



Death is Women's Work: Santa Muerte, a Folk Saint and Her Female Followers

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Abstract

Santa Muerte is a new religious movement that originated in Mexico. It centers on devotion to death. It has come under fire from the Catholic Church, the Mexican State, and mass media across the Americas. In misrepresentations that are often racist, and sexist, Santa Muerte has been portrayed by the above institutions as a 'narco-saint', that is a saint worshiped by narcotraffickers, and the religion portrayed as one that only violent, barbaric males follow. This article counters this erroneous depiction suggesting that devotion to death is women's work. I detail how Santa Muerte has long been appealed to by women who have been at the fulcrum of the expansion of the movement. I describe how knowledge of Santa Muerte continues to be germinated by women who through gynocentric thanatological praxis are empowered and fashion spaces in which to deal with the violence, precarity and poverty that riddles the Mexican post-colony.

Keywords Santa Muerte · Women · Mexico · Femicide · Gendered violence · Death

*Sangre Mía
sangre del alba,
sangre de luna partida,
sangre del silencio.*

Blood of mine
blood of dawn,
blood of cracked moon,
blood of silence.

Susana Chavez
1974-2011

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Gabriela began visiting the chapel to Santa Muerte, the female folk saint of death in July 2019. Her prayers to Santa Muerte commenced soon after a woman was discovered in a hotel close to the bar where she worked. The woman had been raped and strangled. Only a few weeks earlier, another young woman's body had been discovered on a dirt road in a residential neighbourhood. She had been macheted to death. Gabriela works as a waitress, often returning home late at night. She feared for her safety and even her life, believing that the Virgin of Guadalupe, a Mexican Marian advocacy, would not be strong enough to defend her. She was afraid but can not give up her job since opportunities are few locally. As a single mother, she has several mouths to feed and no other help but her mother who takes care of her children while she is out working. That year she began lighting white candles, praying and gifting flowers to Santa Muerte every 1st of the month at the chapel and has not stopped since. 'The only thing I have ever asked for' she told me 'is protection from the violence that surrounds us'.

Introduction

Santa Muerte is the fastest growing new religious movement in the Americas. It centres around a female folk saint who personifies death. In English, the folk saint is known as Saint Death, or Holy Death. The new religious movement has come under fire from the Catholic Church, the Mexican State and mass media across the Americas. In misrepresentations that are racist, and sexist, as I will detail, Santa Muerte has been reduced by the above institutions to a 'narco-saint', that is a saint worshipped by narcotraffickers, and the religion portrayed as one that only violent, barbaric males follow (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a). This misconstrues the new religious movement. It ignores the female devotees that outnumber male devotees 2 to 1, silencing Santa Muerte supplication by women.

It is women that were and remain at the forefront of the expansion of the new religious movement (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b), especially mothers and grandmothers. As Chesnut asserted, underlining the importance of women to the faith's inception:

The godmothers of the cult, Doña Queta and Enriqueta Vargas, confirm that ...they see more women and girls at their shrines than males... I also noticed that about twice as many girls and women came to see the ... saint. (Chesnut 2017, 12)

My research in rural Oaxaca between 2018 and 2020 confirmed that twice as many followers are female. Within the area where I conducted fieldwork, all shrines and chapels to Santa Muerte were founded and are tended to by women. Notwithstanding, no academic examination has been undertaken of the importance of women in the expansion of this mushrooming movement and how their faith is a manifestation of their increasing precarity. This article remedies this lacuna.

I will explore Saint Death worship by Mexican women in a space of violence and death, counterpoising the erroneous view that the movement is a macabre, male-dominated cult that promotes drugs and violence. I will argue that devotion to death is women's work. I will demonstrate that women, through Santa Muerte, have fashioned a matrifocal movement to cope with the violence and death perpetrated by men and the male-dominated state. I will also detail how women, typically corralled into the private sphere, have emerged in the public arena as leaders in the domain of devotion to death.

Mexican women's fears and anxieties are many, including dealing with the death of loved ones, coping with violence-related anguish and worrying about their own security and that of their children in a country where gendered violence and narcoviolence are commonplace and treated with impunity. Through Santa Muerte, women have created a gynocentric thanatology to deal with the brutality of the Mexican post-colony.

Death Herself

Death in Mexico is a feminine domain both culturally and empirically. Women have long been linked with death, as female identity is associated with the liminality of childbirth, sexuality and passion (Norget 2006, 143). Female figures such as Santa Muerte, *La Calavera Catrina*¹ and *la Llorona*² symbolize this. On a practical level, death is women's work. It is women who organise and lead search parties for the disappeared (Carlsen 2019). It is also women who arrange funeral rites, prepare food and clean up. Men 'never step foot inside the house, nor do they recite a single word of prayer' (Norget 2006, 143). The realm of popular religiosity provides cultural resources to 'women ... who tend to be marginalized in the public sphere' (ibid, 147). Norget notes how women in Mexico are excluded from the 'rational, outer' domains of public life and instead are anchored to the homestead where funeral rites take place. Funerals create opportunities for 'female leadership ... women create new social centers and shoulder new responsibilities for the guidance ... of community social relations' (ibid).

Through Santa Muerte, women have created new opportunities for themselves and supported their communities. They have established shrines adjoined to their homes that have drawn swathes of followers, segueing from the private into the public space. Furthermore, such female leaders have acquired financial independence, power and prestige in their local communities. Women's devotion to Saint Death externalizes their precarity to a female folk saint who they forge in their own image and imagine as caring for them in an inclusive, healing space that counters that of the violent patriarchal, Mexican narco-state which is 'founded around the exclusion of women' (Wright 2011,34).

My article is based on fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico, between 2018 and 2020 working with female devotees of death—who will be known as Santa Muertistas—at two shrines. It is also based on previous collaborative work with a scholar of religious studies, with research spanning across Mexico. I will commence with an overview of the misconceptions of Santa Muerte. I will then describe who the saint is and outline the doctrine of death. Subsequently, I will recount the tales of female founders and followers of Santa Muerte to demonstrate that devotion to death is women's work.

¹ In 1910, José Guadalupe Posada, a Mexican illustrator, drew *La Catrina*. The satirical cartoon was created to mock the early twentieth-century Mexican upper classes, during the era of Porfirio Díaz, whose lavish, European lifestyles were said to be at the expense of the lower classes. *La Catrina* is typically depicted as a skeletal lady attired in high fashions with a French-style floppy hat.

² *La Llorona* is a female spirit at the centre of a Mexican legend. The tale is of a woman who unloved by her husband drowned herself and her two sons in a river. She was denied entry to heaven until she found her sons' souls. It is said her spirit haunts waterways wailing as she seeks her children, and she is said to go after wandering children and men.

Misconceptions of La Muerte

Santa Muerte is the fastest growing new religious movement in the Americas, boasting 10–12 million followers most of whom reside in Mexico, Central America and the USA (Chesnut 2017, 6). Cognizant of losing its flock to the faith, the Catholic Church has demonized devotion to death decrying it as heretical and blasphemous (Roush 2014). Mexican bishops threatened Catholics who worshiped Holy Death with excommunication. The Argentine Pope lambasted the folk saint of death as a macabre and dangerous symbol of narco-culture. Ironically, although those outside the folk faith often etically define Santa Muertistas as non-Catholic, emically during my interviews with devotees, many—but not all—detailed that they considered themselves and the saint Catholic. We might thus conceive of Santa Muerte as a post-Catholic folk faith that consists of what McNeal (2011) has called ‘alter-cultural praxis’. Whilst Santa Muerte partially reproduces the traditional Catholic Mexican cultural association of women with death (which concomitantly associates them with the domestic space), nevertheless, it also creatively subverts this discourse by enabling women to emerge empowered in the public, male sphere through their devotion to death.

The Mexican State also correlates the folk saint with drug cartels. The army, under the administration of Felipe Calderon, razed scores of shrines dedicated to Santa Muerte in a futile act that failed to expunge drug-related crimes (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, 2). In the mass media, Santa Muertistas are depicted as violent Mexican men: drug dealers and murderers. The media refers to Saint Death as a ‘narco-saint’ and often terms the movement a ‘narco-cult’. The 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*, depicts an image of Santa Muerte praying over a handgun (Deibert 2014). In Western television, film and videogames, Santa Muerte is used to suffuse scenes with male terror, such as in ‘Breaking Bad’, ‘True Detective’ and ‘Ghost Recon’. Indeed, in most films, Mexican males are portrayed as the ‘baddies’, viz. criminals and malefactors. Although some narcotraffickers practice Santa Muerte, they are a minority. Many cartel members venerate the Catholic saint of lost causes, St. Jude, or practice Santería; yet, these religious activities have not attracted the same sensationalistic media attention.

The media furthermore fails to understand the complexities of the drug war and how it impacts the lives and choices of those who cannot escape its contours, thereby creating monolithic, simplistic depictions of Mexican masculinity. Rather than examining the problems of institutionally marginalized men (not from the elite ruling classes), these narratives vilify them thus serving the interests of the status quo. Various scholars have outlined how young men, living in violent post-colonial states led by rapacious leaders, must make difficult decisions to ensure their everyday survival which often involve *volens nolens* joining in criminal gangs or carrying out acts of violence (Abbink 2005; Kingsbury 2014, 2018, 2019; Richards 1996; Rodgers 2006; Rodgers and Jones 2009).

Vigh has described how young men in Guinea-Bissau, unemployed, marginalized and faced with few choices, were willing to fight in the war for paltry salaries so as to ‘make the best of their lives despite a bare minimum of life chances’ (Vigh 2006, 235). Rodgers has posited that manifestations of male youth gang violence in Nicaragua are often coherent modes of social structuration in the face of broader conditions of high crime, insecurity and socio-political breakdown (Rodgers 2006, 269). I have previously written on how disenfranchised young men joined the Knights Templar drug cartel of Michoacán, Mexico,

out of desperation in the context of ‘increasing urban violence, high unemployment rates, the disintegration of the family unit, waning belief in the Catholic Church, lack of political engagement as well as waxing disillusionment with the government’ (Kingsbury 2019, *ibid*). I explained that these young men sought ‘new means of navigating their daily predicaments’, craving ‘ways to empower themselves, to regain their voice, to overcome their lack of finances and limited opportunities’ (*ibid*).

During fieldwork in Oaxaca, I heard stories of fishermen who, unable to feed nor house their families due to declines in fish stocks and seasonal government restrictions on their activities, accepted offers from drug cartels to transport illegal goods in their boats so as not to fall into dire penury. I also heard tales of ‘kill or be killed’ where under duress, young men carried out crimes for the cartel on pain of death or harm to their loved ones. It is thus vital to deconstruct depictions of both cartels and Santa Muerte as a narco-cult in order to avoid misunderstandings that ideologically connect from the standpoint of dominant institutions and vested interests.

Certain academic explorations of Santa Muertistas have reified such associations, focusing on criminal elements, such as Kristensen’s study of Santa Muerte as a ‘cult’ adhered to by the male prison population wherein he claimed that Santa Muerte veneration exploded in Mexico City prisons in the 1990s (Kristensen 2015). This focus mutes the importance of women’s role across the country in the inception and expansion of the religion. We know for a fact that the first prayer ever recorded to Santa Muerte was for wronged wives or girlfriends ‘to bring back a wayward husband or boyfriend’ humbled at her feet (Chesnut 2017, 22; Lewis 1961; Toor 1947). This suggests that from the outset, the movement was motivated by women seeking to take control of men behaving badly. Moreover, as I will describe, devotion to death went public when a woman, Doña Queta, created the first public street-side shrine in November 2001.

The ‘imagined religion’ of Saint Death produced by popular culture has little to do with actual practice by most devotees. Santa Muerte, like Vodou, has been devalued in much of Western media as a deviant pseudo-religion (Bartkowski 1998) in a manner ‘aimed to evoke terror...without openly entering into racist discourse’ disseminating and reinforcing centuries-old racist tropes ‘of the barbaric Other’ (McGee 2012, 232) whilst ignoring the women who worship death and exploring why they do so.

Female followers of the folk saint must be focused on for they are at the fulcrum of faith, as we have seen, outnumbering male devotees 2 to 1. Santa Muerte’s complex, multifaceted character is the conrescence of the many facets, needs and experiences of Mexican women. An analysis of how and why women venerate Santa Muerte discloses the social, economic, political difficulties they face, and how in response women reconstruct feminine spirituality to renegotiate their place in the world and re-frame their understanding of it through a gynocentric thanatology.

Who is Santa Muerte?

Santa Muerte is a Mexican female folk saint who personifies death (Fig. 1). Her origins—the history of which is polemical and beyond the scope of this paper—are syncretic, deriving from Catholicism, Indigenous spirituality and including elements of Santería and New Age influences (Chesnut 2017: 14, Perdigón 2008). Santa Muerte is represented as a female Grim Reaper wielding the same scythe and wearing a shroud, akin to her European male



Fig. 1 Seven-powered (*siete potencias*) Santa Muerte statue photographed in rural Oaxaca at Doña Elena's shrine, note offering of flowers by her side, an apple has also been offered to her, see the right side of the statue

forebear, on the many religious accoutrements that believers utilize in ritual (Lomnitz 2005, 148). Unlike Catholic saints, who have been canonised by the Church, folk saints are spirits of the deceased who have not received official recognition but are deemed holy by the local populace for their miracle-working powers (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, 6). 'They intermingle with humans and have causal influence—magical and miraculous' (Graziano 2006, 6).

In Mexico, and Latin America in general, folk saints such as Jesús Malverde, a Robin Hood-type figure (ibid), are often favoured above Catholic saints. To locals, God may seem a *deus otiosus*, aloof and uninvolved. Catholic saints hail from Europe and their life stories are unrelatable to most Mexicans, whereas folk saints lived out their lives on local soil. Due to personas and mythologies that are forged upon cultural familiarity and locality, devotees view folk saints as far more active, easy to petition and understanding of their needs. Santa Muerte differs from other folk saints in that

rather than being the spirit of a deceased Mexican woman, followers assert that she is the personification of death herself (Chesnut 2017: 4).

Unlike the Virgin Mary or official Catholic saints, Holy Death is amoral. The new religious movement is inclusive. Death is said to judge no one as she comes to us all, no matter colour nor creed. The folk saint is open to all types of petitions from people of all origins, genders and sexual orientations. Santa Muerte shares some of her qualities with the Virgin of Guadalupe who is a brown-skinned Mexican advocacy of Mary (Fig. 2). She is said to have appeared to Juan Diego, an Aztec convert to Christianity, in a vision in 1531. Since then, the Virgin has become the most popular feminine religious figure in Mexico, playing an important role as a national symbol of Mexico (Wolf 1958), but increasingly, many women have turned away from the Virgin to worship Death herself, as will be detailed.



Fig. 2 The demure Virgin of Guadalupe, as photographed in a local Catholic Church. Note how submissive she appears compared with Santa Muerte

Like the Marian figure, Santa Muerte is believed to be endowed with motherly qualities, taking care of her devotees by rewarding them with generous miracles. She may be gentle and sweet like Guadalupe. On the other hand, as Chesnut recorded, devotees have described her as '*una cabrona*', a battle-axe, 'like us' (Chesnut 2017, 3). A female devotee I met gifting flowers to Santa Muerte at a shrine in rural Oaxaca described Holy Death to me as '*una chingona*', a bad-ass woman you do not mess with. Such terms would never be used to describe Guadalupe, who, according to devotees, is chaste, pure, and has a 'humble attitude' (Peterson 1992, 40).

In Mexico, 'the Roman Catholic ideals of the male provider and protector and the virginal housebound wife are commonly subscribed to by men and women in all social classes' and the cultural influence of the Virgin as a model for women is readily apparent (Scott 1986: 23). However, women are not 'passive incumbents of socially ascribed gender roles, but are individuals who make choices' (ibid). I believe that women, in creating the Santa Muerte movement, have consciously reformulated their gender roles and identity through this icon, moving away from the Roman Catholic gender norms and social pressures of chasteness and submission to reformulate a new sense of femininity.

In mythology, Santa Muerte is not imagined as a virgin; consequently, she is said to be open to prayers of a sexual nature and petitions from women of all sexual orientations. Imagining the saint in this manner enables women to accept their sexuality, as opposed to associating this with sinfulness as in the Roman Catholic rhetoric (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b). Furthermore, although she is caring, Santa Muerte may also be ireful and vindictive. Santa Muertistas recount that she punishes those who do not respect their oaths to her and that she dispenses death and destruction to the enemies of her devotees. Her multifaceted persona, both tender but also truculent, is a projection of the Mexican women devoted to her. With equal maternal gentleness and ferocity, they protect their children and their homestead. Many of these women are no longer willing, or able, to emulate the humble, servile attitude of Mary and turn the other cheek when death and violence visit them and their families, as I will describe.

Death's Doctrine

There is no single, unifying Santa Muerte Church equivalent to the Catholic Church although, as I will later detail, a female founder set up a transnational ministry. Despite the large number of shrines which have been opened, no official clergy exists, only laissez-faire leaders who are mostly female. Saint Death has no doctrine. Furthermore, the new religious movement does not require sexual abstinence, teetotalism nor enforce moral regulations.

As the faith has no founding scripture, such as the Bible, in which gender roles are demarcated in terms of hierarchy and since the faith revolves around a female saint, it does not diminish the female gender. If anything, it is matrifocal and offers a representation of the female gender as powerful, active and dominant. Even if many Santa Muertistas also worship God, for those I spoke to, Saint Death as the female personification of death is prepotent and independently so. One female devotee detailed to me 'women bring life into this world, of course it makes sense that a woman would also take it away'. When I asked her about what sort of woman the saint is, she stipulated, 'she is tough and a leader'. Whereas the Virgin was described as a humble spouse, Santa Muerte was said to be '*soltera, sin compromiso*', 'single and beholden to no

man'. As I will describe, this has inspired female leaders, such as Doña Elena, to revel in their autonomy and independence from men.

This liberated attitude towards religion centred around an omnipotent female divinity, with no male intermediaries such as priests or pastors overseeing ritual is alluring to female devotees who fashion their own spiritual spaces free of the male dictates of Catholic Church worship, thereby reclaiming their autonomy by taking their religious practices into their hands. In a country where women have largely been subordinated by male institutions, this is empowering.

Whilst women imbue Santa Muerte with their characteristics and qualities in the way in which they imagine her, dialogically, the strength that she reflects in them in turn empowers them. Abby told me that the saint's fierce female persona instilled her with temerity, to face her fears and to confront men. 'Once you believe in her, you are less afraid', she said. For Victoria, the powerful female figure had given her the confidence to leave her childhood home to escape the abusive uncle who had raised her. 'La Santa gave me a sense of self-worth and the strength to leave my uncle who regularly came home drunk and drugged and beat me till I was bloody and bruised'.

Despite diverging practices, there are certain ritualistic and liturgical commonalities (Pansters 2019, 27). For example, Santa Muerte statues and votives are believed to have specific uses according to their colour. Altars and shrines are fundamental. Most devotees have an altar and regularly visit local shrines to leave offerings. As I will detail, for many women, their public shrines evolved naturally from ever-expanding private altars and have been the means through which they have emerged into the public arena achieving fame and financial security.

Female Founders: Enriqueta Romero

Women, especially mothers and grandmothers, have been founding figures establishing chapels open to the public that have catalyzed the expansion of Santa Muerte devotion. The most famous person who made Santa Muerte devotion go public is Doña Queta also known as Enriqueta Romero (ibid, 13). Doña Queta, a poor housewife, set up a small altar in her kitchen corner from where she sold quesadillas to locals, in Tepito, Mexico City, to try to earn a bit of money. Seeing the altar adorned with an effigy of Santa Muerte and objects of worship, they asked to leave offerings.

Doña Queta was worried about her son's incarceration in jail. Mexican prisons are perilous places where the threat of a violent death is ever present (Porres 2006), who better to appeal to than death herself to manumit her son and lessen the risk of his demise than the Saint of Death. Queta's prayers were heard. Her son was released. Given that offerings were overtaking her kitchen and to thank the saint, on November 1st, she moved her altar out onto the street. Queta decided to reinvest devotees' donations into enlarging it. Soon it became a large, renowned shrine. For the last 10 years, it has been a pilgrimage site for Santa Muertistas. Doña Queta must be credited with devotion to death going public, especially in Mexico City. Prior to this, Santa Muerte remained a secretive folk faith, practised behind closed doors.

Although Doña Queta is now a famous figure, the media continues to fixate on narcos as the principal Santa Muerte protagonists. When the media does recount her

story, many authors, such as Washburn, seem to diminish rather than highlight Queta's powerful role:

Now in her 70s, diminutive...one of the most unlikely religious crusaders around... She curses; she makes dramatic hand gestures; recently, to get some Mormons on her doorstep to beat it, the grandmother told them she was a stripper... Although Romero is now internationally recognized, it's not like she is [WhatsApping the pope](#). She spends most days at home puttering about in an apron, and has lived in the same house her entire life (Washburn 2016).

Such a discourse denies rather than affirms Queta's role as a dominant, dynamic person who has actively shaped religious culture despite her age, gender and lack of economic opportunities in a country where women, particularly in their later years, are 'situated at the margin of the world [which is] not a favorable situation' (de Beauvoir 2010, 129). Terms such as 'diminutive' and 'unlikely' are belittling. Despite her public role as a spokeswoman for Santa Muerte, words like 'apron' and 'same house', symbolizing feminine domesticity, are employed, as if Queta was removed from public life when she has emerged front and centre through Saint Death.

The National Geographic described Doña Queta as 'an alternately fierce and motherly woman' (Guillermoprieto 2013). What the National Geographic overlooked, a point that is central to understanding Santa Muerte and her female followers, is that a woman may be both fierce and a mother. Indeed, this description encapsulates Santa Muerte's qualities, coalescing those of the women that worship her. If as Feuerbach wrote 'God... made man in his own image' (1957), then I argue that women also make Goddess in their own image. Doña Queta as a caring mother was determined to see her son freed. In moving her shrine into the public arena, and later, fighting the authorities who threatened to have it demolished, she has fiercely defended her beliefs as well as her son's life³ by proving her devotion to Saint Death with a grand gesture that up until then no one had dared to do (Fig. 3).

Doña Queta, once an impoverished woman selling quesadillas from her kitchen, has now accrued spiritual prestige, financial and social capital. She plays a vital role within her community. Santa Muertistas ask for her counsel not only on religious but also life matters. She has acquired protection from the violence that characterizes Tepito through her foundational role in the germination of Santa Muerte devotion.

Tepito is one of the most violent neighbourhoods in Mexico City, where many police do not even dare tread. Police corruption and impunity have created public insecurity, allowing organized crime groups to become the 'functional equivalent of mini-states' (Davis and de Guillermo Ruiz 2013, 113). Queta's husband, Raymundo, was slain in 2016 by two armed assailants. Her brother, Rafael, was also shot but survived. Due to her prestige, Queta is considered untouchable. In her eyes, the death saint protects her. On one occasion, she recalls how she was on her way, late at night, to see her critically injured son in hospital. She and her group of female friends suddenly crossed paths with a group of muggers; however, she avers that Santa Muerte 'covered them with her holy shroud' and they went unnoticed (Aridjis et al. 2007).

³ Her son was later gunned down in 2017.



Fig. 3 Doña Queta holding a portrait of Santa Muerte

Quesadillas are no longer Queta's source of income; instead, a shop abutting the shrine supplies visitors with Santa Muerte paraphernalia. Between the income from this store as well as the constant *limosnas*, donations placed by devotees in the box at the shrine, Romero is financially independent. Nevertheless, it has not been easy; Doña Queta has been attacked by both the Church and the State, with authorities threatening to raze her shrine. Keeping the shrine immaculately clean, ensuring her Santa Muerte effigy is always adorned in an impeccably coiffed wig and garbed in a new gown every month, is labour intensive, but it is a labour of love.

Death is women's work: Doña Queta can be seen day in and day out diligently clearing away old candles, dressing her saint and discarding old offerings. She is fiercely faithful to Santa Muerte, a saint who in descriptions of her feisty but caring persona condenses the qualities of the owner of the shrine who was the first person to dare to demonstrate her devotion to death in the public arena.

Female Founders: Enriqueta Vargas

Enriqueta Vargas was distraught when her only son, Jonathan, was murdered with impunity in 2008 not far from an immense statue of Santa Muerte that he had helped erect in Mexico City. Although Enriqueta was not a devotee of Saint Death like her son, and venerated the Virgin of Guadalupe, she made a covenant with Holy Death

(Chesnut 2018). She promised she would extend Santa Muerte's reputation if the saint brought justice to the sicarios that killed her son. Events over the months following her entreaty unfolded such that Vargas felt Saint Death had responded to her request.

Vargas transformed devotion to death, establishing her own ministry, the first of its kind, named Santa Muerte Internacional.⁴ It comprises a network of shrines spanning across the Americas. She became a public spokesperson acquiring significant social status, spiritual prestige and financial capital. As I have stated, devotion to death is women's work. Enriqueta worked incessantly to promote Santa Muerte, even conducting weddings and baptisms as a Santa Muerte priestess (Fig. 4). In November 2015, she began offering last rites at her temple in Tultitlán. Nevertheless, she is the only person to offer such a service. It is extremely rare that an entire family is devoted to Saint Death. As I found out in Oaxaca, family members often have opposing views on Santa Muerte, some may be devotees and even deem the saint a Catholic figure, others may be indifferent, whilst others may look upon the faith as satanic and non-Catholic. Due to this disjuncture, funerals are necessarily held in a traditional Mexican Catholic manner and do not incorporate elements of Santa Muerte faith as this would estrange those who do not adhere or even fear this folk faith and create family tensions.

Lady Justice

Vargas' story, of how she as a former worshiper of Guadalupe turned to Santa Muerte devastated by the violent demise of her son, demonstrates that the humble Virgin is no longer the first figure women turn to when faced with death. Santa Muerte is often depicted in iconography with scales in her left hand, whilst wielding her scythe in her right. This denotes her role in delivering justice to aggrieved devotees, such as in the case of Vargas. Santa Muertistas believe that the saint acts as judge, jury and executioner. She may also prolong life. In the face of State impunity towards murder and violence, and women's exclusion from public space, they turn to the female figure of death for justice.

Zaniyah, a devotee of Santa Muerte whom I met lighting a white candle for her husband, related to me how she worried about his safety daily and prayed to Holy Death to let him live. With three children to feed and no income of her own, his death would spell disaster, not only leading to financial precarity but also possible physical dangers as single women are at higher risk of violence (see Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b).

Juan is a travelling salesman who spends a lot of time on the road. Zaniyah described the risks of his job to me: 'Cartels and criminals frequently raid the vans of salesmen. They steal the merchandise and kill all those in the vehicle'. I asked Zaniyah why she venerated Saint Death. She replied: '*porque lo unico seguro que hay es la muerte*' (because the only thing that is certain is death). In the post-colony, women constantly fear death and violence and it is the only truth. They are aware of the impunity, as has been detailed, with which violence toward and murder are treated whether of men, women or children.

In Oaxaca, children frequently disappear. They are not exempt from the brutality. Sixty percent of females that go missing in the region are between 7 and 17 years of

⁴ In 2018, Vargas died of natural causes. Enriqueta's daughter has taken up her mantle.



Fig. 4 Enriqueeta Vargas holding a devotee's baby who is dressed in white for a Santa Muerte baptism

age. Senora Xiadani is a Santa Muertista and grandmother to several children. She became a fast friend due to her sense of humour, warmth and tempting me with delicious homemade tamales. One day after bumping into her at the local shrine in rural Oaxaca, she suggested we go to a local café and have a chat. We sat down to enjoy the sun and a coffee. At 1.30, she abruptly got up and told me she must make haste to pick up her granddaughter from school. If she did not, she stated, someone might rape and murder her. Someone might kidnap the girl and sell her into prostitution. Someone might remove her heart, kidneys, eyes and liver to sell them to affluent white people for their ailing child. The girl might disappear with no explanation, and the police would do nothing about it. Female life, in particular, she explained 'is not worth anything, except to those who make money from it'.

Xiadani blamed the narcos. 'They're not welcome in my village' she fulminated, '*los campesinos*, (the farmers), they fight with their machetes against the narcos but we women, we will fight too, we will take our garrots and throttle them if we have to, they can come with their guns, we are ready'. Xiadani, like Vargas, had grown up venerating Guadalupe but no longer believed that the Virgin was strong enough to do what needed to be done to protect her and her loved ones. In her description of Saint Death as a strong and caring mother, she projected her own traits as well as her desire and determination to keep her family and her village safe from harm, reaffirming that women make Santa Muerte in their own image.

Ni Una Mas, Not One Woman More Dead

In 2019, the Mexican murder rate escalated to 35,000 confirmed murders. Furthermore, as a result of the drug war, 65,000 people have disappeared since 2006 indicating that the president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's policy towards narcos, summarized in

his maxim ‘abrazos no balazos’ (hugs not bullets), has been futile. Mexico has also witnessed a growing pandemic of femicide and gendered violence.

Mexico has been named one of the most perilous countries for women. Every 18 seconds, a woman is raped (Mujeres en Red 2019).⁵ Government figures record that an average of 10 women are murdered daily (NPSS 2019). The number of femicides has increased by 137% over the past 5 years. Mexican authorities have nebulous definitions of femicide allowing it to be treated with leniency. The Femicide Observatory, a coalition of 43 groups that document crimes against women, noted that only 16% of female homicides in 2012 and 2013 were classified as femicides; moreover, a mere 1.6% resulted in convictions. ‘Many of these killings are carried out by unknown assailants’; however, many are also ‘murdered by someone known to them’ (Olivera 2006, 105 see also de los Rios et al. 2010).

In March 2020, millions of women rallied together across Mexico to protest gendered violence. The campaign led by a feminist collective was entitled ‘*Ni una mas*’ (not one [woman] more). The initiative commenced in Argentina started by a group who defined their activities as ‘a collective scream against machista violence’. It quickly germinated across Latin America (Rovetto 2015). The collective named the campaign after a phrase penned in 1995 by Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez: ‘*Ni una muerta más*’ (not one more [woman] dead). Chávez wrote this to protest the thousands of femicides in Ciudad Juárez where she lived. Chávez’s body and severed hand were found in January 2011. She had been strangled to death; her head covered in a black bag. State authorities treated her murder with impunity, refusing to categorize it as yet another femicide or to link it to her work as an activist, stating it was the result of a group of young men’s drunken revelry gone awry.

As Speed points out ‘Thousands and thousands of women and girls have been murdered in recent years, their bodies tossed out like so much waste in garbage heaps, ravines, and empty lots’ (Speed 2016, 285). Femicide appears to be the extreme manifestation of ‘a range of violations of women’s human rights’ in Mexico (Olivera 2006: 105). The victims have largely been blamed in public rhetoric for gendered violence: for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Police in Juárez, for example, related to the distraught families and friends of women and girls who had disappeared that they most likely lived ‘double lives’ (Nathan 1999, 26; Wright 1999, 456).

During the ‘*Ni una mas*’ protest, women attacked the rhetoric of victim-blaming as they chanted a song that has been circulating across Latin America: ‘*Un Violador en tu Camino*’, (a rapist in your path). The lyrics affirm in one section: ‘*Y la culpa no era mía, ni dónde estaba ni cómo vestía*’, ‘and it was not my fault, not where I went or how I was dressed’. Women also denounced the complicity of the patriarchal state in violence, from which they are excluded. The lyrics continue with the following opprobium ‘*El patriarcado es un juez que nos juzga por nacer, y nuestro castigo es la violencia que no ves*’ (patriarchy is a judge that judges us for being born and our punishment, the violence you do not see). The lyrics later declare ‘*El violador eres tú. Son los policías, los jueces, el Estado, el Presidente. El Estado opresor es un macho violador*’ (the rapist is you, the police, the judges, the State, the President, the oppressive state is a macho rapist).

Despite the protests across Mexico, Lopez Obrador has met women’s wrath with apathy, complaining that protests distracted from the raffle of his presidential airplane.

⁵ See the article Dieciocho segundos. Cada 18 segundos una mujer es violada en Mexico in ‘mujeres en red, el periódico feminista’ <http://www.mujeresenred.net/spip.php?article13> see also the information centre on <https://www.gesmujer.org/>

Violence against women is an expression of male power. The president's comments reified the latter, underlining how women are subordinated to not only the physical but also the institutionalized power of men through 'real and symbolic inequalities' (Olivera 2006, 105). In Mexico, there is a 'pervasive gendering of the public sphere' which serves as a 'mechanism of violence' for circumscribing and controlling whilst excluding 'the feminine' from the public sphere of 'politics, economy, and culture' (Landes 1988, 2).

Yet through devotion to death as a feminine domain, as we have seen, women have emerged in the public space as religious leaders. They create spiritual culture through their shrines, reclaiming and re-gendering space. Santa Muerte faith has been formed by female followers into a gynocentric thanatology within which they express themselves and cope with anxieties about death and violence. Moreover, by emphasizing Santa Muerte's feminine identity, despite recognizing that violence is perpetrated by men, women have reclaimed death, at the closure of it all, as a female realm.

Please Protect Me

Santa Muerte enables women to cope with experiences of gendered violence and create spaces and modes of healing, as I witnessed through Maria. She came to the shrine of Saint Death to light candles and say prayers. She is 26 years old and originally from Veracruz, where she had been brought up a Catholic, her family venerating La Virgen de Guadalupe. I asked Maria why she was a devotee of Santa Muerte. She related that 5 years ago, she had been kidnapped by a group of men; she suspected they were members of the cartel. For days on end, she did not see the light of day. She was tortured and raped by numerous men. Maria knew they would eventually kill her. Prior to this, she had heard of Santa Muerte but was not a devotee. Every day, she implored the folk saint to help her escape alive, promising Saint Death that she would get a tattoo of her. One night, her captors distracted, an opportunity arose. Maria was able to flee. Nine months later her baby was born.

'When I first saw her, I was afraid, I did not even want to look at her. But something gripped me. I said, let me see her. All my fear melted away, she had my face and I knew that for some reason la Santa had sent her to me'. After this, Maria purchased a black Santa Muerte statue and embracing her said 'Please protect me, you freed me and now I will tattoo myself for you'.

Maria had scars from the beating and on these she had Santa Muerte tattooed which she believed protected and healed her. She mounted an altar in her house. She told me that Saint Death cared for her like a mother and whenever anyone hurt her the saint took revenge on them. She believed that Santa Muerte had also punished her rapists. I asked her if women had a special relationship with the Saint. 'She attracts women most of all because she is inside of us', she explained.

If Santa Muerte is inside women, as Maria explained, she must be understood as an externalization of their experiences, fears and desires. She is a response to the world they inhabit. An analysis of the folk saint's female following is vital for comprehending how increasing precarity for women is manifesting in changing patterns of religious belief and praxis, namely abandonment -for some women- of Marian advocations for Santa Muerte. Moreover, we must recognize women's capacity to create spaces of

healing and empowerment to counter the toxic experiences they have of death and violence. The Virgin of Guadalupe, for many, can no longer offer women the solace or protection they seek and only death herself has the power to grant them life.

Female Founders: Elena Perez Martinez

Doña Elena is an Indigenous, Zapotec woman in her 70s who was thrown out by her father at age 12 (Fig. 5). She never learned to read nor write. This has made finding work difficult; she sewed for a living until establishing a chapel to Saint Death. She initially set up a small shrine in 2003 to thank Santa Muerte for healing an ailment that had consumed her for 12 years and for which she had received no proper medical care. She related ‘one night as I lay in my bed death came’ but not as she expected. Death



Fig. 5 Doña Elena in her Santa Muerte shrine

flew in from the darkness, in a long gown, black as midnight. Santa Muerte whispered to her that she would be cured. Elena woke up to a miraculous recovery.

Elena with her son's help established the little shrine right next to her tin-roof home. Over time, donations to the saint by visitors were used to expand it. When the small road by the shrine and the shrine itself were destroyed by authorities to make way for the construction of a major highway, this was seen by Elena, not as an excuse to give up, but as an opportunity to build an impressive chapel. The Santa Muerte church has had an impact on the local populace, attracting those who are not familiar with Saint Death or reticent to worship her publicly. From the donations of devotees, Elena is able not only to maintain the chapel and add embellishments to it but also cover her basic needs.

For Elena, exactly like Queta and Vargas, devotion to death has become a full-time job and she has become central to her community. Many revere her as spiritually powerful. Her blessings are in demand. I even found myself momentarily comforted by her words on one dark, stormy night when I had to drive home from the chapel. She said to me 'May la Santa bless your journey and keep you safe'.

Residing within the community in rural Oaxaca, as a lone female scholar, there were moments when I was afraid. This was when I started to understand why women worship death. Looking up at the demure almost self-effacing gaze of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a local chapel one day and then later at Elena's chapel being met by the defiant glare of the skeletal figure of death as she brandished her scythe menacingly, I had a realisation. If I were to choose one supernatural figure to protect me, to implore—such as the night when I crashed my car on a pitch-black dirt road in the jungle where a woman had previously been murdered, and had to hide in the darkness as unknown SUVs potentially filled with dangerous people drove by—it would be a fierce female deity whose power surpassed that of those I feared and who was ready to fight them to the death, if need be (Fig. 6).

For Elena, just like for Queta, it has not been easy to maintain her chapel. A local Catholic priest has threatened her many times and attempted to have the shrine razed. One night, the state police (*Estatales*) raided the chapel and her house. They menaced her, violently forced her and her granddaughter into a room which they then locked. They stole funds from the donation box and desecrated the shrine, even lighting the hands of Elena's favourite Santa Muerte statue on fire. She tells me that Saint Death exacted her revenge. She heard on the radio (she cannot afford a television) that the same police had raided a ranch. It happened to have CCTV. The owner of the ranch reported it and they were punished.

Like Enriqueta Romero, Enriqueta Vargas and many of the female devotees I have met, Elena is caring yet fierce. She is ferociously devoted to caring for her shrine and her family. She is not willing to turn the other cheek when harm is done to her and her family. Santa Muerte's persona as a saint who is both caring but feisty and vindictive is the spiritual expression of these female founders and disciples who are devoted to death. They have created an icon in their own image that represents the many difficulties that women have and the strength, determination yet nurturing nature they must have to survive and bring up children in a country where death and violence are ever present. Women have emerged in the public space as leaders of their communities in the realm of death, countering Mexican necropolitics (Wright 2011) with a gynocentric thanatology in which death as a woman has the last word.



Fig. 6 Black and white photo of Santa Muerte

I asked Senora Elena why so many women came to shrine. She responded ‘more women come because we have many problems. *Es una lucha*’ (it is a battle). ‘Women may be worth little to most here, but not to la Santa. No one else listens but she does. I spend hours talking to her. I come in the chapel and I tell her my problems and she listens because she is female and she has suffered the same difficulties.’ The saint is imagined as a woman, and like them, she takes on the roles they do and understands the injustices and difficulties they face, because as Elena pointed out, no one else does. Women, faced with the daily fear of death and violence, are imbued with strength to face their fears and cope with their pain, as they do not have the choice to do otherwise. Santa Muerte vindicates their desires for justice, and for a better life, rather than, like the Catholic Church enforcing submission and acceptance, or like the state blaming female victims of violence.

Centred around an omnipotent, independent female figurehead, the Santa Muerte movement instills women with a sense of autonomy ‘As you see me now,’ Elena told me, ‘I am happy. I live alone, but I am not afraid. I have everything I need with Santa Muerte at my side. Men are nothing but trouble and I don’t need their money. They expect so much from you, nowadays if my son asks me to cook for him, I tell him to do it himself. I have looked after men for long enough, now la Santa looks after me.’ And Elena looks after her Saint, day in and day out, keeping the shrine meticulously clean as devotion to death is women’s work.

Conclusion

Santa Muerte is not merely a religious object of veneration for male narcos as the Church and the media portray. She has a special appeal to the innumerable women who have been at the forefront of the faith, whether as shrine owners or as devotees. As outlined, funeral rites in Mexico are women’s work where within the realm of popular religiosity they emerge as leaders to guide community social relations (Norget 2006). I suggest that the veneration of Santa Muerte, the Saint of Death, just like funerals is women’s work. It is a spiritual labour that empowers women and legitimizes their gender identity. The folk faith does not discriminate based on age. It is older women, mothers and grandmothers, who have founded key shrines and ministries responsible for the expansion of the movement. These shrines have evolved, as we have seen, out of their own homes. It is these women who daily clean these shrines or tend to ministries, ferociously fending off male authorities in the form of religious or state figures who threaten them and their chapels. They take on powerful roles of leadership and guidance in their communities, even, in some cases, across numerous countries.

If the empowerment of female devotees occurred only in the spiritual realm, it might be easy to dismiss devotion to Saint Death as an ‘opium of the masses’ that mollifies women who might otherwise rise up against the violence and political exclusion. However, as has been alluded to in the cases of Queta, Enriqueta and Elena, what is now the fastest growing new religious movement in not only Mexico, but also across the Americas, is largely led by women who have accrued spiritual, financial and social capital. Despite living in a country where women are excluded from the public realm, they have emerged as respected leaders through their devotion to death. Furthermore, as we have seen, through Santa Muerte, women have created spaces of healing where they can freely express their grievances to an omnipotent female saint who legitimizes their suffering as women.

Santa Muerte is a free-for-all faith with no moral nor behavioural strictures, no power structures, no officialized priests, dictums nor scripture. There is no gender bias within the faith, rather it is matrifocal, as Santa Muerte is depicted as a female saint. Even if many devotees also pray to God, as the personification of death, the saint is seen as supreme. This spiritual space is distinct from the male-governed church and offers women a sense of power that the patriarchal state denies them. For women who have few means nor opportunities and who deal constantly with the threat of death and violence, a powerful female folk saint allows them to navigate the difficulties of the post-colony, whilst validating their identity as women. In short, as a weapon of the weak, or perhaps more accurately a weapon of women, devotion to Santa Muerte empowers Mexican women socially, spiritually and financially.

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