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# “Santísima Muerte, Vístete de Negro, Santísima Muerte, Vístete de Blanco”: La Santa Muerte’s Illegal Marginalizations

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Academic Editors: R. Andrew Chesnut and David Metcalfe

Received: 27 July 2016; Accepted: 13 February 2017; Published: 4 March 2017

**Abstract:** La Santísima Muerte, the death saint patron of the marginalized and dispossessed in Mexico, the United States, and beyond, is especially favored by devotees who identify with her duality between dark and light, and good and evil. Most of Santa Muerte’s devotees understand that good and evil coexist in her, and they often simultaneously appeal to both. At the same time, illegality and marginalization, which are generally associated with the saint’s “dark” or “evil” sides, take on multiple, diverse forms, encompassing criminalized activity such as narcotrafficking, religious transgressions that reflect unorthodox spiritual practices such as witchcraft, and most contentiously of all, the very conditions of poverty and racialization in Mexico. Nevertheless, cultural representations of Santa Muerte often resist such diversity and persist in opposing her dark and light sides. Films such as Eva Aridjis’s *La Santa Muerte* and Pável Valenzuela Arámburo’s *La Santísima Muerte* aim to represent all Santa Muerte in all of her multiplicity and to correct stereotypical representations of the death saint in general. But perhaps inadvertently, Aridjis’s film reinforces the contrast, rather than the intersections, between “light” and “dark”. However, in *La Santísima Muerte*, Valenzuela Arámburo deliberately embraces the saint’s contradictory duality to provide a different perspective on illegality and criminality, simultaneously accepting such illegality as a dark menace in the vein of Santa Muerte’s typical detractors, and rearticulating it as a necessary aspect of the saint’s holy works. Valenzuela Arámburo’s film not only emphasizes that the very same devotees invoke Santa Muerte for her powers of “good” as well as for those of “evil”, it demonstrates that these devotees incorporate the saint’s dark side as they see fit not as a consequence of their marginalized status, but as a means to resist it. Thus, while both films underscore that marginalized populations are just as nuanced and contradictory as their patroness of death is, Valenzuela Arámburo’s film grounds itself in Santa Muerte’s duality in order to demonstrate how her seemingly contradictory aspects construct and shape each other. As such, the film combats the representation of marginalization and criminality in Mexico and beyond, highlighting the extent to which her devotees appeal to both her dark and light sides precisely because they are simultaneously victims of marginalization and agents of resistance.

**Keywords:** Santa Muerte; Popular Saints; film; marginalization; popular classes; religious cultural practices; popular religion in Mexico; cultural production

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La Santísima Muerte, the death saint patron of the marginalized and dispossessed in Mexico, the United States, and beyond, is especially favored by devotees for her accessible duality. In the media, in histories, and in the cultural production that focuses on the saint, such as films and music, Santa Muerte’s followers frame her contradictory duality as inevitable and desirable. In a 2004 New York Times article, Hayde Solís Cárdenas, a vendor of smuggled tennis shoes in Tepito,

the infamous Mexico City *barrio bravo* that is ground zero for the devotion of Santa Muerte, asserts, “[Santa Muerte] was sent to rescue the lost, society’s rejects...She understands us, because she is a cabrona like us...We are hard people and we live hard lives. But she accepts us all, when we do good and bad” ([1], n.p.). Indeed, those who believe in the death saint strongly identify with her duality between dark and light, and good and evil.

Santa Muerte is known by many nicknames and endearments, such as “La Niña Blanca” (White Girl), “La Flaca” (Skinny Girl), “Mi Reina” (My Queen), “Mi Niña Bonita” (My Beautiful Girl) or “Madrina” (Godmother). Since she does not manifest in a human form but rather as a skeleton, the death saint both subverts and intensifies the traditional iconographic emphasis on the faces and bodies of saints. As a skeletal figure, she is endlessly transferable even as she resists specific identification with any particular visage. Santa Muerte is strongly associated with Mexico City, especially in relation to her primary shrine on Alfarería Street in Tepito and its caretaker, Doña Queta (Enriqueta Romero). But she is most commonly worshipped through transient images, relics and altars. Moreover, she is celebrated as the patron of so many causes and concerns, ranging from love and passion to healing to law and justice, that it is difficult to specifically link her to any of them; as R. Andrew Chesnut suggests, “Much more than Jesus, the canonized saints, and the myriad avocations of Mary, Santa Muerte’s present identity is highly flexible” ([2], p. 172). Indeed, La Santísima’s flexible, variable identity is a significant part of her appeal to devotees. Nevertheless, she is most strongly associated with the drug wars and criminality in general, particularly from the dominant perspective of the Catholic Church and the Mexican state, as well as the media. The saint’s devotees, rather, argue that she is a holy presence who tends to their everyday needs and desires. They appeal to her healing powers, they request work to support themselves and their families, and they seek justice in the face of a corrupt legal and carceral system. While the media, church and state frequently reduce Santa Muerte to binaries, typically defining her through illegality or criminality rather than focusing on her ordinary appeal to the masses, the death saint’s followers also frame their devotion through a contradictory binary of “light” and “dark” or “good” and “evil”. Yet by contrast, Santa Muerte’s devotees not only identify with her powers of contradiction, they embrace them as a means through which to access her humanity as well as her sanctity.

The identification with Santa Muerte’s contradictory duality is rooted in a long history of duality between life and death and light and dark in the worldview of many indigenous groups in central Mexico where her cult originated, particularly in relation to Mexica/Nahua/Aztec beliefs. In an analysis of Eduardo Matos Moctezuma’s body of research, Félix Báez-Jorge emphasizes that the entire “symbolic imaginary” of the Mexicas in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica is centered on a life-death duality, particularly in relation to the natural and agricultural cycles and the warrior culture that such groups inhabited ([3], p. 220). In turn, while the life-death duality provides a window into the “inexhaustible kind of thought that was present for thousands of years” in Mexico, it also signals an enduring “conception of the universe” which is rooted in ancestral beliefs ([3], p. 220).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Catholic devotional practice and belief is also grounded in the duality of life and death, evident in rituals such as the Easter celebration, with its emphasis on death and resurrection, or Biblical verses such as Ecclesiastes 3:20; “All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return”, to name a few. Yet such duality and contradiction is frequently denied, condemned, or otherwise perceived as too threatening in relation to Santa Muerte. While it seems obvious that official, mainstream perspectives like those of the media, the Catholic Church, or the Mexican state would fear and shun La Santísima for her ability to represent good and evil and life and death at the same time, even some critical and creative representations are reluctant to accept and embrace her full complement of traits.

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<sup>1</sup> ([3], p. 220). Translation mine. “...la dualidad vida-muerte es una llave que permite comprender y abrir muchas puertas que dan paso a una inagotable forma del pensamiento que estuvo presente durante miles de años...[hasta convertirse en] una concepción del universo con todo su contenido ancestral.”

Since Santa Muerte is so firmly associated with the lower or working classes in Mexico, where marginalization is historically conflated with criminality and illegality, to consider the death saint's full duality between life and death and its link to notions of good and evil or light and dark is implicitly threatening. Multiple, sometimes conflicting aspects of Santa Muerte's "dark" side are evident in cultural, media, and historical representation; not only from the perspective of her detractors but also of her devotees. Chesnut is correct that "very few media reports and films show anything but the dark side of the cult" in relation to Santa Muerte's association with criminal activity and illegality such as the drug trade, but the saint's devotees also frequently invoke her "darkness" in relation to her formidable powers of vengeance, her jealousy as well as her loyalty, and her role in "the important business of witchcraft", where devotees "ask the saint both to perform dark deeds against rivals and enemies and to prevent spells and hexes from taking effect on themselves" ([2], pp. 96, 116). Perhaps most unsettling to those who distinguish between Santa Muerte as a symbol of either good or evil, many devotees alternate between or intertwine their appeals to the death saint for more socially acceptable purposes, such as healing or help crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, with the threatening, shadowy space of illegality. Frequently, the devotees who seek violent vengeance against their enemies and request health and safety for a pregnant daughter through the powers of the death saint are one and the same. Moreover, the illegality and marginalization that are generally associated with Santa Muerte's "dark" or "evil" side, in fact assume multiple, diverse forms, encompassing criminalized activity such as narcotrafficking, religious transgressions that reflect unorthodox spiritual practices such as witchcraft, and most contentiously of all, the very conditions of poverty and racialization in Mexico. Indeed, even as devotees understand Santa Muerte as a being that encompasses both dark and light, their conceptions of these elements are represented as binaries but as characteristics that actually constitute each other.

But while most of Santa Muerte's devotees understand that good and evil are not binaries, but instead overlap and coexist in her, and often simultaneously appeal to both, cultural representations of the saint often resist such diversity and persist in opposing her dark and light sides. Films such as Eva Aridjis's *La Santa Muerte* and Pável Valenzuela Arámburo's *La Santísima Muerte* aim to represent all Santa Muerte in all of her multiplicity and to correct stereotypical representations of the death saint in general. Whereas the dominant construction of marginalization and illegality in Mexico effectively codes the indigenous, the impoverished, the migrant—those who are commonly referred to in Mexican slang as the *naco*—as inherently criminal, these films rearticulate the meaning and significance of illegality and marginalization. Nevertheless, Aridjis's film ultimately does not give sufficient attention to the everyday, banal representation of Santa Muerte's dark side as experienced by devotees themselves. Perhaps inadvertently, Aridjis's film reinforces the contrast, rather than the intersections, between "light" and "dark". However, in *La Santísima Muerte*, Valenzuela Arámburo deliberately embraces the saint's contradictory duality to provide a very different perspective on illegality and criminality from that posited in much of Aridjis's film, simultaneously accepting such illegality as a dark menace in the vein of Santa Muerte's typical detractors, and rearticulating it as a necessary aspect of the saint's holy works.

Valenzuela Arámburo's film emphasizes that the very same devotees invoke Santa Muerte for her powers of "good" as well as for those of "evil", and indeed, often understand these traits as mutually constitutive. Moreover, the film demonstrates that devotees incorporate different understandings of the saint's dark side not as a consequence of their marginalized status, but as a means to resist it. Significantly, alongside devotees' understanding of Santa Muerte through the duality of good and evil, they also view her as both victim and agent, and particularly identify themselves with this contradiction. Thus, while both films underscore that marginalized populations are just as nuanced and contradictory as their patroness of death is, Valenzuela Arámburo's film grounds itself in Santa Muerte's duality in order to demonstrate how her seemingly contradictory aspects construct and shape each other. As such, the film combats the representation of marginalization and criminality

in Mexico and beyond, highlighting the extent to which her devotees appeal to both her dark and light sides precisely because they are simultaneously victims of marginalization and agents of resistance.

### 1. Santa Muerte and the Representation of Marginalization in Mexico

Santa Muerte's association with criminality and illegality from the perspective of state and Church and in the media, and her link to marginalized peoples in general, is clearly connected to an ingrained historical conflation between marginalization and criminality in Mexico. In his article "Degeneration and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs", Isaac Campos analyzes the way that the "concept of 'degeneration' helped to turn 'drugs' into a problem of national importance in Mexico" at a far earlier point in time than in most other countries, stemming from the Spanish regulation of medical practice dating to the Early Modern Era ([4], pp. 379–80). Campos argues that in post-revolutionary Mexico, "degeneration was...understood as a general condition that involved bad government, bad racial stock, and 'degenerated customs', such as alcohol and drug use ([4], p. 395). Yet part of the insidiousness of the "degeneration concept" is its slipperiness. Campos points out that the notion of degeneration "can only be fully articulated within some kind of comparative relationship", which always depends upon opposing a supposedly degenerated "something" against a "healthy or fully constituted other" ([4], pp. 392–93). Indeed, he emphasizes the "remarkable adaptability to multiple levels of social analysis" of the "degeneration concept" as the basis for the unbreakable link between "the drug question" and Mexican national security ([4], p. 408). Such adaptability essentially renders the idea of degeneration undefinable. But while it cannot stand on its own; as an endlessly transferable signifier that is always positioned against something else, it may also stand for anything. In this sense, "degeneration" readily lends itself to the criminalization of poverty, in which the poor are always already suspect because they are considered to be of lower racial stock, morals, and intelligence and thus prone to criminal behavior.

Just as the poor and working classes were viewed through the lens of criminalization, Mexico City, the heart of the cult to Santa Muerte, was historically ground zero for the construction of marginalized peoples as criminal suspects. At the same time, as Pablo Piccato notes, "for the majority of [Mexico City's] inhabitants [in the early decades of the twentieth century]...crime was an integral part of everyday life" ([5], p. 3). That is, marginalized subjects in Mexico City were represented as criminal even as they contended with crime and violence in their neighborhoods on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the poor and working classes who lived in such conditions effectively understood crime as a social construct and a "relational category, incarnated in the suspicion of the police, judges, and the law itself towards the urban poor, and the latter's distrust towards state ideologies and practices with respect to crime" ([5], p. 3). Though Piccato focuses on the representation of the urban poor in Mexico City the early twentieth century; to this day marginalized people know that they cannot count on institutions such as the police or the judicial system to protect them. At the same time they understand that in their communities, "transgressions had their reasons—defense of honor motivated violence, economic need prompted theft", even when these crimes are defined very differently by the authorities ([5], p. 3). Indeed, the urban poor's understanding of their relationship with and against criminality in Mexico City elucidates the fact that the concept shifts between vague and precise definitions depending upon context. As Piccato argues, "the police and press treated criminals as a clearly identifiable social group...[and as such] criminology and penology unified 'crime', constructing it as an urban, modern phenomenon" ([5], p. 4). But all too often, "men and women were punished out of suspicion rather than actual offenses", while for the urban poor themselves, criminals were not pathological threats against society, but rather "those who committed crimes—whether they were forced to do so by circumstance or because of their shamelessness" ([5], p. 6). Most significantly of all, criminals in Mexico City were "people who often looked like their victims", and in many cases were both criminal and victim depending on circumstance and context ([5], p. 6). Certainly, the urban poor in Mexico have always been people who are rendered suspect and often coded as criminal simply because of their class and racial status.

While such nuances regarding the representation of criminals and victims are typically ignored in relation to the urban poor in Mexico City, they also extend to the portrayal of Santa Muerte, for both the death saint and her marginalized followers are reduced to binaries and are frequently viewed through the lens of illegality. The Mexican press promotes sensationalist stories that sell newspapers and increase ratings, such as tales of the ritual murders of several people in Sonora allegedly performed in the name of the death saint ([6], n.p.), or the supposed link between notorious serial killers such as “La Mataviejitas” (“The Old Lady Killer”) and “El Mochaorejas” (“The Ear Chopper”) and Santa Muerte [7].<sup>2</sup> Journalist José Gil Olmos cites historian Katia Perdigón, who claims that the press purposely portrays Santa Muerte and her devotees in a lurid manner and omits information that might normalize the death cult, like the fact that “El Mochaorejas” maintained many shrines to the Virgin of Guadalupe alongside the well-publicized ones dedicated to Santa Muerte ([8], p. 125; [9]). Meanwhile, Santa Muerte is frequently associated with paranormal or magical characteristics in the media and some forms of cultural production, as in television series such as “Relatos de Ultratumba”, popular yellow news programs, or Homero Aridjis’s 2004 novel *La Santa Muerte*, which emphasizes the connection between the occult and violent crime in practices of worship of Santa Muerte ([10]; [11], pp. 125, 127). The notion that the death saint is primarily an occult figure rather than an ordinary aspect of devotional practice further reinforces her salaciousness, even when such pieces focus on devotees who specifically appeal to both her paranormal and earthly qualities.

In relation to dominant religious discourse, the representation and reception of Santa Muerte is even more predictable. Despite the obvious diversity in its ranks, the Catholic Church officially rejects any saint it does not sanction. For example, in Eva Aridjis’s film *La Santa Muerte*, one of the few critics of the death saint featured is a Catholic priest who condescendingly claims: “It is interesting to see the warmth that people feel for Saint Death, and the tenderness with which they speak of her. If it was another [sort of] devotion, it would be edifying...Meaning it is good people, who are searching for God...I don’t think they do it conscious of the fact that it is the Devil whom they are worshipping” [12]. This standard theological objection obscures the fact that almost all of the followers of the death saint insist that their devotion is integral to their Catholic faith, or otherwise incorporate official Catholic imagery and beliefs into their worship of Santa Muerte. Cultural critic José Manuel Valenzuela Arce argues that the devotion to Santa Muerte is a response to the failure of church and state to address the needs and desires of the marginalized classes, asserting, “...the traditional religions...do not adequately address the series of needs and expectations that emerge from the spirituality of the population. There is no contradiction between [this population’s] belief and participation in elements of Catholicism such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, the mass...and their [belief in] the mystical [cult] of la Santísima Muerte” [13].<sup>3</sup>

The Catholic Church’s rejection of Santa Muerte implicitly obscures the role it plays in marginalizing the popular classes in Mexico. As Campos and Piccato imply, the pervasive prejudice and racism against the lower classes and anyone perceived to be dark-skinned or “Indian” reveals the conflation of marginalization and criminal behavior in Mexico. The inherent undefinability of such groups, reflected in their liminal stance as both agents and victims in society, is especially threatening

<sup>2</sup> Although “there have been no confirmed cases of human sacrifices in Mexico” to Santa Muerte, eight people were arrested in Sonora in 2012 for allegedly killing two 10-year-old boys and a 55-year-old woman in ritual sacrifices in the cult of Santa Muerte. ([6], n.p.). Juana Barraza Samperio, known as “La Mataviejitas,” is a Mexican professional wrestler and serial killer sentenced to 759 years in jail for murdering many elderly women from the early 1990s until 2006, when she was detained and sentenced. The number of her victims is undetermined but most likely totals more than twenty. She is alleged to have been a longtime devotee of Santa Muerte. ([7], n.p.) Meanwhile, Daniel Arizmendi López, “El Mochaorejas”, is a Mexican kidnapper famous for cutting the ears off of his victims in order to put pressure on their families to pay for their release. Chesnut notes that Santa Muerte first gained widespread national press coverage in Mexico in 1998 when El Mochaorejas was arrested and police permitted him to bring a figure of the death saint with him to prison ([2], p. 97).

<sup>3</sup> “...Lo que han sido las religiones tradicionales...no estan cumpliendo de manera adecuada con lo que es ese conjunto de necesidades y de expectativas, que emergen de la espiritualidad de la poblacion. No existe ninguna contradiccion en que el registro en que ellos puedan, digamos, participar en los eventos de culto catolico como la virgen de Guadalupe, en la misa, pero tambien...acudir como devotos hacia lo que seria el apoyo mistico de la Santísima Muerte” [13].

to the power structure. It is therefore unsurprising that the urban poor and working classes in Mexico are frequently discriminated against and feared as *nacos*, a typically derisive slang term with multiple connotations that is used to signify all that is tacky, low-class, vulgar, uncultured, dark-skinned, or indigenous-seeming.<sup>4</sup> According to Carlos Monsiváis, *naco* denotes “undisguisable Indian roots and blood.” The term is usually applied to the lower classes, but it also transcends socioeconomic status to refer to those who are “without education or manners, ugly and insolent, graceless and unattractive, irredeemable, complex-ridden, resentful, vulgar, mustachioed and shocking” ([15], p. 51). The slipperiness of these subjective attributes underscores their arbitrariness, and the banality with which they can be applied to marginalize and criminalize people. As Monsiváis argues, *naco* “violently allud[es] to the most marginalized of the nation” ([15], p. 51). Essayist Rafael Toriz further suggests that the most frightening aspect of the *naco* for middle- and upper-middle class Mexicans is its ordinariness. He asserts, “Currently, we are all susceptible to being *nacos*, or, in other words, anyone can act like a *naco* [*naquear*] from time to time” ([16], n.p.). Given the right context, anyone could be a *naco*, indicating an uncomfortable proximity for many Mexicans desperate to avoid the stigma of marginalization and criminalization. As Monsiváis argues, the revulsion toward the *naco*, who is so associated with “Indians” and “ignorance”, stems from the fact that upper- and middle-class Mexicans view them with terror as their own mirror image and as a “confirmation of the inferiority of a lesser country” ([15], p. 53).

Perhaps because of rather than despite such uncomfortable proximity, in certain circles in Mexico the concept of the *naco* has also been reclaimed as a marker of pride and “cultural self-fashioning”, with “all of its class and racial connotations” ([17], p. 207). The celebration of *naco* culture is also evident in the representation of the *barrio bravo* of Tepito and its residents as symbols of Mexican independence, ingenuity, and authenticity. But not everyone agrees that “*naco* is beautiful, for the concept still has the power to wound, revealing the pervasive racism and classism of Mexican society” ([15], p. 55). The correlation between indigenosity and ignorance enclosed in the word *naco* is especially insidious, since it is frequently obscured by the more benign, humorous connotations of the term, such as the *naco*’s supposed love of plastic furniture covers, or socks worn with sandals. In the same way, the accusations on the part of many middle- or upper-class Mexicans and others that Santa Muerte and her devotees are satanic or criminal conceals their deep disdain for the impoverished, transient, migrant, indigenous, and *naco* masses who worship the death saint. The contempt that many Mexicans feel toward Santa Muerte’s devotees reflects a perceived personal and national assault, for in the eyes of the middle and upper classes, the “*naco*” devotees of the death saint, like Octavio Paz’s *pachuco*, could easily be confused with their own image. As such, middle- and upper-class Mexicans and others frame their objections to Santa Muerte under the cloak of morality, ethics, or illegality in order to maintain their sometimes tenuous sense of self and national pride.

## 2. Eva Aridjis’s *La Santa Muerte*

The discrimination and racism directed at the followers of Santa Muerte by middle- and upper-class Mexicans and others is rarely acknowledged, even in many scholarly or critical representations of the death cult. Rather, devotees and detractors alike reiterate the doctrine of church and state regarding Santa Muerte when referring to criticism of her cult. Doña Queta provides typical testimony in Eva Aridjis’s film *La Santa Muerte*: “If people say this is Satanic, and that I’m a devil worshipper, and lots of nasty things, you know? And even the press, the newspapers...say a lot of things, like that we’re Satanic, that we’re devil worshippers...Well, I say time will tell, and they’ll eat their words, right?” [12]. Similarly, Jesse Ortiz Peña, who gives masses and rosaries to Santa Muerte at the shrine on Alfarería Street, says: “Lots of people have believed in Saint Death for many years...But

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<sup>4</sup> I have also discussed the representation of the *naco* and its link to marginalization in Mexico in my book *Borderlands Saints* [14].

you couldn't wear an image of Saint Death before, because if people saw it...they would consider you a Satanist...That you're a Satanist, that you're a sorcerer, that you're a witch. So you would hide your Saint Death. But not anymore. Now you can wear it more freely" [12]. Neither Doña Queta nor Ortiz Peña suggest that the mass media, the church, the upper class, or anyone else might reject them because of their marginalized status as impoverished, indigenous, migrant, lawless, or naco. Yet it is clear that Santa Muerte's devotees are ultimately most threatening because they are marginalized and coded as illegal, not because they worship an illegitimate saint or a Satanic figure.

To this end, Aridjis's documentary film accurately reflects the contradictions of the death cult, encompassing faith, rage, peace, uneasiness, fear, and hope. The film certainly portrays the cult much more analytically than the typical condemnatory or scandalous media reports. Moreover, in contrast to the Catholic Church's indictment that worshipping Santa Muerte is inherently evil because venerating death is equivalent to venerating the devil, the film demonstrates that while devotees respect the saint for her power of death, they worship her because of the agency and equality she confers upon them in life. However, *La Santa Muerte* also downplays the power and especially the nuances of the dark side that attract so many devotees to the saint. Aridjis is clearly eager to amend the many negative portrayals of Santa Muerte and her devotees, especially those that link them to the drug trade, and she is invested in Santa Muerte's dynamic cult of personality as well as of faith. Yet Aridjis fails to fully attend to the balance many devotees seek through Santa Muerte's dark side, especially in terms of its ordinary, even banal appeal. For the majority of her devotees, Santa Muerte's dark side is not exclusively linked to the criminal underworld or the drug wars. Instead, it manifests itself through the dangers inherent to misusing or misunderstanding Santa Muerte's considerable powers by employing them recklessly, failing to pay her proper tribute, or ignoring her jealous nature. Her followers know that the death saint exacts a heavy price from those who cross her. At the same time, her devotees also define her "dark" qualities in relation to the stigmatized criminality that surrounds them and that they may also participate in.

While Aridjis emphasizes the ordinary concerns of devotees who live on the margins of society in her film, such as prison inmates and transvestite prostitutes, focusing on their desire for lost lovers, reunions with family members, or employment, at times she seems tentative in her representation of devotees' understanding of Santa Muerte's dark side and different forms of illegality. *La Santa Muerte* features several inmates who are tattoo and visual artists or poets who consider the death saint as a muse, and dedicate their work to her. One inmate displays an unfinished sketch titled "With her tears I pay for my sins". The poem that accompanies the sketch mentions indigenous gods like Tonatiuh (the Aztec sun god) alongside Santa Muerte, demonstrating the syncretic religious beliefs inherent to many devotees' faith practices. The poet declares, "The penitentiary is my university, it's the place where I received my education, and learned how to survive within the demented" [12]. This statement positions Santa Muerte as both a protector and guide that helps inmates navigate the treacherous world of the prison, but who also serves as teacher for those (like most of the inmates portrayed) who cannot receive a traditional education. Many other inmates and Tepito residents in *La Santa Muerte* are deeply familiar with different forms of illegality, and, as Piccato suggests, they primarily understand illegality and criminality as shifting social constructs and relational categories ([5], p. 3). Aridjis interviews an inmate at the Women's Social Re-adaptation Center, identified as the daughter of Ernestina Ramírez Hernández, a resident of Tepito. The woman hesitates and nervously covers her mouth with her hand when the filmmaker asks her how she ended up in jail: "For pickpocketing. Well, for robbery. Of a...they say I stole a wallet...1700 pesos. But I didn't do it. On Tuesday when I had my hearing, the guy kept on contradicting himself...him and the police. My lawyer said I'll probably beat them" [12]. When Aridjis asks the woman about her devotion to Saint Death, she eagerly describes her daily prayers in the jail and her desire for her freedom. It is unclear but also immaterial whether the woman is guilty of committing the petty theft, which perhaps amounts to a little more than one hundred dollars. Rather, it is more important to register the woman's evasiveness as a sign of her awareness that the criminal justice system in Mexico is deeply flawed and corrupt [in which the "guy"

and the “police...kept on contradicting” themselves in a seemingly endless cycle], and moreover, that she is considered guilty no matter what she does. The woman’s “criminal” activity—the theft—and her devotion to Santa Muerte are bound to each other by their transgressive qualities and their function as shifting social categories.

A few inmates in the film openly embrace the shifting nature of their transgressive, marginalized conditions. One woman, who paints murals and other images of Santa Muerte by request for her fellow inmates, clearly identifies the death saint as both an economic succor and a guardian for her drug habit, demonstrating devotees’ willingness to simultaneously invoke the death saint for socially acceptable and transgressive or disreputable desires. The woman asserts, “a lot of people have asked me to paint her for them. And from that I get some money for food...and to buy myself whatever I want...And it’s like she’s my friend, because...when I get high, she holds my hand. She’s right by my side. Because what if I overdose and die? She’s there with me” [12]. It is evident that the woman expects neither judgment for nor deliverance from her drug habit. Instead, she considers Santa Muerte a friend who will not only protect her from overdosing but will stay by her side as she gets high, perhaps implicitly participating in the illicit journey with her. Even though others might reject or disdain this woman, Santa Muerte is always available to her for emotional and social support. Such friendship is threatening to mainstream society because it reflects the illegality and marginalization that many of the death saint’s devotees appeal to, yet like many other devotees, the woman also venerates Santa Muerte for her powers of economic prosperity and abundance. Chesnut suggests that currently, “petitions for prosperity keep the Skinny Lady...busier “than any other sort of request due to the effects of simultaneous economic recessions in Mexico, Central America, and the United States ([2], p. 134). Certainly, many of Santa Muerte’s poorer devotees participate in shadow economies as street vendors or itinerant, unofficial service providers, as well as on the black market, thus blurring the line between legality and illegality out of sheer necessity. But the connection that the artist implicitly draws between drug culture, economic prosperity, and social or emotional support (“it’s like she’s my friend”) reflects the flexible, routine understanding of illegality that impoverished devotees in Mexico operate under.

Indeed, the devotees in Aridjis’s film are necessarily familiar with perceived illegality and criminality, since it surrounds them in their daily lives in Tepito. Although they matter-of-factly discuss the ways that Santa Muerte protects them from violence, and allude to their own marginalized social status; perhaps for obvious reasons they tend not to dwell on their own involvement in potentially illegal activities. One of Doña Queta’s sons, Omar Romero (named only in the film credits) casually discusses his multiple brushes with death. Dressed in the style of many gang members in the neighborhood, with a shaved head, tattooed, muscular arms, and a wife-beater top, Romero claims that Santa Muerte has saved his life at least three times: “Well, at times when I’ve been unwell. About to...die. It’s only been a few times, like two or three times...The police beat me up and...I was dying. My mother was already going to bring a priest. The liquid was going into my brain. My skull was split open. And...that’s when I pray to her. Because...I’m not going to ask her for things all the time” [12]. Romero’s reluctance to appeal arbitrarily to Santa Muerte reflects a code of justice and retribution that rewards those who know when and how to properly summon the death saint. Since violence surrounds so many Tepito residents as a part of everyday life, they must be judicious in their pleas to Santa Muerte.

At the same time, Romero vacillates when Aridjis asks him about the nature of the trouble he was in: “Were you sick or in danger?” “In danger, you know?...In danger and sick. My skull had been split open because of a...problem I’d had and I was dying.” “Because of a fight?” “No, it was another type of problem. The police beat me up” [12]. In turn, when Doña Queta describes visiting her critically injured son, she states, “...I’ll tell you that time...they came to tell me that my son was in a bad way...”, preferring to emphasize the way that Santa Muerte protected her and her woman friends from a group of muggers by covering them “with her holy shroud” so the muggers would not see them, rather than discussing the circumstances surrounding her son’s condition [12]. Aridjis is justly prudent and respectful while interviewing the subjects who grant her access to their lives. Omar Romero’s case

clearly points toward the extent to which the Mexican police are corrupt, underpaid, and potentially prone to violence or collusion with gang members or narcotraffickers, especially in poorer barrios like Tepito.

However, it is significant that so many devotees in the film prevaricate about their relationship to perceived criminality. Although they are pragmatic about the economic hardships and the daily potential for violence in their neighborhoods, the devotees in Aridjis's film—whether because of film editing questions, tact on the interviewer's part, practicality or a reluctance to divulge incriminating information—generally deny that they participate in or utilize Santa Muerte for “bad things,” as one inmate puts it. Yet the devotees are by no means in denial about their relationship, or that of the death saint, to notions of good and evil. Rather, these devotees adhere to a very different understanding of good and evil—which extends to conceptions of criminality and marginalization—than the authorities or other outsiders to Tepito have. Furthermore, many believers indicate that their own actions or beliefs direct Santa Muerte towards either darkness and evil or light and beneficence. In emphasizing such agency, her devotees are able to articulate equality for marginalized groups and spaces that fundamentally lack it. For example, worship at Doña Queta's altar expands the available public social space for Tepito residents to not only pray, but also to socialize, work, and seek some degree of safety, however tenuous.<sup>5</sup> The death cult around shrines like the one on Alfarería, with its attendant preachers, dressmakers, caretakers, and especially, the congregation that attends the monthly masses, serves as confessor, social worker, therapist, friend and family for the faithful. Nevertheless, for devotees who believe that Santa Muerte is what you make of her, acknowledging their own use of the death saint for “dark” purposes may be personally threatening.

### 3. Pável Valenzuela Arámburo's *La Santísima Muerte*

The impasse between notions of “dark” and “light” in relation to Santa Muerte is certainly alluded to in Aridjis's film, but it is a central theme of Pável Valenzuela Arámburo's film *La Santísima Muerte*, reflecting devotees' own understanding of good and evil and their sometimes ambiguous relationship to the cult. From the earliest scenes of the film, devotees emphasize the death saint's duality, implicitly echoing the life-death duality emphasized by pre-Columbian Mesoamerican belief systems and Catholic devotional practice alike. In Tepito, a man on the street affirms, “Santa Muerte was practically a creation of God...It seems to be a creation of God and we as human beings know [from the start that just as good exists in the world, evil also exists]” [13].<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, a woman asserts, “She is life and death. [Because] everything that has life, just like a tree that is green and then dries out, [later comes back to life] again,” while another man specifically identifies himself with the ambiguity and liminality that the saint represents: “I feel that [I belong neither to] the good nor the bad, [you know? Neither to the devil nor to God. An in-between point]” [13].<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Valenzuela Arámburo indicates that such duality is built into the official prayers to the saint, as in one recited by a prayer leader at the shrine on Alfarería Street: “Santísima Muerte, I believe in you, because you are the mother of the cycles, [for everything that begins must end, and everything that lives must die...]” [13].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Describing his visit to the rosary service at the shrine on Alfarería Street, Chesnut notes that Doña Queta warned the crowd with “a string of expletives...[that they should] quickly vacate the street at the end of the service, lest they fall prey to the ‘fucking thieves’ waiting to rob them” ([2], p. 86). Furthermore, he points out that “because of such security concerns, the godmother of the cult had first changed the time of the rosary from midnight to eight in the evening, and now, in order to beat nightfall,...[she] had moved it up to five o'clock” ([2], pp. 86–87).

<sup>6</sup> English translations are taken from the subtitles of *La Santísima Muerte* except where otherwise indicated. “La Santa Muerte prácticamente fue obra de Dios, no? O sea, al parecer fue obra de Dios, y pues nosotros como seres humanos de antemano sabemos que tanto como existe el bien, existe el mal” ([13], Translation partially mine).

<sup>7</sup> Translation partially mine. “Ella es vida y es muerte, no? Por eso. Porque todo lo que tiene vida, así como un árbol que está verde y luego se seca, pero luego vuelve a revivir.” Translation partially mine. “Siento que no estoy ni dentro de lo bueno ni de lo malo, verdad? Ni con el diablo ni con Dios. Punto intermedio, no?” [13].

<sup>8</sup> Translation partially mine. “Santísima Muerte, creo en tí, porque eres la madre de los ciclos, pues todo lo que empieza termina, y todo lo que vive muere...” [13].

This focus on the death saint's duality between good and evil, and its applicability to the lives of ordinary devotees throughout the film rearticulates the representation of illegality and criminality in Mexico and beyond. In Valenzuela Arámburo's film, illegality and criminality are understood in both the conventional sense of clearly identifiable, pathological transgressions emphasized by the state and Catholic Church, and as social constructs and relational categories that mark her devotees as inherently suspect and marginalized. Moreover, *La Santísima Muerte* demonstrates that devotees are prepared to employ both of these definitions of illegality as necessary aspects of Santa Muerte's holy works.

Like Aridjis's film, *La Santísima Muerte* focuses on Tepito, but it also emphasizes the peripatetic nature of the saint by emphasizing other manifestations of the cult in Mexico and the United States, with stops in Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, Los Angeles, and Nuevo Laredo. In contrast to Aridjis's film, *La Santísima Muerte* specifically elucidates Tepito's inherent duality, revealing its status as a place that is synonymous with both the official stigma of illegality and the resourcefulness and agency of the marginalized classes. In the film, the Mexico City *barrio* reflects the fundamental contradiction between light and dark that the death saint's devotees struggle with, both from their own perspective and that of outsiders. In one scene, Valenzuela Arámburo features Alfonso Hernández, a chronicler of Tepito, who plainly denounces the Mexican government for its denigration of the *barrio* and its residents: "The [Mexican] government is responsible for stigmatizing Tepito. Fortunately, the charm of the hood [sic] prevents that. Now, the devotion to Santa Muerte here has been in a way a new protection for this hood [sic]. Just as Tepito has been considered a wardrobe for the needy, and a point of cultural reference in this city, because of [the devotion to Santa Muerte] Tepito has [come] again into a cultural spotlight, then the hood [sic] allows the city to see another reality. Some people think this can be a divinity of the crisis. But the working classes have always been in a state of crisis. [So...] this [has] gotta be something else...another thing with more essence and substance that provides a strength and self-confidence to people [sic]" [13].<sup>9</sup> Hernández identifies a crucial contradiction of Tepito: the fact that it is marked as intrinsically "illegal" even as it serves as a cultural touchstone and symbol of pluck and fortitude not only for Mexico City, but for the entire nation.

Valenzuela Arámburo emphasizes the construction of marginalization and illegality in Tepito and other regions of Mexico and the United States by demonstrating that devotees' own relationship to notions of "darkness" is a part of their everyday existence. Like Pablo Piccato suggests, the devotees featured in the film understand that there are different ways to be marginalized or coded as illegal. Many devotees know someone who has been in jail, or they may have been incarcerated themselves, and as Piccato indicates, they understand that "criminals" and "victims" may be one and the same [5]. As Doña Queta declares in relation to her shrine, "Thieves and criminals may come here, I will not tell you that criminals do not come here, all kinds of people [are] here, no one has troubles with everybody, every single one of us, no matter [whether] they are prostitutes, gay, whatever they are, they...need to have faith in something and we cannot cheat people" [13].<sup>10</sup> Though Aridjis's film addresses the contradictory nature of Tepito by capturing the humanity and agency of its residents while depicting their matter-of-fact attitude towards poverty and marginalization, many of the devotees in Valenzuela Arámburo's film clearly identify with and appeal to the saint's dark side. Indeed, Santa Muerte's devotees' frequently employ her dark side not because they are coded as suspect and criminal in

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<sup>9</sup> "El gobierno se ha encargado de estigmatizar a Tepito. Afortunadamente el carisma del vecindario se sobrepone a eso. Y ahora, esta devoción, a la Santa Muerte, es un nuevo tonal protector para Tepito. Así como Tepito sigue siendo el ropero de los pobres, y un punto de referencia cultural en esta ciudad, ahora en el aspecto devocional Tepito vuelve a ser un referente cultural...Entonces le acerca y le deja ver a la ciudad otra realidad. Algunos dicen que esto puede ser una deidad de la crisis. Pero la clase popular siempre ha estado en crisis. Entonces no, esto es otra cosa. Esto es otra cosa con más esencia y substancia que le da una fortaleza y una confianza a la gente" [13].

<sup>10</sup> "Yo no te puedo decir que no vienen rateros, no te puedo decir que no vienen delincuentes, es de todo. Nadie esta peleando con todos. Todos, todos, todos. Así sean prostitutas, así sean gay, lo que sea. Tienen necesidad de tener fe en algo. Y allí no se engaña la gente" [13].

Mexican society, but rather, as a means to acknowledge their representation as marginalized subjects and resist it.

Pavel Arámburo's film pays special attention to the contradictory condition of marginalization in the lives of Santa Muerte's devotees. While most of the saint's followers are marginalized by the state and church, at times Santa Muerte is also used to wield power over them, especially in the case of the drug wars and narcotrafficking. The terror of the drug wars and the violence associated with them is especially heightened in the border regions chronicled in *La Santísima Muerte*, while the devotees portrayed seem to innately accept the contradiction between her role as a powerful agent and a victim. Indeed, they go out of their way to embrace this contradiction in relation to their own lives. In Ciudad Juárez, Yolanda Salazar, the priestess at the Santuario Santísima Muerte [Saint Death Sanctuary], situates the death saint as a symbol of equality, a tool of resistance, and a victim of misunderstanding and slander that must be defended. Despite the death saint's great powers, like her followers she is also marginalized. Echoing other devotees in the film, Salazar appeals to Santa Muerte's duality, in this case through an official prayer focusing on the equilibrium of the scale: "The scale will be the balance of our lives so that we have the necessary tranquility in our person. That for the scale of equity between good and evil [may this cult] flourish more and more for you my Pretty Girl, my White Girl...May your spiritual balance...achieve [equilibrium] for all your fervent followers" [13].<sup>11</sup> Like Doña Queta and other leaders in the cult, Salazar emphasizes the need to combat misperceptions about Santa Muerte and her followers, and the agency she confers upon them. Such misperceptions are so prevalent that they are a part of the standard prayers to the saint that the devotees recite aloud during prayer services: "Oh divine and [beautiful] Holy Death, heal [those who are] mean and liars [who] always attack your wonderful and divine cult, and when you call [on them] to [confess] in [the] presence of our Lord, have mercy on their souls and forgive them with all of your wisdom that only you have" [13].<sup>12</sup>

These prayers requesting mercy for the misguided souls who condemn the cult place Santa Muerte and her followers in a long tradition of resistance against religious persecution. Furthermore, the death cult privileges equality not only in relation to prayer, but also to the very structure of its practices of worship. Priestess Salazar insists that anyone can be a leader in the cult, provided that Santa Muerte blesses them; that is, they must be a "child" of Santa Muerte [*ser hijo de la Santísima Muerte*]. But more importantly, devotees must be willing to acquire the necessary knowledge to preach and embrace all aspects of the death saint, both good and bad: "In order to become a priestess you should have, since you are working with [another] type of energy, you must be able to work with all kind[s] of energ[ies], all kind[s] of magic, you must know [the history of] Saint Death, what a cult is, also how to practice exorcisms, I mean, you should have a wide knowledge of so many things" [13].<sup>13</sup> Salazar provides the interviewer with a brief history of Santa Muerte in Mexico, emphasizing once again that her followers are not against God, but rather position their belief in relation to faith in the "one true" God, as well as to many other aspects of orthodox Catholicism. But the priestess is most attuned to the death saint's role as a protector against the drug wars. Indeed, the scene opens with a shot of a parade in Ciudad Juárez, with Santuario Santísima Muerte participating under a banner reading "Por La Paz de Cd. Juárez!!!" [For Peace in Cd. Juárez], as devotees cry out, "Peace for Juárez, Santísima Muerte!" [Peace for Juárez] [13].

<sup>11</sup> Translation partially mine. "La balanza sea el equilibrio de nuestras vidas, para que tengamos la tranquilidad necesaria en nuestra persona, que por la balanza de equidad, entre el bien y el mal, floresca más y más este culto, hacia ti, mi niña bonita, mi niña blanca... Que tu balanza logre el equilibrio espiritual, para todos tus fervientes seguidores" [13].

<sup>12</sup> Translation partially mine. "Oh preciosísima y divinísima Santa Muerte, sana los mezquinos y mentirosos, que en todo momento atacan tu maravilloso y divino culto, cuando los llames a rendir cuentas, ante nuestro Señor, apíadate de sus almas, y perdónalos con ese don de sabiduría, que sólo tu posees" [13].

<sup>13</sup> Translation partially mine. "Para ser sacerdotiza debes tener, como estás manejando otro tipo de energías, debes manejar todas las energías, todas las magias, saber lo que es realmente la historia de la Santa Muerte, lo que es el culto, saber exorcisar, o sea, tener un conocimiento de muchas cosas" [13].

Salazar indicates that Santa Muerte personally called her to service when the death saint saved her life after she was stabbed in Sonora, and asked her to fulfill a promise to build a temple in the notorious border city of Ciudad Juárez. Above all, the cult of the Santuario Santísima Muerte promotes peace, healing, and justice for the people of Juárez; as Salazar asserts, “[Juárez is a] very dangerous city, we are having very difficult times now, where death, taking lives in a second has become a very ordinary thing here” [13].<sup>14</sup> She continues, “We have no exclusivity for the drug dealing issue, in this cult as in many other religions, there are people who...make a living [from that], and they also believe in their own saints or in God, because there is only one God. How many churches have been built with narco-charities?” [13].<sup>15</sup> While Salazar invokes justice for Ciudad Juárez, she also rejects the idea that the city and its people are somehow inherently tainted or evil because of their role in the drug wars and their violence, and implies that other cities and regions also deserve scrutiny for their potentially corrupt ties to drug money.

Similarly, a wizard (*hechicero*) at the sanctuary indicates that one of his main roles is to guide and console devotees who seek answers about the whereabouts of their disappeared loved ones. For this community of faith, Santa Muerte is at once a symbol of the capricious, frequently violent death that surrounds them, a protector in the face of violence, and a banner of resistance against it. The wizard continues, “Regarding the violence that [my country is living through], in my city that is Ciudad Juárez, we can do many things, in fact we’ve done it, well, we set a shield, we make petitions for the city, for the people, there are plenty of demons out there, there is much [evil just as there is good]. Even in the most sacred places evil [also dresses in white]” [13].<sup>16</sup> While the wizard concurs that good and evil coexist and may deceive the community, he is not complacent about the conditions of violence in Juárez. Rather, he suggests that the saint’s primary function is to protect her people by helping them to combat violence. Like her devotees in Juárez, Santa Muerte is also a witness to and victim of prejudice and violence; like them, she also resists and transcends such violence in community.

Elsewhere along the border, there are frequent reminders of the violence and devastation inflicted upon the devotees of Santa Muerte and other marginalized people, not just by narcotraffickers, but also by the state and local government. While Valenzuela Arámburo specifies in the documentary that he and his crew were unable to film shrines in Nuevo Laredo because “lookouts” working for the narcotraffickers forced them to leave the area, in Tijuana (2009) he interviews a group of devotees whose Santa Muerte shrines have been destroyed by the government [13].<sup>17</sup> These devotees are far more threatened and persecuted by their government than by the presence of narcos. Standing over the ruins of the shrine they once tended, alongside hand-lettered pieces of cardboard boxes reading “La Santa Muerte lives on in our hearts” and makeshift offerings to the death saint, two women recount their complaints against the Mexican government: “We got a call at midnight. This looks [like the act of infamous burglars.] I am very upset, very angry because we were told that the army was seen demolishing these chapels at three different locations. We should have been warned, [told] at least something like ‘Ma’am, please pick up your stuff because we are demolishing this,’ at least an official announcement from the authorities” [13].<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> “...aquí en Cd. Juárez, como ya todos saben, es una ciudad muy peligrosa, en la cual estamos viviendo...un tiempo muy difícil donde las muertes, el arrancar la vida es algo de todos los días” [13].

<sup>15</sup> Que no tenemos la exclusividad del narcotráfico, que como tanto en este culto como en...todas las religiones existen personas que se dedican a eso, y que creen en diferentes...santos o en un sólo Dios, porque nada mas hay uno sólo,...porque cuántas iglesias no se han edificado de narco-limosnas?” [13].

<sup>16</sup> Translation partially mine. “Sobre la violencia que hay en mi país, en mi ciudad que es Cd. Juárez, podemos hacer muchas cosas, de hecho lo hacemos, le ponemos un campo protector, pedimos por la ciudad, por la gente, hay muchos demonios, hay mucho mal. El mal esta como el bien, se dice que hasta en los lugares sagrados el mal se viste de blanco” [13].

<sup>17</sup> “Halcones del narcotráfico nos impidieron realizar entrevistas en este santuario” [13].

<sup>18</sup> Translation partially mine. “Nos llamaron en la madrugada...lo veo como unos vil ladrones esto, porque, la realidad, estoy muy incomoda...muy molesta...porque nos avisaron que habían visto el ejército tumbando las capillas de Rosarito, Búlevar 2000 y esta de aquí también. Obvio que tenían que haber avisado, ya mínimo, sabe qué? Señora, vaya a sacar sus cosas para poder tumbar, un aviso pues, como por parte del gobierno” [13].

It is significant that the women emphasize that they were not given “official” advance notice of any kind that their shrines would be demolished, indicating not only that the Mexican government registers the death cult and its followers as illegitimate, but also suggests their complete negation. The contrast between the intense fear that would provoke such demolition and the simultaneous denial of the cult is striking, and the devotees in Tijuana focus on the negation of their beliefs as the ultimate proof of their marginalization. Another woman insists, “We want...permission for this, if we need to do some paperwork, if we have to pay a fee, we will do it, we want our cult to continue, we are free to believe in whatever we want to...Death has no political party or anything like that, what we want is to build...our shrine [again] and to have the authorities’ support this time” [13].<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, another follower declares, “Her shrine is destroyed but I think whoever did this is wrong, we are all free to have a personal belief. And I am really mad because they do not respect this. We are not going to believe in what they [believe in], we are going to build this up again, we will do it because we are so many people who believe in her.”<sup>20</sup> Like other devotees, these women implicitly reference the government’s hypocrisy in refusing to respect or legitimate their beliefs even as it supposedly privileges freedom of religion. Clearly, the situation surrounding the demolition of the shrines is much more complicated than it appears; Chesnut notes the “great irony” in the fact that “more than a few cops and army grunts are themselves devotees of the Pretty Girl”, and speculates that some of the soldiers who were “ordered to raze the sacred sites...must have been scared to death”, considering “their patron saint’s tremendous powers of vengeance” ([2], pp. 102, 109). But regardless of any speculation, while one woman invokes a desire to comply with the authorities that marginalize her beliefs, the other rejects the Mexican government by suggesting that it will never respect the followers of the death saint; as such, the faithful must claim such respect for themselves.

Valenzuela Arámburo also highlights some examples of more mainstream, hierarchical practices of worship in his film. In 2012, the filmmaker profiles Padre Sisyphus of the Templo Santa Muerte on Melrose Ave in Los Angeles, who provides a breakdown of his church’s devotees and their requests: they are mostly Mexicans, some Central and South Americans, and a few native-born Latinos/as, who particularly seek help for family members and friends who need to cross the border into the U.S. Such concerns are in line with those of many other Santa Muerte temples. Yet unlike some other devotees profiled in the film, Padre Sisyphus does not appeal to a place for the death cult within the Catholic Church, arguing that while many of those in his congregation are of “Catholic heritage”, they now question and implicitly reject the Church for its perceived failure of the people ([18], n.p.). At the same time, Padre Sisyphus seems to have grander designs for his branch of the death cult than many of the other priests and ordinary devotees who appear in the film. He announces that his temple’s primary goal is to promote the “spiritual evolution” of the people, with masses broadcast weekly through the church’s website that could potentially reach all over the world. He also proudly asserts that he addresses topics that have not been discussed for “2000 years...since Jesus came down to earth” such as the nature of death itself [13]. It may be that Padre Sisyphus, in a slightly different mode than Doña Queta, is particularly media-savvy, as befits a temple leader in Los Angeles. Yet it is telling that in the Padre’s interviews, there is no evidence of the egalitarian channels for devotees to become sorcerers or priests that are evident at the temple in Ciudad Juárez. Moreover, Valenzuela Arámburo’s segment on Templo Santa Muerte does not feature any interviews with the Los Angeles congregation members at all, unlike the scenes filmed in Tepito. Furthermore, while Padre Sisyphus insists that his congregation is not “looking [to be] bad people”, he makes no other reference to

<sup>19</sup> “Queremos un permiso si hay que hacerlo por escrito, si hay que pagar sólo, lo vamos a pagar. Queremos que el culto siga, somos libres en culto...la Muerte no tiene ningún partido político ni nada que se le parezca. Queremos únicamente que la capilla sea vuelta a levantar y que tengamos...el apoyo de nuestro gobierno” [13].

<sup>20</sup> Translation partially mine. “Su capilla esta tirada pero pues yo creo que... las personas que lo hicieron están mal porque todos somos libres de tener una creencia. Y pues estoy enojada porque pues no respetan. No vamos a creer en lo que ellos piensan. Se va a volver a levantar...porque somos muchas personas las que creemos en ella” [13].

Santa Muerte's "dark side" in the film, although elsewhere, in an interview with journalist Shweta Saraswat, he admits, "Some temples of Santa Muerte work on the dark side, yes...Santa Muerte works everywhere. That's why people get confused. She's a being of light. She is a shield to those with faith" ([18], n.p.).<sup>21</sup> While Padre Sisyphus acknowledges that other temples focus on the death saint's dark side, he nevertheless draws an implicit distinction between light and dark, and suggests that his temple is exclusively on the side of light.

In contrast, many of the ordinary devotees featured in Valenzuela Arámburo's film are very willing to appeal to what they perceive to be Santa Muerte's dark side, as well as to different forms of illegality. In their appeals they deliberately emphasize the saint's duality between light and dark. Back in Tepito, a male devotee and gang member speaks of the "generations-long" devotion to Santa Muerte in the barrio on the part of many gang members: "We do it for the homies too, for those fallen folks, for the ones that are still [on] the corners, or those homies that are still [down in it...up with 'la trece']...She helps us to [move forward], step by step, if anyone needs something, well I ask her" [13].<sup>22</sup> The gang member is not specific about the nature of his requests to the death saint, but he situates her as a protector of the homies who have died in the gang as well as those who are still on the streets, implying that she supports them in all manner of licit and illicit endeavors. Others in Tepito unabashedly seek Santa Muerte's powers of darkness and illegality. A young man, perhaps in his late teens, performs a rap for the filmmakers where he dedicates his skills to the death saint by specifically referencing her dark powers: "Thank you, Holy Death for this gift you have given me...Look I am a great MC, thank you [black] Santísima Muerte" [13].<sup>23</sup>

Later, a priest in Tepito returns to the duality invoked at the beginning of the film by calling forth both the "black" and "white" versions of Santa Muerte to protect and guide the people. In an official group prayer session requesting legal justice, the priest intones: "Santísima Muerte, [dress yourself in black], and [give the judge] strength, cover him in balsams, so that he [will resign], Santísima Muerte, [have mercy on him], so [that he will not] suffer or moan, Santísima Muerte, [dress yourself in white], and show him the right way, give him strength and energy, so he doesn't fail again" [13].<sup>24</sup> These prayers by a large group of people seeking protection from and through the legal judicial system contrast with Chestnut's claims that "black is not one of the most popular votive candles among devotees", and his analysis of the death saint's dark side as bound to outlaws and drug traffickers ([2], p. 96). Though Chesnut persuasively argues that Santa Muerte is the patroness of "those on the front lines of the Mexican government's war against the cartels...[as well as of] the traffickers they are fighting", he does not emphasize that while she is indeed overwhelmingly worshipped by everyday people with everyday concerns, many of these people have a more ambiguous and capacious understanding of the role of the black Santa Muerte ([2], p. 107). Rather than solely reflecting supposedly amoral "dark deeds" as defined by the Catholic Church, the Mexican state, or the media ([2], p. 96), the death saint's devotees understand that her darkness coexists with her light side, and that the two are inseparable. Indeed, by showcasing devotees' relationship with the dualistic Santa Muerte of light and dark, Valenzuela Arámburo calls attention to believers' recognition—and rejection—of their identification by the state, the media, and the Catholic Church as primarily criminals or victims. Rather, in the film devotees emphasize their belief that Santa Muerte embodies light and dark in order to resist and transform their own representation as marginalized subjects. While

<sup>21</sup> "No buscamos ser malos..." [18].

<sup>22</sup> Translation partially mine. "Por el barrio, no? Por los carnalitos caídos, los que andan todavía en las esquinas, o tirando la placa...siempre va pa' arriba la 13...Nos ayuda a caminar, paso tras paso...cuando alguien quiere algo, yo le pido a ella" [13]. "La trece" (number thirteen) refers to the Mexican Mafia or "La eMe", a historically Mexican-American prison gang with ties that extend to Mexico and Central America.

<sup>23</sup> Translation partially mine. "Gracias Santísima Muerte por este don que me ha dado...Mira yo soy un gran MC, gracias Santísima Muerte negra" [13].

<sup>24</sup> Translation partially mine. "Santísima Muerte, vístete de negro, y dale fortaleza, Santísima Muerte, cúbrelo con bálsamos, para que se resigne, Santísima Muerte, dale misericordia, para que no sufra y gima, Santísima Muerte, vístete de blanco, y muéstrale el camino correcto, dale vigor, energía y fortaleza, para no [rendirse]" [13].

they may be criminalized by the state because of their status as marginalized, working class subjects, Santa Muerte's followers rearticulate their belief as a practice of duality that recognizes the threatening simultaneity and multiplicity of "dark" or illegal and apparently "light" or holy petitions and acts.

The film appropriately closes with the priest in Tepito reciting a prayer from the perspective of Santa Muerte herself. The priest situates himself and the congregation in the position of the death saint, imploring non-believers and outsiders to understand and learn about them beyond their representation by the media, state, or Church. At the same time, he declares that Death is also eternally with all non-believers and outsiders regardless of their actions or beliefs: "I am writing this letter to ask [that you] not insult me [nor] judge me [nor offend me], since I am just another [one of God's creations]. I am not responsible for being called Holy Death, if that is what bothers you. Remember that Jesus, Son of God, died and resurrected. I am the spirit of light that [delivers] you to Him when your soul detaches [from] your body, and you have to give an account of your life. If you don't know me, don't [criticize me]. First do some research and then [you can form an opinion of me]. Death loves me even if I stay [away] as far as possible from her, even if I want to forget her, death will [always be by my side], [always faithful to me], and [at the end] I will leave everything, honor, riches, love and fame, everything to become one with her, until the end, to unite and [be in] communion with her" [13].<sup>25</sup> Here, the priest echoes an exhortation by Doña Queta, which celebrates Santa Muerte's universal accessibility by suggesting that she resides within us all, implicitly touching everyone: "She is inside of you just as she is inside of me...Once you peel this [your skin]...you are the Muerte. You already have her...in you" ([19], p. 156). For Doña Queta, as for the priest in Tepito, this possessive love and internal communion between the saint and her followers suggests peace and comfort, rather than the fear or control that are so threatening to state and church.

It is especially significant that the prayer at the end of the film reprises many of the criticisms levied against Santa Muerte's marginalized devotees, yet responds to them in the voice of the death saint herself. In the prayer, she is marginalized just like many her followers are. However, Santa Muerte not only resists victimization by demanding a full accounting and awareness from her critics, she also asserts herself by announcing her presence in the lives of everyone, believer and non-believer alike. Santa Muerte is in communion with all of us, but the prayer is also a powerful, even subtly menacing reminder of the futility of disrespecting and negating her followers. Although the death saint and her devotees may be marginalized by the media, the Mexican state, the Catholic Church, and other institutions, her people claim the dignity and respect they are so often denied by appealing to her duality between dark and light, and by emphasizing her itinerant, malleable, and contradictory nature. In this manner, Santa Muerte's devotees rearticulate and resist the dominant representation of marginalization and illegality, and in the process, reorder the typically monolithic portrayal of their patroness through the lens of mutually constitutive duality between light and dark.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>25</sup> Translation partially mine. "Te escribo esta carta para pedirte que no me insultes ni me juzgues ni me ofendas, puesto que yo soy una obra mas de tu creador. Yo no soy culpable de que me digan Santa Muerte, si esto es lo que te molesta. Recuerda que JesuCristo, hijo de Dios padre, murió y asi mismo resucitó. Yo soy el espíritu de luz que te lleva hacia Él cuando tu alma se desprende de tu cuerpo, y tienes que rendir cuentas de tu vida. Si no me conoces, no hables mal de mi. Primero investiga y luego puedes dar tu opinión acerca de mi. La muerte me ama por mas que permanezca alejado de la muerte, por mas que quiero olvidarla, la muerte siempre estará a mi lado, para mi, siempre fiel, y hasta el final, yo le dejaré todo. Honor, riqueza, amor y fama, todo para ser uno, uno mismo con la muerte. Sólo hasta el final, para estar en unión y comunión con ella" [13].

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