story in turn impacted heavily on news reporting, where it was frequently cited as nonfiction. Ironically, the volume sold well among devotees who bought it to include on home altars.

Veneno (Our Lord of the Poison) within the metropolitan cathedral, at the heart of the downtown, where people could leave their statuettes (preferably in opaque plastic bags) and confess without fear of repercussions.

In film, the presence of a Santa Muerte statue or scapular came to signal a dangerous place. Tony Scott's 2004 thriller *Man on Fire*, in which Denzel Washington rescues Dakota Fanning from kidnappers, is set in Mexico City. The appearance of Santa Muerte is fleeting—Washington's character finds a chromolithograph at the scene of an abduction—but a minor character explains that it is the calling card of a death cult, a cult that is later associated with Judicial Police involved in the kidnapping. In the 2007 feature film *La Santa Muerte*, funded by a consortium of Protestant churches, worship of the skeleton is a gateway to Satanism. Interestingly, victims in the film are lured into demonic possession with drug-dealer tactics: the first few miracles are free. In the end, she sucks the life out of her victims. Crime reporting has echoed fiction and vice versa; subsequent violent episodes picked up performative elements from both.

The arrival of Enriqueta's altar on the Mexico City scene in 2001 was surely the moment that did the most to give Santa Muerte a sociopolitical identity. The rosary service at her altar was not only intensely photogenic in its own terms but took place in a legendary neighborhood already amply patrolled by reporters, especially crime writers.⁹ Moreover, accumulated legends about Tepito as a community of criminals, but also as a nucleus of class resistance, helped to further shape understandings of Santa Muerte. Enriqueta decided to offer a Santa Muerte-themed rosary each month and to welcome anyone who felt drawn. Within the first year or two, the crowds at the monthly rosaries swelled to hundreds and then thousands. From the outset, there was an urgent need to offer a message to devotees, who arrived with multiple traumas, a wide range of concepts, and also with certainty that they would find guidance at the altar.

Soon, interest in the event on the part of reporters, and later, scholars, meant that Enriqueta needed a message for the general public as well. In 2004, perhaps inspired by the narcosatánicos and the Ear Chopper, a group of teenaged killers called the Pokemons claimed to have promised Santa Muerte a hundred bodies in exchange for protection. Tabloid reporters, who for decades have relied on Tepito for lurid stories, added the monthly rosaries to the urban curiosities beat. One might have expected this kind of publicity to drive the crowds away from Enriqueta's altar, but the opposite occurred. Offended by the coverage, families who had previously never taken their icons out of their homes felt the time had come to stand up for her reputation. Over the next few years, Enriqueta and her family found themselves at the center of a whirlwind: the growth of Santa Muerte's popularity was already well under way. It was as if new devotees had been waiting to be convened in the city.

I would like to suggest that the emergent Alfarería Street tradition coheres around a therapeutic vision of its role. From the outset, Enriqueta and her close circle tried to listen to the devotees' reasons for seeking out Santa Muerte, what

9. Pablo Piccato (2001) and Ernesto Aréchiga (2003) elaborate on the long-standing relationship between Tepito and the tabloid industry.

they needed from the service. They saw the need to speak frankly to people's violent realities, but given the context of the accusation it was important to exclude the more bloodthirsty parts of Santa Muerte lore or provide a counterweight. The language and gestures used at Alfarería Street not only perform a collective posture as the "good" devotees but also open a subject position for participants in a therapeutic congregation.

Enriqueta and her close circle have invested great care in fine-tuning the prayers, taking at least two distinct publics into consideration: devotees and potentially hostile nondevotees. The opening address to God, asking for permission to pray directly to Santa Muerte, not only respects the Catholic distinction between adoration and veneration,¹⁰ but places the two entities in a close proximity that, in the logic of films about demonic possession, would not be tolerated by a truly satanic presence any more than the Lord's Prayer would be. The persistent splicing together of the Virgin Mary's names with the alternate names of Santa Muerte addresses this same cinematically informed reasoning. More importantly, however, Enriqueta's ad hoc therapeutic process has brought experiences of "the real" of illegal and violent scenarios into a symbolic order less stigmatizing of the devotee than other options. Prayers for the imprisoned keep prisoners in the third person, absent from the scene of praying but still vulnerable and cared for. It is not unusual for the elderly parents and young children of an absent adult to attend the service together. In this congregation, one of Mexico's crueler demographic trends is clear to see: what anthropologist Mercedes González de la Rocha (1994) calls "doughnut households." The middle generation is missing, typically because of migration, sometimes due to incarceration or violence. These prayers always acknowledge that innocent people can end up in prison. As previously mentioned, the meditations allow for multiple positions around the problem. The rosary avoids putting the praying self in the position of the drug user. But it is equally careful not to push away those who do participate. Such language puts individual devotees on a better interactional footing than they find outside this sheltered space once their "problem" has been named.

Meanwhile, Enriqueta's altar has been recognized or labeled (depending upon one's sympathies) as the geographic and moral center of the correct and well-meaning side of Santa Muerte. It has become a sort of liturgical hub, whose practices and prayers are reproduced elsewhere. The fame of the Tepito altar has led to a certain celebrity status for Enriqueta. She is often publicized as a special guest at newer altars, where her appearance authorizes gatherings as appropriate for families. Her visits are treasured as a seal of approval, and her nonviolent, pro-healing language is increasingly pointed to as exemplary, regardless of what devotees do and pray for in private.¹¹ Ordinary Mexico City-based devotees value

10. Bravo Lara (2013) explains how the Catholic distinction between *latría* (adoration) and *dulia* (veneration) grounds the sensibilities of Santa Muerte devotees in a Guadalajara altar that also offers baptisms and communion, chiefly to Central American migrants traveling by rail.

11. In the last few years, new congregations and online communities in Mexico and the United States have made heavy use of videos posted on YouTube as showing "correct" practice. The most-referenced videos are of Enriqueta's service and that of a rival altar in Iztapalapa, Mexico City, led by Martín George Quijano, who also edits a printed magazine, *Devoción a la Santa Muerte*, which he also posts

the contrast that her altar creates as the Santa Muerte figure is taken up in every imaginable way in the visual language of the “narcomedia.”¹²

To summarize, the paranoid or accusing style of framing Santa Muerte has a paradoxical *poder de convocatoria*: by referring to a strange sect and broadcasting reports on new altars, media reports have helped to call something else into existence, which Michael Warner (2005, 65–124) has called a counterpublic. Indignant about the ways that the devotion is characterized in the media, new devotees identify with those who are praying in the street and jot down the address. Devotees enter knowingly, as a marked party, into an imaginary constellation that revolves around the problem of violent crime.

IN THE DARK AND IN THE SUBWAY

The congregation at Alfarería Street frustrates any expectation that it will evolve into either a new religion or a protest movement. What puzzles quite a few visitors is the fact that people who attend the monthly event apparently form no networks outside the event itself. If the devotees who are called to this space never get to know each other’s names, never form any other association beyond these encounters, what do they share? Moreover, what do Santa Muerte devotees share in general, given that this congregation brings together only a small fraction of the people who use the image in one way or another?

What the devotees at Alfarería have in common are the problem spaces around an increasingly clear set of issues, which define their relationship to the rosary. Individuals arrive at Alfarería Street from many parts of the city and many socio-economic backgrounds. The greatest number come not from Tepito but from other parts of downtown, from families that formerly depended on manufacturing jobs, and from outlying *colonias* in the north and east of the city where families built their own housing on land they occupied in legally precarious ways. Most of these areas are also quite violent. Large numbers of people across the metropolitan region live and work in legal limbos, seeking resources, including access to legal good standing, via political brokers. What Daniel Goldstein and Enrique Desmond Arias (2010) call “violent pluralism” frequently entails, in contemporary Mexico, a political modality whose history runs deeper than the current violence. Diane Davis (2010, 55), in the same volume, describes the context of violent pluralism in urban Mexico in terms of a demographic squeeze that pushes working populations out of legal economic activities:

The city’s industrial sector has been mortally wounded by the opening of the economy and the relocation of Mexico City factories to the border areas. . . . As a result, many previously employed in the city’s industrial sector have looked elsewhere for income. . . . In an

online. I thank Adrian Baumann, a journalism student at Columbia University, for his unpublished accounts of the altar in Queens, New York, and to Blanca Bravo and Manuela Camus for access to congregations in Guadalajara.

12. By 2012, when a family in Sonora confessed to sacrificing children to Santa Muerte, the ritual component was not even depicted as the shocking part of the story. Paul Eiss (2014) shows how the semiotics of “narcomessaging” has evolved in tandem with the possibilities of social media during the period of the drug war, including the banalization of certain kinds of events in certain regions.

economically squeezed environment, state downsizing has made it difficult for democratically elected authorities to raise public sector salaries, tempting police to further engage in crime. . . . With fewer job prospects in manufacturing and many new employment opportunities beyond the educational reach of those laid off from factories, ever more Mexican citizens are being thrown into the informal sector.

Informal-sector groups pushed into illegal activities tend to maintain their rules, their connections to political power, and concepts for thinking about power and dependency, though the relationships may grow more predatory. The satisfactions of the Santa Muerte ritual in Tepito fuse personal searches for protection against catastrophe with national-level narratives about *la crisis*, as processes of economic and institutional deterioration are episodically named. The relations of protection don't map cleanly onto socioeconomic or generational groupings. Perhaps it would be more precise to say that devotees' social location is on the wrong end of the stick in protection-selling and protection-buying relationships. Devotees are people who must think constantly about being "unprotected" or *desamparado*, who weigh the stakes of desamparo against the costs of a bad protector, and who fantasize about not needing protectors at all. In the end, the prayers to Santa Muerte ask her for protection against evil influences and against impersonal forces. The only theological debate among Santa Muerte devotees is a friendly one about whether she can be negotiated with and how expensive her fees are.

The reparative side of the Alfarería Street congregation is perhaps best seen at a distance from the altar, in small pockets of disorganized activity on the rosary evenings.¹³ As mentioned above, many devotees hand out small gifts before and after the formal service. This aspect of the event is the one least captured in photos. This is because it takes place beyond the lights that illuminate the altar and below the beams of the spotlights that graze the heads of the assembled as the sun goes down. The greatest investment on the part of the many participants goes into preparing some kind of gift to distribute on the first of the month. There are several circuits of exchange alongside the prayers at Alfarería: offerings such as candles left directly for La Grande next to her vitrine; food offerings to the crowd, like sponsoring massive vats of tamales; small gifts to strangers, or *regalitos*; small carvings from wood or bone made in prison and purchased from prisoners' family members; and the *pureo*, the purification or "activation" of personal statuettes.

The *regalitos* are passed out "without discrimination" and are meant to be placed on the recipients' home altars; they range from apples, incense, or cigarettes to embellished matchboxes or scrolls with hand-written testimonies about miracles worked by Santa Muerte. Not only do the *regalitos* require an outlay of cash that is significant for most devotees, the hand-adorned and embellished ones can be quite labor-intensive. One denies any expectation of a return on the gift from recipients, because (it is hoped) the presents will go home to the recipients' altars; they are gifts for Santa Muerte, distributed over many home altars. The usual explanation for giving out small presents at random to the assembled

13. The idea of "the reparative" and "reparation" comes from the Kleinian tradition in psychoanalysis and refers to efforts on the part of the damaged psyche to move from a fragmented or paralyzed internal state toward a state in which one can perceive subtleties, narrate, and decide.

crowd is that this is one of the ways you can repay the Santa for particular favors or just show your appreciation for her overall protection. This practice is common at the altars of mainstream saints.

The *pureo*, or purification with cigar smoke, is borrowed from the Santería tradition. Some also say that for a *babalawo*—an authority in Santería—to share a cigar with your statuette “activates” her. The story is that when the statue is sold, Santa Muerte is not yet in it. It is still just an object, but it breathes in the spirit with the smoke. Some claim that the same effect can be obtained using Santa Muerte spray from an aerosol can. An overlapping practice that has waned since 2003 involved devotees smoking with their statuettes. What impressed me was how they did it. Cradling it in their arms as a child would cradle a doll, or as a parent would cradle an infant, they put the cigar or cigarette or joint to her lips (lack of lips?) as if they were giving a bottle to a baby, gazing tenderly into her lack of eyes and blowing their own smoke gently and lovingly over her face, the way an adoring parent seems to get lost in the face of an infant. The repetition of this bodily posture at Alfarería, taken as an inversion of the mother-infant dyad, could imply that there is a density of concern here with the recognizing gaze. This would not come as a surprise given the productive misrecognition involved in the evolution of Santa Muerte devotion as a public problem.

The *regalitos* and the other small exchanges could provide a satisfaction related to the experience of spiritually horizontal relationships, or of being in fellowship in Christian terms. It could even be read as a barely conscious enactment of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, a scenario emphasized by liberation theology, once highly present in the same parts of the city. In some circles, the miracle resides in the temporary suspension of mistrust, because the people stopped hoarding the food they already had. In preparing the more elaborate *regalitos*, art projects that can take all month, one acknowledges the meditative experience of strangers by imagining their home altars. One thinks about the gift that would be a nice addition to that imagined altar, something a bit different than what is probably already in it, given the tide of mass-produced items. The gift is in a sense a gesture of recognition toward a stranger’s inner affective world in situations already defined as being “complicated”—as being traumatic in specific ways, within a shared frame of difficulties, shared stigma, or shared perspective on the dynamics of fear.

The average devotee can’t rule out any better than anyone else the possibility that there is a dangerous secret organization, from which one is merely excluded, at work in the same crowd. The rumor of a secret center, about which one might pick up clues, is surely appealing to different people at different moments. But it also seems that this exchange of small gifts destined for altars is special because it allows one to bypass, with eyes wide open, moral and affective inhibitions against interacting with plausibly dangerous strangers. The gifts reiterate a tacit agreement that suspends personal rules about who ought to be shunned. Outside, it is common sense that you don’t leave yourself vulnerable to certain types of people, especially if you are one of those people. The gathering may be read overall as a ritual suspension or socialization of fear. While it lasts, the rules

of suspicion are replaced by a gestural code of bare-minimum recognition which serves as a counterweight to infinite misrecognition.

Beyond the congregation at Alfarería Street, devotees also acknowledge each other in ways that signal their shared stigma and disapproval of a hypothetical, stylized antagonist. In Mexico City, on the street and in the subway, strangers who discover that they share the devotion—tattoos, scapulars, and T-shirts are conversation starters—engage in generic dialogues that resemble a miniature catechism, one whose ideas coincide with the printed and handwritten prayers that circulate hand to hand. As if rehearsing for conversations with accusers, they answer questions with yes or no answers that also point up the silliness of mainstream fears:

Does it make any sense for people to be afraid of a skeleton? (No).
 Each of us carries around a skeleton with us every day, yes or no? (Well, yes).
 She comes for all of us, yes or no? (Yes, of course).

Unlike a Catholic catechism, no devotee ever asks another whether he “believes in her”; there is not too much concern about separating believers and nonbelievers. Another kind of generic dialogue is a sort of theological debate about whether she is a relatively indifferent angel whose job is simply to come for you when it’s your time, or whether she’s a high-maintenance *cabrona*, a mean lady with whom one enters into expensive negotiations over scheduling.

These two positions connect to two sorts of visual representation of la Muerte. The older, purely skeletal image with no facial expression connects to the idea that Death is indifferent and simply comes for you when it’s your time. Artistic representations of Santa Muerte with a gleefully malicious face—often with glowing red eyes—are newer, having been added in the 1990s. This heavy metal and horror movie style tends to be preferred by younger people, who are more likely to warn you that she is a vindictive *cabrona* who will help you to harm your enemies, but who will also turn on you if you don’t give her everything she wants. But if she is a *cabrona*, then she is at least willing to sell you protection, like the predatory but charismatic and finally indispensable brokers who rule in the universe of informal and illegal economies.

There are many prayers in circulation, but one refrain is universal and not at all foreign to Catholicism: *no me desampares*—“don’t forsake me,” or more literally, “don’t remove your *amparo*; don’t leave me unprotected.” Traditionally, this basic request was made to Mexico’s patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe. But now Santa Muerte has become more popular than the Virgin in some social spaces—and not exclusively among the poor—where people say she protects them from dangers they cannot discuss with priests. If one considers the timing of the icon’s arrival in the public sphere, it is easy to imagine that the focus on *desamparo*—the loss of protection—has something to do with the state’s abandonment of national welfare, the Church’s retreat from the “preferential option for the poor,” or both.

CONCLUSIONS

Objectively, it is easy to see how Santa Muerte devotion is used to talk and think about experiences of extreme abandonment in contexts that Mexicans often understand as manifestations of national crises: economic crisis, demographic crisis, the crisis of the rule of law, the crisis of faith in the national future. The devotion's language points to experiences that came with neoliberal reforms and securitization: collapse of formal employment, violent entrepreneurship, and inadequate access to justice. The Alfarería Street service, now widely imitated, represents these problems when it dedicates the holy mysteries to unemployment, imprisonment, addictions, miscarriage of justice, and neglect by a strained public medical system. But its occult symbolism also inevitably suggests violence and cruelty in ways that other available religious idioms do not, and this turns out to be a key factor in the devotion's booming popularity.

Researchers in this special issue are concerned with how religion organizes everyday experience in zones of crisis. Responding to questions about the "return of religion" to the public sphere in other regions, they find that in Latin America, religion has always been part of public life but that social scientists, at least in the Anglophone world, are only recently focusing on it. As elsewhere, they find that the boundaries between religious and nonreligious spheres are blurred, and that new forms of blurring often cause anxiety in countries where the legal status of religion has changed.

In the case of Santa Muerte, the disturbing breakout is double. First, its religiosity seems to irrupt into public suddenly, along with new Evangelical churches and other "sects." Moreover, from the point of view of mainstream religion, the Santa Muerte cult represents a breakout of the heretical and the esoteric into the spaces that Roman Catholicism has only recently been encouraged to reoccupy, as if the Vatican, Evangelicals, non-monotheistic religions, and even esoterics could now be on equal footing. Talal Asad (2003), Charles Taylor (2007), and others have shown how the category of the religious was remade in relation to the secular, especially through national legal projects that attempted to confine religious language—any argumentation that pointed beyond the worldly—to a private sphere. Peter Pels (2003) clarifies a parallel history for the magical and the occult: at different moments, diverse subaltern traditions became the other of both organized Christianity and organized reason. In Mexico, the irritation is multiple because both Mexican liberal and revolutionary traditions would lump esoterismo and religion together, as superstition when they are harmless and as "the irrational" when they appear as part of a threat to human freedom.

A thought-provoking model for relating resurgent witchcraft to neoliberal disruption and mysterious accumulation of wealth was put forth by anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff. Writing about South Africa, they suggested a series of connections, including the suggestion that "preoccupation with the occult" is about, at one level, "the desire to plumb the secret of those invisible means [those gotten under new and poorly understood rules]; at another, it is concerned to stem the spread of a macabre, visceral economy founded on the violence of extraction

and abstraction . . . in which the majority are kept poor by the mystical machinations of a few" (1999, 293). The Santa Muerte phenomenon as something pointedly esoteric surely links to worldly time as an expression of suffering and dilemmas and serves as metaphorical commentary on the elusiveness of capital flows. But it is also connected to worldly time in the way its symbolic language comes together; it does more than reflect social realities. Perhaps ironically, devotee postures that look and feel religious—including aggressive gestures—became possible because of how violence was problematized in this-worldly political discourses.

Enriqueta's solution picks and chooses elements to show a "good" devotion, one that eschews violence and offers a therapeutic intervention to a traumatized population. To say that the devotion arises partly in response to media episodes is not to say that the experiences of devotees are not also religious experiences. Uses of the iconography in what could be called "lived religion" are never ignorant of or indifferent to public-language constructions of Santa Muerte as the mark of an evil spirit or a will to violence. The array of practices is always set in the problem space of the upsurge of cruelty and who is to blame for it. The range of gestures encompasses both indignation—over false attribution of malevolence to a broad population—and also appropriations of Santa Muerte imagery in new acts of cruelty. This is to me the central irony that brings devotees into a common identity. Mass-mediated efforts to make narrative sense of a more violent state of affairs created the conditions for Santa Muerte's transformation into a highly visible mass phenomenon: new devotees began searching for connection with others by way of their indignation over the politics of blame for violence. Dispersed and vague practices gained the appearance of a coherent rite in the wake of accusations against a "cult" that did not yet exist.

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