

Article

The Scythe and the Pentagram: Santa Muerte from Folk Catholicism to Occultism

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Abstract: Santa Muerte is establishing a presence among practitioners of contemporary occultism in Europe and North America. The occult milieu is highly different from the Mexican cult of Santa Muerte, having a strong heritage of secrecy and tradition as social capital and being mostly middle-class in orientation. Nonetheless, this Catholic folk saint with a mostly pragmatic, popular, and grassroots cult is becoming increasingly popular among occultists. Based on a survey of three recent books on Santa Muerte geared towards an Anglophone, occult audience, it is therefore the aim of this article to understand how and why the Skeleton Saint is attracting adherents in the occult milieu, by analyzing the underlying causes of this growing trend, as well as the conditions shaping it. It is the overall argument of this article that the beginning reception of Santa Muerte in occultism is a result of perceived needs and demands specific to the occult milieu rather than characteristics inherent in the symbol itself, and that an analysis of the ways in which she is spreading outside of her original sociocultural context must be guided by an understanding of the novel one she is integrated in.

Keywords: Santa Muerte; occultism; Catholicism

1. Introduction

When visiting the temple of a Deep South occult lodge in 2012, we encountered something we had not anticipated. Among the statues and artwork representing Egyptian, Indian, and Greco-Roman deities, Kabbalistic symbolism, and demonological beings, was a small altar to Santa Muerte. While Western esotericism is often eclectic, this was the first time we had encountered this Mexican folk saint doing fieldwork in the esoteric milieu. Santa Muerte's presence was not as surprising as it may seem. On the contrary, the saint is establishing a presence among practitioners of contemporary Western esotericism, an umbrella term denoting a number of genealogically related, heterodox religious phenomena originating in the Renaissance and whose earliest roots can be found in pagan antiquity. Although precise demarcations vary, a number of currents are commonly included in the category: Renaissance Hermeticism, alchemy, and magic; German *naturphilosophie*; the Tarot; some branches of Freemasonry; Rosicrucianism; Theosophy; spiritualism; modern occultism, Satanism, Paganism, and aspects of New Age. For the purposes of this article, the last group of phenomena is the most central. In the nineteenth century, what Max Weber has termed "the disenchantment of the world" birthed what is known as occultism, a particular manifestation of esotericism in modernity that is simultaneously a product of and reaction against some of its core tenets. Occultism mingles older esoteric worldviews

with modern notions of individualism and concepts derived from modern science.¹ While older esotericism was largely Christian, the search for re-enchantment and existential meaning coupled with general disillusionment with the Church combined with the growing availability of literature on ancient paganism, as well as Asian religions compelled many *fin-de-siècle* occultists to turn to Hinduism, Buddhism, and varieties of pre-Christian paganism in the articulation of their ideas.

The Anglo-American occult milieu is different from the social context out of which the contemporary Mexican cult of Santa Muerte emerged. While Santa Muerte attracts devotees from all layers of society, many if not most of her Mexican adherents belong to the working class (Chesnut, *Devoted to Death* [5], pp. 11–13). Although her connection to cartel violence has been strongly exaggerated, Santa Muerte is nonetheless popular among many lower level criminals, as well as police and correctional officers (Chesnut, *Devoted to Death* [5], pp. 14, 96–98, 101–2, 106–7; Kristensen, *Postponing Death* [6]). Finally, most of her Mexican devotees were raised Catholic ([5], p. 115). In contrast, the contemporary occult milieu in the US and Europe generally attracts members of the middle class, many of whom are college-educated.² Western esotericism also has a strong heritage of secrecy as social capital, tradition as a high value, and notions of an exclusive, higher truth of reality that is mostly available to an elect few.³

Nonetheless, Santa Muerte, a Catholic folk saint with a mostly pragmatic, popular, and grassroots cult is becoming an increasing presence in the occult milieu outside of Mexico. Based on a survey of three recent books on Santa Muerte geared towards an Anglophone, occultist audience, the purpose of this article is to explicate how and why the Skeleton Saint is attracting adherents in the Anglo-American occult milieu, by analyzing the underlying causes of this growing trend as well as the conditions shaping it. It is the overall argument of this article that the reception of Santa Muerte in Anglo-American occultism thus far has been shaped by perceived needs and demands specific to this part of the occult milieu rather than characteristics inherent in the symbol itself, and that an analysis of the ways in which she is spreading outside of her original sociocultural context must be guided by an understanding of the novel one she is integrated in.⁴

2. What is Western Esotericism?

Academic debates regarding how properly to define Western esotericism have been ongoing since its inception as a field of legitimate research, and far exceed the focus of this study.⁵ In this article, we are

¹ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 1996 [1]; cf. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* ([2], pp. 174–75, 395); Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* [3]; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 2006 [4].

² There is currently a lack of research on contemporary occultism, including quantitative data on average income and educational level. However, it is possible to draw some conclusions, partly due to the greater availability of such research on contemporary Paganism and witchcraft, which is demographically similar and often overlaps with occultism. See e.g., Berger, Leach, and Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census* [7]. However, while Berger et al. conclude that the broader milieu of Paganism and witchcraft appears to have a higher percentage of women than men (this is also supported by Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* ([2], p. 401f.), the opposite appears to be true of a number of initiatory occult fraternities, including the Ordo Templi Orientis and the Dragon Rouge. See Hedenborg-White, forthcoming doctoral dissertation [8], and Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment* ([9], pp. 91–92). Granholm also states that many members of the Dragon Rouge are university educated ([9], pp. 107, 197–98). Scholars have also attested that many occultists read and are influenced by scholarly publications on their religious field. Asprem and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms” [10]; Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment* ([9], p. 198). This also supports the conclusion that the contemporary occult milieu is, by and large, quite highly educated.

³ The important role of secrecy and initiation as a form of social capital in Western esotericism has been debated in a number of publications. See e.g., Pasi, “The Problems of Rejected Knowledge: Thoughts on Wouter Hanegraaff’s Esotericism and the Academy” [11]; Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 2010 [12]; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 2012 [13]. While in actuality many of the beliefs and practices associated with various branches of occultism have actually been broadly available, many occult authors nonetheless emphasize a view of reality as many-layered and partly concealed.

⁴ Needless to say, there are also important examples of how elements of Western esotericism have become integrated into the cult of Santa Muerte in Mexico, and vice versa. As the focus of this article is the reception of Santa Muerte among Anglo-American occultists, these processes exceed the scope of this study, and it is our hope that future research will attend to the interface between occultism and folk Catholicism in Mexico, as well as the trajectory of this crossover among Hispanophone devotees living in the US.

⁵ For a brief review, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 2012 ([13], pp. 314–67).

guided by the theoretical model developed by pioneering esotericism scholar Wouter J. Hanegraaff, who traces the origins of esotericism to the historically ambivalent relationship between European culture and pagan antiquity [13]. Hanegraaff sees Western esotericism as comprised of “rejected knowledges”; a diverse set of worldviews and epistemologies relegated to the wastebasket of Western culture in its attempts to define true religion, sound science, and modernity. Although Christianity was the dominant faith in the Roman Empire in the late 4th century, Platonism remained a central influence on Christian theology up until the Reformation ([13], p. 77). The Renaissance witnessed the flourishing of a narrative of ageless wisdom according to which ancient sages such as Zoroaster, Plato, and Hermes were all mouthpieces of a universal, divine wisdom that was also expressed in Christian teachings. Nourished by the recent availability of a large corpus of pagan documents, as well as texts on Jewish kabbalah and magic and science from the Islamic world, a vibrant intellectual milieu mostly centered in Italy gave rise to a number of primarily Catholic thinkers seeking to harmonize aspects of pagan learning, particularly religious Platonism, with Christian doctrine.

Far from constituting a rejection of Christianity, the ancient wisdom narrative could be seen as a way of bolstering its claims to timeless legitimacy ([13], pp. 5f, 8, 16, 27f, 42, 72f, 77). However, a number of overwhelmingly Protestant critics viewed the ancient wisdom narrative as evidence of the degeneracy and corruption of Catholicism, attacking the thought of the Christian Platonists in a number of polemical writings. Hanegraaff identifies this genre as the early origins of the historic study of what is today known as Western esotericism, being the first to treat all of the then existing currents today seen as esoteric as a coherent phenomenon. This can thus be seen as the first stage of discursive rejection through which what is now known as Western esotericism began to be separated out as a delimited cultural field ([13], pp. 78–82, 93ff, 127). The second phase is marked by the late 17th century and onwards into the Enlightenment, when it was increasingly held that aspects of pagan philosophy could be useful as long as they were in harmony with reason and were not intermixed with religion. Thus emerged philosophical eclecticism, that is, the transhistorical study of philosophy aimed at extracting its supposedly rational truths from the magical superstitions they were allegedly mired in. Hence, the religious aspects of Platonism were relegated to the cultural wastebasket ([13], pp. 127ff, 132, 140–53).

In other words, Western esotericism *sensu* Hanegraaff first emerged as a “historiographical concept”, comprising a set of epistemologies and worldviews that were rejected first by mainstream religion as heresy or sin, and subsequently by modernity as irrational and superstitious ([13], p. 107). Although this means that Western esotericism is partly a construct, Hanegraaff asserts that the rejection was not random. On the contrary, the epistemologies ejected through the articulation of true religion, sound science, and rational philosophy share important characteristics, namely a focus on panentheism and an emphasis on intuitive, ecstatic knowledge of ultimate reality (*gnosis*) ([13], pp. 371–73). Moreover, the discursive exorcism of these worldviews created an attractive alternative to people seeking to challenge both religious dogmatism and materialist disenchantment. Romanticism is an example of this, which also contributed to the emergence of a self-aware esoteric and occult milieu that perceived itself as separate from or even opposed to the dual pillars of doctrinal faith and positivist science ([13], pp. 23, 243, 253f, 258, 259). Occultism can thus be seen as a particular manifestation of esotericism in modernity, secularized esotericism, or the attempts by esotericists to come to grips with industrialization, secularization, modern science, and disenchantment.⁶

⁶ Cf. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 1996 [1]. Although this is an extremely compact summary of the history and development of Western esotericism, a more detailed explication exceeds the aim and scope of this article and is not strictly relevant to our immediate purpose. For more insight into the history of Western esotericism, the reader is referred to e.g., Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 2012 [13]; Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 2010 [12]; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 1996 [1]; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* [14].

3. Santa Muerte in the Occult

As mentioned above, Santa Muerte is becoming a presence in the contemporary Anglo-American occult milieu, and a growing number of webpages, spellbooks and *grimoires* clearly aimed at a non-Latin readership integrate Santa Muerte with aspects of Anglo-American occultism. Below, we will present and compare the structure and contents of three English-language introductions on Santa Muerte geared towards a non-Hispanophone, occult audience before proceeding to a discussion of what these books reveal about the contemporary occult milieu.⁷ Due to the space confines of this study, our presentation of the source material will be very brief. The third written work scrutinized will be presented at greater length, as it is substantially longer than the two others.

3.1. *Grimoire of Santa Muerte* by Sophia DiGregorio

Published in 2013 by Winter Tempest Books, Sophia diGregorio's *Grimoire of Santa Muerte* comprises 117 pages and serves as a practical introduction to Santa Muerte aimed at "English-only speaking, non-Catholics" (Sophia diGregorio, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte* [15], p. iii). diGregorio presents herself as an occultist and former Wiccan from a family of Catholics.⁸ She has previously published books on spell-casting, non-Wiccan witchcraft, and vampires, seemingly mostly through Winter Tempest Books, and also appears to be the publisher's main author. In contrast to more established esoteric publishing houses, a majority of the titles issued by Winter Tempest Books appear to focus on magical methods for acquiring material wealth, prosperity, or harming one's enemies. However, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte* appears to be its sole publication that is based on Latin American spirituality.⁹

In terms of the ritual and devotional practices described, *Grimoire of Santa Muerte* is similar to many spellbooks and pamphlets distributed in *botanicas* on both sides of the US-Mexico border: most of the book is made up of prayers, instructions for how to establish an altar, consecrate candles and talismans, and perform spells aimed at solving everyday problems connected to relationships, prosperity, legal issues, or protection ([15], pp. 33–108). The book also includes several versions of the *novena*, a traditional sequence of prayers to be recited on nine subsequent nights ([15], pp. 40–46, 76–77, 81). Like many Hispanophone spellbooks focused on Santa Muerte, diGregorio eschews more complex theological speculation in favor of practical instructions for developing a concrete relationship with Santa Muerte. The *Grimoire* also comprises an overview of color correspondences and suitable altar offerings to Santa Muerte ([15], pp. 30–31, 37–40).

Despite these similarities, diGregorio's treatment of Catholicism reveals that the work is intended for a different audience than many Mexican spellbooks on the Skeleton Saint. As is common in Mexican devotion, she includes Catholic prayers such as Glory Be, Our Father, and Hail Mary, and outlines the use of the rosary and sign of the cross prior to invoking Santa Muerte ([15], pp. 20–22). However, she integrates this Catholic content in a non-Christocentric narrative by claiming that Catholicism is really born from "paganism and the occult, although this is officially denied by the church" ([15], p. 15). She argues that Christianity has its roots in the pre-Christian pagan religions of the Mediterranean such as the cult of the Greek god Dionysus, as well as in astrology, and the doctrine of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water ([15], pp. 15–17). She identifies Jesus with the sun, "passing through the twelve signs of the zodiac, represented in the Christian allegory by the twelve disciples", and claims that the Eucharistic wafer of the Catholic mass represents the solar, masculine divine force united with its feminine and lunar counterpart, identified with the cup of wine ([15], p. 16). She also claims

⁷ Our interpretation of the target audience of these works is based on the authors' self-presentations; the fact that the publishing houses behind them are clearly oriented towards an occult, Pagan, or New Age market; and the discursive conventions they relate to. Our selection of books is not intended to reflect the occult milieu comprehensively, but rather to exemplify different approaches to introducing Santa Muerte to an occultist audience.

⁸ "The Dangers of Wiccan Covens and Other Neo-Pagan Groups to Women and Children" [15].

⁹ The publishing house has no website presenting a comprehensive listing of its publications. For an overview, see "Browse by Book Publisher: Winter Tempest Books." [16]

that the Christian cross really represents the four elements and the Tetragrammaton, and contends that Our Father is really an invocation of the elements ([15], pp. 17–21). While many of the Catholic aspects of Mexican Santa Muerte devotion are nominally retained in diGregorio's book, they are thus re-interpreted as a veiled manifestation of originally pagan or occult teachings. This can be interpreted as a way of meeting the preferences of an Anglo-American occultist readership.

diGregorio's idiosyncratic interpretation of both ancient paganism and Christianity can be seen as a way of resolving possible tensions created by the largely Catholic origins and context of the Mexican Santa Muerte cult with the widespread skepticism towards mainstream Christianity in contemporary, Anglo-American occultism. diGregorio indicates her awareness of the difficulty of making a folk saint steeped in Catholic symbolism appealing to an occultist readership by paganizing Santa Muerte and linking her to the Mexican underworld goddess Mictecacihuatl, various Mayan deities of death and the underworld, and Greco-Roman deities, including Thanatos, Athena, Minerva, and Hecate ([15], p. 8).¹⁰ diGregorio also explicitly expresses her awareness of this fact by writing that readers who have a "very negative association with what seems to be Christian symbolism" may substitute an elemental invocation for the conventional Catholic opening rites ([15], p. 24). She also displays a negative attitude towards mainstream Christianity at large that is common to contemporary occult works, arguing that the Christian view of death represents "judgment, punishment, the fires of Hell and separation from the world of the living" whereas paganism is more focused on death as "a transition and a change of condition" ([15], p. 4). By expressing criticism towards mainstream Christianity, acknowledging that readers may be prejudiced towards the Christian faith, and integrating Santa Muerte into a lineage of pagan deities predating Christianity, she thus negotiates the introduction of this Catholic folk saint to the novel context of Anglo-American occultism.

3.2. *Santisima Muerte: How to Call and Work With Holy Death*

"Santisima Muerte: How to Call and Work with Holy Death" was originally part of an ongoing series of pamphlets called *Guides to the Underworld*, issued by the English esoteric publisher Hadean Press. The series focused on practical methods for ritual magic and invocation of demonic beings as well as Catholic saints, primarily based on European grimoires. The text was later reprinted as part of a collection of pamphlets dealing with saints. The publications of Hadean Press combine older folk magic with more established esoteric systems, such as reinterpretations of Aleister Crowley's *Thelema* (<http://www.shop.hadeanpress.com/recent-releases/>). There are also a growing number of titles focused on various modalities of African Diaspora religion, exemplifying a growing trend among a number of contemporary occultists to combine European folk magic with African Diaspora forms.¹¹ The publisher states that the use of pamphlets as a medium is deliberate, as it responds to a longing for pre-Internet exclusivity and authenticity, linking it explicitly to the use of magical pamphlets in earlier periods (<http://www.hadeanpress.com/guides-to-the-underworld/>). This statement is illustrative, seemingly indicating a willingness to address what may be seen as a sense of disenchantment caused by the increasing availability of occult material resulting from digitalization.

"Santisima Muerte: How to Call and Work With Holy Death" can thus be understood as part of a nostalgic discourse in contemporary occultism that seeks return to a more authentic magical practice. Nonetheless, the way in which its author, Conjureman Ali, presents Santa Muerte, is very clearly shaped by values and aspirations specific to the contemporary occult milieu. Conjureman Ali, also known as Dr. Raven, is a well-known writer and practitioner of various forms of folk magic, both European and African Diaspora, and priest and founder of one of the few semi-public Quimbanda temples active in the USA today.

¹⁰ The association with Mictecacihuatl is not uncommon in Mexico. Chesnut, *Devoted to Death* ([5], p. 28).

¹¹ See e.g., Frisvold, *Exu* [17]; Frisvold, *Pomba Gira* [18]; Frisvold, *Palo Mayombe* [19].

The rituals presented in “Santísima Muerte” are based on outlines found in Mexican spellbooks, and include a common version of the novena.¹² All are also set within the framework of folk Catholicism. Similar to many Hispanophone texts on Santa Muerte as well as diGregorio’s work, the spells are aimed at pragmatic goals. However, Ali’s approach to Santa Muerte is different from that of diGregorio. Despite addressing a non-Mexican, primarily occultist readership, he is clearly opposed to any efforts to paganize Santa Muerte, stating that she is a “purely Mexican, folk-Catholic phenomenon and should be respected as such”, and that attempting to “syncretize her with neo-pagan deities or remove her from her cultural roots would be disrespectful to both her and her devotees” ([21], p. 161). Thus, he is clearly opposed to approaches like that of diGregorio. However, he is more neutral to the identification between Santa Muerte and the Aztec goddess Mictecacihuatl, and interestingly also less condemning of Mexican Pagan attempts to create syncretism between the two ([21], p. 163). Thus, his animosity is seemingly mostly aimed at European and North American Pagans and occultists. This may be interpreted as an attempt to avoid accusations of cultural appropriation while simultaneously maintaining an emphasis on what is perceived as traditional.

Although Ali seemingly attempts to present Santa Muerte in as traditional a manner as possible, his treatment of Catholicism is still different from that of a typical Mexican spellbook and he clearly anticipates an ambivalent or negative reader response to mainstream Christianity. Although he stresses that Santa Muerte should be approached like other Catholic saints, he presents this as a matter of adherence to tradition rather than an expression of his own personal beliefs or those of his readers. The importance of Catholicism in the development of the Santa Muerte figure is thus acknowledged but simultaneously relativized, as the Catholic customs recommended are not presented as part of an overarching existential framework according to which all of creation should be interpreted. Ali’s insistence on tradition is also indicative of the particular conditions and norms of the contemporary occult milieu, in which the concept of tradition holds very high cultural and spiritual capital.¹³ Interestingly, Ali’s insistence on tradition and how one should or should not approach Santa Muerte is also rather untraditional in relationship to the eclectic and non-dogmatic cult of Santa Muerte in Mexico. His attempt to present a traditional interpretation of Santa Muerte can thus be seen as a way of catering to the very specific cultural tastes of an occultist audience.

3.3. *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic and Mysticism of Death*

Tomas Prower’s *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic & Mysticism of Death* is the first work on Santa Muerte issued by a major esoteric and New Age publishing house, Llewellyn International. While DiGregorio and Conjureman Ali clearly target an occult readership, Prower draws much more explicitly on occult and New Age symbolism and practice. Contrary to Ali, Prower writes that one does not have to adopt Catholic rites or customs if they are contrary to one’s own beliefs, contending that Santa Muerte can be integrated into one’s own religion and that her magic is available to anyone who approaches her “with an open mind and an open heart” ([23], pp. 10, 31). Thus, Prower also relativizes the importance of Catholicism in the Santa Muerte cult, although in a different manner, by presenting Christianity as but one out of many equally acceptable pathways to Santa Muerte. This sentiment is also echoed in the fact that the book—in stark contrast to Ali’s work—features no prayers to Jesus, God, or any other saint, nor any version of the novena. Instead, the spells are focused on visualizations and correspondences, and Prower writes that words spoken to Santa Muerte should come from the heart and not be written down.

¹² For this article we had the following titles available for comparison; *Altars, Ofrendas, Oraciones y Rituales a la Santa Muerte* (2007); Rey, Victoria (2012). *Santa Muerte Magia Verde*. Pita, Laila (2013). *Testimonios de la Santísima, Relatos Verdaderos de Milagros Recibidos por los fieles seguidores de la Santa Muerte*, Jimenez, Beto (2015) *La Biblia de La Santa Muerte* as well as descriptions of rituals and spells included in e.g., Chesnut, *Devoted to Death* [5]; Kristensen, *Postponing Death* [6]; Fraser, *Santa Muerte*. [20]

¹³ For discussions on the importance of tradition as a source of authority in esotericism, see e.g., Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, ([22], pp. 85–200); Aspren and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms” [10].

Prower downplays the connection between Santa Muerte and socioeconomic marginalization that, although mentioned, is not presented as central to her cult. Rather than introducing Santa Muerte as particularly connected to any social class segment, Prower writes that her devotees are part of a mystery school akin to the Eleusinian mysteries of Ancient Greece ([23], p. 30). He also presents a type of article of faith for the devotees of Santa Muerte. Referring to the cult as “we”, he presents himself as a spokesperson for a larger community of adherents:

Essentially, we believe that the world is good. We believe that the divine energy (God, the universe, the Tao, etc.) is perfect, and since that divine energy is in everything, everything is perfect. (...) The problems of life result from a self-disassociation with everything else, the belief that you are separate from all other things. (...) By believing that we are all equally connected in the web of life, harming others becomes much less appealing since the destruction of a single strand ultimately affects the whole and threatens the stability of the entire web. A more philosophical concept of this belief is popularly known in dharmic religions as karma. Everything you do will eventually come back to you. (...) Thus, a devotee of La Santa Muerte and a practitioner of her magic would, at the very least on a selfish level, not want to cause harm to another because it would result in harm ultimately coming to themselves. Although not all devotees explicitly call it karma, this ethic of cosmic reciprocity is a main tenet of working with La Santa Muerte and understanding how to utilize her magic ([23], p. 11).

He also contends:

An ancient Buddhist treatise says that holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone; you are the one who gets burned. The anger and hate we harbor within us affects us negatively. Even before releasing a hex and suffering the karmic consequences of doing so, anger and hate make us spiritually and physically sick ([23], p. 215).

The above quote demonstrates a very different attitude to Santa Muerte to that of Conjureman Ali, who includes rituals for harming and even killing enemies, and most likely also from many of the Skeleton Saint’s Mexican devotees on both sides of the Mexico-US border.¹⁴ While ethical prescriptions are also present in some of the Mexican literature, Prower’s notion of “cosmic reciprocity” is phrased in terms of westernized notions of karma that can be traced to the interest in Hinduism and Buddhism in *fin-de-siècle* occultism, rather than the Catholic doctrine of sin. His attitude to “cosmic reciprocity” as something akin to a natural law is similar to that found among many Wiccans ([2], p. 396). Prower also clearly draws on New Age discourses of universal interconnectedness, positive thinking, and westernized interpretations of Indian religion ([1], pp. 130, 132, 238–42, 286, 296, 374, 467, 488–90; [24], p. 110).

In contrast to both Ali and diGregorio, Prower places especial emphasis on Santa Muerte’s femininity, construed in terms that clearly draw on discourses of gender dominant in many forms of Wicca, in which the four elements are gender coded and the universe seen as governed by a masculine-feminine polarity [25–28]:

[I]n the eyes of outside traditions, La Santa Muerte is most often associated with the elements of earth and water. Deities of femininity and death tend to be associated with the earth because of its ability to create, sustain, and nurture life. Earth is also the element that experiences death most frequently through the changing of the seasons and the finite existence of organic matter. (...) With regard to water, La Santa Muerte’s femininity and

¹⁴ Conjureman Ali, “Santísima Muerte,” ([21], p. 184). On the more ambivalent role of harmful magic and cursing in the Mexican cult of Santa Muerte, see Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*. [5]

dual existence in both the spiritual and physical worlds grant her this association. Water is symbolic of emotions and intuition—what is visible on the surface often masks the profundity of what lies below. While both men and women possess logic and intuition, in general, women are blessed with a stronger sense of intuitive wisdom, thus linking them with water ([23], p. 95f).

Prower also presents a gendered interpretation of the colors associated with Santa Muerte. Drawing on a Westernized version of Daoist doctrine, he relates her black and white robes to yin and yang, respectively. Prower connects the black (or “yin”) Santa Muerte to supposedly feminine characteristics, such as receptivity, while the white (or “yang”) Santa Muerte, seemingly a more masculine version of her, is more suitable for projecting energy:

...femininity, intuition, night, soft, cold, wet, and yielding are all categorized under black yin energy. For these reasons, the black aspect of La Santa Muerte is used in protection magic, where the objective is not to project energy, but rather intuitively foresee negative energy and take away its harmful effects and neutralize it, or, if that’s not possible, to become invisible to the harmful energy and avoid it altogether. (...) When we purify something we expel and push all the toxins and negative energies away, just as all the colors in the visible spectrum are expelled and pushed away to make something appear white. In the Taoist symbol for yin-yang, the yang energy of the universe is symbolized by the white side of the circle, which is often misinterpreted as good, but is better understood as aggressiveness and projecting. Thus masculinity, logic, day, hard, warm, dry, and giving are all categorized under white yang energy ([23], p. 84).

The above excerpts dealing with Santa Muerte’s femininity and its supposed magical connotations are highly interesting, illustrating broader themes of gender construction in the occult and Pagan milieus.

Unlike Ali and diGregorio, Prower also emphasizes the importance of transforming the magician’s own consciousness by entering into a “magical mindset” ([23], p. 155f). Prower argues that, in order to do magic, one must first access an alternate level of consciousness by transforming brain frequencies to the more “dreamlike” levels of alpha, theta, and delta [23]. This emphasis on consciousness as the principal ritual tool draws strongly on what became a central theme in nineteenth century occultism and has continued to be fundamental to occultist discourse since [3,4]. Similarly, the invocation of science-like language draws on the modern occult preoccupation of attempting to harmonize magic with scientific discovery.¹⁵

It is also worth noting that the use of statues and images holds no prominent place in Prower’s manual, also setting it apart from the two previously described works as well as the orientation of much of the Mexican cult of Santa Muerte, and some spells do not even mention Santa Muerte or any other saint.¹⁶ Nonetheless, similar to the spells outlined by Conjureman Ali and DiGregorio, those Prower details are generally oriented towards material ends, like love, money, legal matters, and protection.

4. Santa Muerte and the Occult

4.1. A New Context

In the previous pages, we have presented three recent English-language books on Santa Muerte. While Prower’s is the most explicit in this regard, all three are geared towards an occultist readership with a very different sociocultural orientation than that of the Mexican cult of Santa Muerte. Thus,

¹⁵ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* [3]; Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* ([2], pp. 174–75, 395). This tendency can also be seen in much New Age thought, see e.g., Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 1996 ([1], pp. 62–76).

¹⁶ See e.g., Prower, *La Santa Muerte* ([23], p. 194).

their structure and content are also impacted by norms and conventions current to the occult milieu. In the following pages, we will highlight and analyze the significance of the various ways in which the authors discussed negotiate these conventions.

By stressing Santa Muerte's femininity and building on an essentialized understanding of the latter as receptive, intuitive, and pliant, Prower draws on a discourse of gender polarity that has been central to many forms of modern occultism.¹⁷ This can be seen as a way of familiarizing Santa Muerte by integrating her into an established, gendered framework. The tendency to map all of creation onto a perceived ontological dialectic between masculinity and femininity can partly be traced to cultural transformations during the nineteenth century, and play strong parts in writings of a number of prominent occultists including Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, Julius Evola, and Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca.¹⁸ While contemporary Mexican society is hardly lacking in ideas about gender, and Santa Muerte's femininity is certainly important to understanding her cult in its Mexican context, this discourse of a male–female, active–passive dichotomy onto which all of creation can be mapped is arguably drawn from modern, Anglo-American occultism and Paganism rather than Mexican folk Catholicism. diGregorio also briefly references the concept of gender polarity in her interpretation of the Catholic mass as a symbolic union between masculine and feminine. The fact that Ali does not mention ideas of gender polarity at all can potentially be interpreted as indicative of his aim to adhere to more closely to what he perceives as tradition.

Prower also presents a view of death as transformation by writing that the spells in the book are of a destructive nature in the sense of the magic aiming at transforming a current state of being to another; the old state must die in order to make way for the new ([23], p. 155). The emphasis on death as transformation rather than its literal sense is a common theme in occultism, exemplified in the writings of Aleister Crowley, who identified the human soul with the sun and argued that when the sun sets in the West it only appears to disappear. Thus, Crowley reasoned, death is simply a name for the soul's onward journey into a new state of being ([33], p. 46). Prower also views Santa Muerte as a remedy to the tendency of the modern world to hide death away and shelter its citizens from it ([23], p. 19). This reflects a clear difference between Santa Muerte's Mexican context and that of Prower's intended readership. The concept of death has been identified as central to Mexican cultural identity as evinced by the iconic Catrina Calavera and *Día de los Muertos* celebrations, and Chesnut notes that Santa Muerte is "as familiar to Mexicans as death itself" [5,34]. Moreover, the lethal danger faced daily by many Mexican citizens on both sides of the drug war is an important contributing factor to the Skeleton Saint's popularity ([5], pp. 96–120; [6]). With new homicides making headlines daily, contemporary Mexican society can hardly be said to shelter its citizens from death. Similarly, a study of Santa Muertista transgender sex workers in Guadalajara and San Francisco indicated these devotees' experience of living under the daily threat of deadly homophobic and transphobic violence strengthen their faith and sense of affinity in Santa Muerte [35]. Thus, this statement on Prower's part appears to be a very clear reflection of the fact that his book is intended to introduce the cult of Santa Muerte to a different audience than that of urban, working-class Mexico.

4.2. Negotiating Catholicism

Ali, DiGregorio, and Prower relate to Catholicism in a different way from large parts of the the Santa Muerte cult on both sides of the US-Mexican border. Mexican devotees of Santa Muerte exist in a culturally Catholic context, and were likely raised Catholic whether they are practicing or

¹⁷ See e.g., Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 2006 [4]; Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged Secret Flame, To Her the Stooping Starlight." [8]

¹⁸ Cf. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 1996 ([1], pp. 88, 152–54); Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 2006 ([4], pp. 55–80, 109–39, 162–222). Gender polarity is not uncontroversial in modern occultism, and has been challenged on the grounds of heteronormativity and gender essentialism by a number of important proponents and movements. See e.g., ([4], pp. 222–54); Effertz, *Priest/ess* [29]; Lupa, "The Female Kink Magician" [30]; Kaldera, *Hermaphroditities* [31]; Faerywolf, "The Queer Craft: Rethinking Magical Polarity." [32].

not ([5], p. 22). Moreover, Chesnut notes that most devotees of the Skeleton Saint he has encountered view their devotion to her as “complementary to their Catholic faith or even a part of it” ([5], p. 115). It is thus unsurprising that Hispanophone spellbooks on Santa Muerte contain few examples of Catholicism being explicitly rejected.¹⁹ However, the abovementioned occult authors operate within the discursive context of contemporary, Anglo-American occultism, in which Christianity has a very different position than in working class Mexico. Hanegraaff notes that the emergence of occultism, especially in the Anglophone world, drew strongly on an “anti-Christian mythographical tradition” originating in the Enlightenment ([13], p. 233). A prominent example of this was the sympathy for the Devil among a number of prominent eighteenth century intellectuals, who built on a tradition of counter-reading John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*²⁰. While not all were anti-Christian, all expressed strongly anti-clerical views, positing Lucifer as an intellectual and spiritual ideal representing liberty, equality, science, and critical thinking [36,37]. The writings of these intellectuals provided a cultural foundation for the later evolution of organized, religious Satanism, exemplified by Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan in 1966 [37]. Several other notable 20th century occultists including Gerald Gardner, Aleister Crowley, and Julius Evola were explicitly anti-Christianity, although for different reasons. While there are branches of modern esotericism that build on heterodox interpretations of Christian symbolism and doctrine, none of the three occult authors whose works we have analyzed are speaking in this context. As a case in point, all three seemingly feel a need to address and negotiate the presence of folk-Catholicism in the cult of Santa Muerte. While they employ different strategies for doing so, this indicates an awareness of the potential difficulties of integrating Christian content into the contemporary occult milieu.

In different ways, the three books studied in this article highlight a cognitive dissonance facing occultist interpreters of Santa Muerte, namely, that of integrating a folk saint whose Mexican cult is steeped in Catholic custom and symbolism into a cultural milieu that is, at best, highly ambivalent towards Christianity. diGregorio, Ali, and Prower all address and negotiate this dissonance in different ways, by presenting various explanations of the Catholic structure of many cultic practices linked to Santa Muerte. By integrating Santa Muerte among other pagan deities, drawing explicitly on symbolism and beliefs derived from modern occultism, and de-emphasizing the importance of Catholicism in her cult, Ali and diGregorio present the clearest examples of attempting to integrate Santa Muerte into an eclectic non-Christian occult context. Whether they are successful in crafting an image of Santa Muerte that is compelling to occultist readers remains to be seen. However, their various strategies of negotiation illustrate that various degrees of translation are inevitably involved when religious symbols are imported from one context into another.

4.3. Seeking Tradition

Cultural and socioeconomic class difference is an integral factor in shaping the transmission of Santa Muerte into the Anglo-American occult milieu. Just as the living conditions of her overwhelmingly working-class, Mexican devotees shapes their devotional practices and relationships with the saint, the particular conditions of contemporary occultism affect the ways in which occultists relate to Santa Muerte.

Santa Muerte’s introduction into the occult milieu was partly enabled by the late modern media landscape. Since her cult went fully public in Mexico in 2002, Santa Muerte has made cameo appearances in the Oliver Stone film *Savages* (2012) as well as a number of TV shows including *Breaking Bad*, *True Blood*, *Dexter*, *True Detective*, and *Ash vs. Evil Dead*. Aside from the final example,

¹⁹ A notable exception is a booklet beginning with ten statements called “Los Diez Estados La Santa Muerte”, the first nine of which have been copied verbatim from Anton Lavey’s *Satanic Bible*, in which the Devil’s name is replaced with that of Santa Muerte. La Vey, *The Satanic Bible*, 25, Jimenez, *La Biblia de La Santa Muerte*.

²⁰ Notable examples of this trend include William Blake, Mary Wollstonecraft, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron in Britain, and Anatole France and Jules Michelet in France.

all of the above films and TV shows portray Santa Muerte stereotypically as a patroness of organized crime and black magic ([5], pp. 36, 52, 96–97). Still, such pop cultural depictions play a strong role in feeding into what Christopher Partridge has termed “occulture”, a loosely structured cultural treasury of beliefs, practices, and symbols linked to occultism, magic, paranormal phenomena, spirits, et cetera, which are drawn on, adapted, and interpreted in individuals’ practice. Occulture (in which the abovementioned depictions of Santa Muerte can be included) is an important factor in attracting new people to occult phenomena, some of whom subsequently seek out more structured material and like-minded people ([9], pp. 194–95; [24,28,29]). Likewise, Santa Muerte’s emergence onto the Anglo-American occult scene has likely been facilitated by the Internet, which greatly increases the possibility of cross-cultural syncretism by simplifying communication across vast distances and making beliefs, practices, and tools whose availability was previously more geographically delimited instantly available to a transnational audience.²¹ The Internet has also democratized the publishing process by providing an inexpensive way of printing, advertising, and disseminating written works across the globe. Consequently, spellbooks, candles, statues, and incense related to the Skeleton Saint are no longer reserved for spiritual seekers with access to specialized occult stores or *botanicas*, but are now globally available.

The digitalization of the occult landscape has placed a severe strain on the concept of esoteric secrets. While much supposedly hidden knowledge claimed by esotericists has oftentimes not been particularly hidden at all, the Internet has greatly facilitated the mass-distribution and commercial availability of rites and doctrines previously reserved for an initiate few (Cf Urban ([4], p. 244f)). One response to this can be seen in the proliferation of artisanal, limited deluxe editions in the occult milieu. A number of established esoteric publishing houses produce “talismanic” books for collectors who are prepared to pay hundreds of dollars for exclusive editions of books with identical content to the more affordable, standard hardbacks these publishers also produce.²² This emphasis on craftsmanship can be seen as a way of conveying a sense of rarity and exclusivity in a new and digitalized market in which occult beliefs and practices are readily available²³. The increasing interest in European and North American occultism in various forms of folk religiosity can similarly be interpreted both as an effect and a reaction against this state of affairs. While interest in Vodou has a somewhat longer history among occultists, recent years have also witnessed the publication of a number of occult works on African Diaspora religions such as Quimbanda and Palo Mayombe as well as those emphasizing the heritage of European and African American folk magic, including translations and reprints of older *grimoires* as well as the digital store and archive Lucky Mojo, which focuses on Hoodoo and rootwork [17–19,39–41]. Notably, the Swedish-Finnish Satanic publisher Ixaxaar has published a book on the Argentinian folk saint San La Muerte, whose cult in many respects is similar to that of Santa Muerte.²⁴

While Medieval and early modern *grimoires*, which were broadly available, had a strong impact on the development of modern ceremonial magic, the wave of occult books on folk religiosity in recent years illustrates a far stronger willingness to draw on popularized or subaltern systems of magic than most leading occultists of the *fin-de-siècle*, who drew primarily on what they perceived as elite teachings. Occult romantization of the subaltern is not entirely novel: Gerald Gardner as well as Jack Parsons, a notable American devotee of Crowley’s, both emphasized romanticized notions of rural people inspired by Michelet’s *La Sorcière* and Charles Leland’s *Aradia* in their respective articulations of witchcraft as a religion of the people. However, the recent turn towards folk religion in Latin

²¹ Cf. Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment* ([9], pp. 193–94). Cf. Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 2006 ([4], pp. 223–24, 245–50)

²² Three Hands press, scarlet imprint. “About.” [38]

²³ Interestingly, the books by diGregorio, Conjureman Ali, and Prower are solely available as inexpensive softcovers. However, as noted above, the cheap format can also be employed as a device for conveying authenticity, as in the case of Hadean Press, which also produces deluxe limited editions.

²⁴ N.A.-A.218, *Liber Falxifer*. [42]

America and the African Diaspora among many contemporary occultists can be compared to ways in which early 20th century primitivists glorified that which had previously been perceived as barbaric, lowbrow, and earthy [43].

Similar to the ways in which the Romantic and occult movements were simultaneously products of modernity and reactions against it, this new occult trend can be interpreted as a counter-reaction against a hybrid and eclectic occult landscape in which nothing is exclusive and an endless banquet of symbol systems is constantly available. As such, it can also be seen as a sort of counterpoint to systems such as Chaos Magick, a postmodernist form of occultism characterized by a deep sense of parody and irony, a rejection of all truth claims, and the pragmatic use of symbols personal systems of magic.²⁵ The increasing occultist interest in folk religiosity and folk magic, of which the gradually growing popularity of Santa Muerte is an example, responds to what is perceived as a loss of authenticity. This also puts Conjureman Ali's advocacy of Catholic custom in devotion to Santa Muerte in a new light: while ostensibly placing his work closer to the Mexican cult of Santa Muerte, his very insistence on adhering to tradition is highly typical of a work aimed at the contemporary occult milieu.

5. Conclusions

The present study has relied on a small number of published occult works on Santa Muerte.²⁶ While we have encountered occultists in Europe and North America who integrate Santa Muerte into their religious practice during previous fieldwork, the scope of this study has precluded more extensive research in this direction. The strongly literary and elite bias of much previous esotericism research has resulted in a focus on key philosophical texts at the expense of everyday practice, obscuring the fact that much of what occurs in the occult milieu may not be visible outside of small groups of people or even individuals' homes. The integration of Santa Muerte into European and North American occultism also highlights the necessity of looking at new avenues of research in terms of the development of beliefs and practices in the development of Western esotericism.

While still a relatively minor trend, the emergence of Santa Muerte devotion among occultists in Europe and the US points to some interesting paradoxes in modern occultism, indicating the importance of studying Western esotericism as a lived religious phenomenon. Far from an archaic relic, occultism has since the nineteenth century been driven by some of the core aspects of modernity: individualism, utopianism, mistrust of religious dogmatism and hierarchies, and a glorification of modern science.²⁷ However, it can simultaneously be seen as a reaction against the disenchantment that is linked to modernity. While today's occultism is very strongly impacted by the late modern or postmodern media landscape, there are also clear signs of backlash against the increasing hybridization and democratization of occult knowledge that it enables. Akin to *fin-de-siècle* occultists, people such as Conjureman Ali, diGregorio, Prower, and the authors of the abovementioned works on African Diaspora religion and folk magic look to symbol systems that are perceived as foreign to their mainstream culture and representing something that it lacks. In turning to a Mexican folk saint, it is perhaps possible that Anglo-American occultists are searching for respite from a perceived spiritual emptiness and disenchantment haunting Western modernity.

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²⁵ Seminal Chaos Magickal works include Carroll, *Liber Null & Psychonaut* [44]; Hine, *Condensed Chaos* [45]. The internet was also instrumental to the popularization of Chaos Magick. Duggan, "Perennialism and Iconoclasm" [46]; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 2006 ([4], pp. 222–54). See e.g., Hine, *Condensed Chaos* [45]; Carroll, *Liber Null & Psychonaut* [44].

²⁶ As the authors' Spanish reading skills are insufficient to engage in meaningful dialogue with the Hispanophone scholarship on the Skeleton Saint, we have been limited to English-language scholarship on her cult in Mexico.

²⁷ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* ([2], pp. 174–75, 395); Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* [3]; Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 2006 [4].

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