Santa Muerte: A Transnational Spiritual Movement of the Marginalized

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SANTA MUERTE: A TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT OF THE MARGINALIZED

By

Armando Rubi III

A THESIS

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SANTA MUERTE: A TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT OF THE MARGINALIZED

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The mass media have recently brought to public light the new religious movement of Santa Muerte, or “Holy Death”. The depictions of Santa Muerte in news coverage, television and film have also swayed public perception through highly exoticized representations of the belief system, particularly in relation to violence and criminality. Separating sensationalization in the media from the actual practices of Santa Muerte serves to demonstrate that many devotees are non-violent practitioners. By using an ethnographic study of botanícas and documenting Santa Muerte related objects available to practitioners, this study nuances the multilayered components of this emergent religion.
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CHAPTER 1
Santa Muerte: An Introduction

In the year 2001, a woman named Enriqueta Romero set up a shrine to Santa Muerte at her home in Tepito, one of the most violent and dangerous neighborhoods of Mexico City. In the following months, thousands of people flocked to the altar to pay homage to the image of “Holy Death” standing at the centerpiece, facing the street. What was behind this social phenomenon?

Enriqueta Romero is referred to by Andrew Chestnut in Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint as the “streetwise godmother of the cult” (40). In public interviews, she has refused to be recognized as a leader and humbly accepts the role of devotee, yet her profits as the shrine attendant suggest otherwise. Chestnut points out that: “Between profits from the store and generous donations made by believers at the shrine, the skeleton saint has blessed her preeminent devotee with a much better income source than she had as a quesadilla vendor” (42). The shrine has become the focal point of monthly pilgrimages and its central location in Tepito allows for the large number of marginalized people in the area to have access for veneration. The practices of Santa Muerte are too individualistic to lend themselves to a strongly organized central church. Although cartel members may be predominantly Santa Muerte believers, their organization is primarily for the purpose of drug trafficking, not converting others under their spiritual guidance.

The beliefs of a devotee to Santa Muerte may vary as there is no central church or official set of scripture. John Thompson in Santisima Muerte: On the Origin and Development of a Mexican Occult Image, explores the "complex, multi-faceted" nature of
Santa Muerte (405). He presents an ethnographic study of Santa Muerte in the U.S. and Mexico, comparing other religions like Santería and its spread across the United States. (427) The syncretic beliefs that make up Santa Muerte are readily apparent in altar displays and the beliefs of her devotees. In *Enriqueta Romeo, Guardian de la muerte*, Damián Quiroga, observing the inside of Romeo's home, writes that: “..en el pasillo intermedio hay un altar santero, que realmente serían muchos, con infinidad de imágenes de las siete potencias santeras y los Orishas, a los que doña Queta lleva ofrendas, como pan y juguetes” (286). The interchange that Santeria, Palo Mayombe, Voodou and other non-Mexican religious practices have had with Santa Muerte have enriched the practice yet also led to lack some definition (Ruiz 57). I hypothesize that it is in botánicas—religious goods stores that cater to these religious communities—where Santa Muerte has found a place among other pagan religions. In Chapter 4 I will explore this hypothesis which if proven correct, would demonstrate that Santa Muerte has become commodified in botánicas as another pagan practice.

1. What is Santa Muerte?

Santa Muerte is a syncretic religious practice, or mixture of different belief systems. The principal source is traditional Catholicism with influences of indigenous Mexican views of death (Castañeda, cited in Chestnut, 30). Many practitioners consider themselves Christian and claim a connection to Aztec cultural concepts of death. Death personified as a female Grim Reaper is the icon of Santa Muerte, and practitioners make offerings and erect altars in her honor. They believe that praying to her and making promises will gain her favor and bring her to one's aid. Chesnut states that: “...in Mexico and parts of this country, she has become the most potent folk saint because of her unique
control over life and death. Her reputation as the most powerful and fastest-acting saint is above all what attracts results-oriented devotees to her altar” (59). The role of folk saints in Mexican culture is extremely important because they act as an intermediary between the believer and God. In *Santa Muerte: Mexico's Mysterious Saint of Death*, Kail defines folk saints as: “...powerful individuals that are revered for their spiritual gifts but are not typically saints that have been canonized by the Catholic Church” (46).

The relationship with death in Mexican culture and practice has also traditionally been criticized by the Catholic Church. In "*De la 'calavera domada' a la subversión santificada: La Santa Muerte, un nuevo imaginario religioso en México*, Perla Fragoso discusses the difference between *calaveras* and Santa Muerte:

> la imagen de la muerte ha sido recuperada por movimientos sociales que aprovechan las fiestas de “días de muertos” para recordar estos hechos y honrar la memoria de quienes murieron luchando contra el autoritarismo o a causa de su posición social desfavorecida. Pero además de esta reapropiación social y política de la muerte y del “día de muertos”, al menos desde la década de los treinta, primero de manera velada y marginal, y en los últimos ocho años de forma pública y expansiva, se ha desarrollado un culto católico por la muerte –aunque no reconocido por la Iglesia– entre amplios sectores populares, en el que a través de la santificación de la calavera se resignifica un ícono que parecía desgastado y trivializado por obra del Estado y del turismo. (11)

It is crucial to note the differences between Day of the Dead skulls, *Catrinas*, and representations of Santa Muerte. Only by observing the visual and representational characteristics of these icons independently, in their origins, can we take count of the conflation in certain cases. What do these three representations of death have in common even though they have different symbolic meanings? Is death not just death? Why has
death, which is so engrained in Mexican culture, become the center of religious devotion for some? In México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization, Bonfil Batalla explains how cultural meanings change:

These celebrations put into play cultural elements that are resources of the group, and the decision to carry out las costumbres (whatever they might be) is also the group's decision. It is a show of autonomy that preserves space for the activity as a part of the reduced universe of social life over which the group maintains decision-making rights. Finally, these traditional rites acquire new meaning and fulfill functions that may be very different from those they had in previous periods. (133)

In what follows, I define each of these:

**Day of the Dead** is a Mexican cultural holiday that is influenced by the pre-Colombian Aztec death cult with elements of Christianity and All Saints Day. Symbols used for this day are: brightly decorated sugar skulls, Mexican marigolds, and family altars or cemetery plots. In *Day of the Dead: When Two Worlds Meet in Oaxaca*, Haley et al. write that: "On the Day of the Dead, that line dissolves and, for a time, there is only one world. At that time, November first and second, the dead return to their former homes on Earth for a while to eat, to drink, to sing, to be entertained, and to visit with their loved ones" (1). That family members return postmortem to partake in the cultural festivities of the living implies that Mexican worldviews present death and life as intricately woven. In *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, Claudio Lomnitz states that death is: "instead meant to be a popular characteristic deployed in everyday life. Moreover, Mexican attitudes toward death are generally understood as peculiarly powerful instances of cultural hybridity or mestizaje, an area of life in which indigenous and popular culture has enveloped and transformed the culture of the colonizer" (40/41). While syncretic
Christian elements have been added to the Day of the Dead by hegemonic forces through the usage of All Saints' Day, the pagan, Aztec origins of the celebration remain as the central focus.

*La calavera Catrina* is considered another category of iconography representing death. Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada used *calaveras* or skeletons as a social commentary of the middle and upper class from the Porfiriato Era; today this style of *calaveras* is used heavily in artisan crafts. Posada's social commentary can be seen as a statement that everybody dies, even the rich, so in the end, all are equal and should be treated fairly. In "El símbolo de la calavera,"Reyes Garcia suggests that the *Catrina* image "fue representar una burla sardónica de las personas de origen humilde que, literalmente, no tienen mucho para cubrir sus huesos y, sin embargo, aparentan ser algo más de lo que realmente son, con el ostentoso y llamativo sombrero de plumas representativo de las clases altas, signo de la aspiración a escalar socialmente y dejar atrás la pobreza y todo lo que implicaba" (33). While this use of *calaveras* as social commentary was not initiated by Posada, he is the most notable figure to use the images in Mexican history and his lithographs in the broadsides and printing press quickly popularized the images (Miliotes 14). It was also a searing critique of the Europeanized fanfare and tastes of the Mexican elite. In *José Guadalupe Posada: Prócer de la Gráfica Popular Mexicana*, Alejandro Topete del Valle comments that: "Posada has gone around the world and has been the representative of Mexico in his time, of its customs, personalities, and the processes of a very singular period of history, given that it was the forerunner of a country that hovered very close to a far-reaching political and social event: The Mexican Revolution" (14). This *calavera* iconography of Posada restated
Mexican culture and advanced the death cult of time immemorial to a state in the process and tumult of modernization. For this reason, it can be argued that elements of both Day of the Dead and *La calavera Catrina* have overlapped and borrow from each other, resulting in hybridity (Gonzalez 26).

**Santa Muerte** is a folk saint which sanctifies the imagery of death in Mexican culture. The Angel of Death or Grim Reaper is the main symbol of the religion and is usually depicted wearing a bridal gown. Chestnut suggests that: "...Santa Muerte is thought to have originated as Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec goddess of death [...] With its persecution of indigenous religion, the Spanish Conquest drove devotion underground and into syncretism with Catholicism [...] Her Spanish-style tunics and dresses, and her European accoutrements, the scythe and scales of justice, are but a façade thinly veiling her true Aztec identity" (28). Archaeological evidence indicates that most of the Aztec gods were anthropomorphized and depicted in divine pairs, such as "Mictlantecuhtli-Mictlancihuatl, Lord and Lady of the Region of the Dead" (Pohl et al. 32; León-Portilla 187) The Aztec underworld was composed of nine different realms which the soul must journey through, facing challenges which if completed would assure them "a place of permanent rest in Mictlan" (Pohl et al. 41). Death gods and goddesses in the Aztec worldview were not only connected to the afterlife or underworld but with other aspects of human life, such as "fertility, health, and abundance" (Smith 206). The evolution of Mictecacihuatl to Santa Muerte is a cyclical interpretation of not only a holy representation of death but as a benefactor that can help the living. She begins as a pagan goddess, who is then syncretized or disguised by Catholicism and kept as a cultural artifact of the land. Four centuries later, she is resuscitated and returned to her prior status.
as a deity by a rapidly growing group of devotees.

2. To Whom Does Santa Muerte Appeal?

Santa Muerte’s attraction for the masses has been criticized by the Catholic Church, which depicts its followers as lost individuals, such as “drug traffickers, prisoners, sex workers, and people abandoned by the state” (Jones et al., 474). Marginalized members of society that have been rejected by the Catholic Church, such as homosexuals, find a place in the practices of Santa Muerte even if they are not deemed criminal or violent. In *Voice, Trust, and Memory*, Melissa Williams argues that marginalization: "points to the fact of structural (or systemic) inequality, i.e., the fact that the dynamics of social, economic, and political processes reliably reproduce patterns of inequality in which members of these groups lie well below the median of the distribution of resources" (16). Throughout this thesis, I use the term marginalized to mean people who are or consider themselves as unequal by the dominant, mainstream culture. Whether it is lack of social, economic, or political power, the marginalized members that lack these forms of currency can cultivate their own form of power.

Even though the criminality and violence of some Santa Muerte devotees has been the main focus of mass media, Santa Muerte reflects an all-inclusive spectrum, taking in anyone who calls upon her. Ruiz observes that: “El culto a la Santa Muerte representa la fe que se ha perdido a la Iglesia Católica. Más que nada se ha adaptado a las necesidades cotidianas y de la existencia de la vida de los sujetos, quienes se encomiendan a un santo que vaya acorde con la situación real y mundana que viven” (56). The quest for a connection to an alternative spirituality to which Mexicans can relate is apparent in the trend of the decreasing Catholic population across Latin America.
within the past century. According to the Pew Research Center in 1910, 90% of Latin Americans were Catholic compared to 72% in 2010. In *Latin American Catholicism in an Age of Religious and Political Plurality*, Frances Hagopian explains that: “Today, intensifying religious competition and an advancing tide of secularism have eroded the political influence and religious and cultural hegemony of the Catholic Church in increasingly pluralist democracies” (149). For some practitioners, a conflict may arise between the capacity to freely practice the beliefs of Santa Muerte and the attitudes that stem from the Catholic Church in relation to it.

The general consensus of the literature on Santa Muerte is that it is a cult movement. Some sources highlight that Santa Muerte is depicted as a cult—mostly by the media—because of the inclusion of criminal and violent members, ignoring the marginalized members who are not causing harm. In "The Term Cult is Misused for New Religious Movements," Cowan et al. note that:

> While a relative few may know someone who has joined a group colloquially regarded as a 'cult', in reality most people get the majority of their information about new or controversial religions through the media. And, though there are occasional exceptions, 'cult' has become little more than a convenient, if largely inaccurate and always pejorative, shorthand for a religious group that must be presented as odd or dangerous for the purposes of an emerging news story. (29)

While Chestnut refers to Santa Muerte as a “burgeoning public cult” (5), I would suggest that the word “cult” implies danger or harm. In a general sense, cult followers pose a danger to themselves or others under the direct control of their leaders. In *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*, Cowan et al. explore brainwashing as a cult characteristic and explain that: “Through the action of the 'cult,' men and women have lost the ability to
think for themselves, and to make rational decisions that in their own best interest...Some religious movements are too loosely organized to support the concentration effort a process like brainwashing would require” (218). Most Santa Muerte practitioners, however, do not pose a danger to themselves or to others, except in the case of narcotraffickers.

The dearth of statistics related to criminality and violence and Santa Muerte is noteworthy. For example, the FBI’s website lacks any statistical information regarding criminality and Santa Muerte. However, the website does cite an article titled “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings” written by Robert Bunker. It contains adequate information on Santa Muerte, yet the most used sources are those of Tony Kail, which seems less scholarly than Chestnut's work. Kail's field of research demonstrates that he is heavily involved with authorities in occult related crime scenes and has books titled *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders* and *A Cop's Guide to Occult Investigations: Understanding Satanism, Santeria, Wicca, and Other Alternative Religions*. Bunker’s article refers to Santa Muerte as a cult, yet Kail's book portrays it as a folk religion, comparing it to other pagan practices.

Elements of Santeria and Palo Mayombe--another less known Afro-Cuban religion--have been incorporated into Santa Muerte religion. The incorporation of these other religion into Santa Muerte practices can be attributed to the cultural exchange between Latinos in the United States, as well as the drug trade. Familiarity with these two Afro-Cuban religions and some of their iconography helps in the coding of certain elements, e.g. altar layout, human sacrifice. The syncretic associations that Santa Muerte has had with other pagan practices can be observed by analyzing one of the first cases of
narco involvement during the late 1980s. According to the Bunker FBI article on *Santa Muerte*, in 1989, ritualized killings in Matamoros were attributed to an extreme form of Palo Mayombe because black cauldrons, or *nganga*--their focal point of worship--found at the crime scene (1). A Santa Muerte statue was also found at the crime scene but the practices were attributed to "narcosatanism". Santa Muerte during this time was not associated with criminality or as a religion. Chestnut writes that:

"Dubbed 'narcosatánicos' by the Mexican press, Costanza and his gang practiced a deviant form of the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Mayombe mixed with Mexican occult practices. Costanza and his narcosatanists abducted and ritually sacrificed at least fourteen people on the ranch. Among the cauldrons, skulls, daggers, and other items recovered at the ranch was a statue of Santa Muerte" (98). The figure of the Grim Reaper at the crime scene was seen to hold empathetic value, i.e. to attract death. Many times the media uses this general depiction of death for similar reasons, to stir up emotions and fears of death. It is noteworthy that the term “narcosatánicos” is used in the Mexican press. Knowledge about Santa Muerte, in the late 1980s was scarce, leading journalists to use a negative term that was liberally used at the time to refer to the occult, Satanism. However, Palo Mayombe was defined as an Afro-Cuban religion and Costanza, being a Cuban, was mixing in Mexican folkloric practices. This individualized practice confused observers, leading them to think that it was a deviant form of a religion already recognized by scholars.

### 3. Purpose and Focus of the Present Study

The purpose of this thesis is threefold:

First, to locate the practices surrounding the worship of Santa Muerte within a longer
trajectory of Mexican folk practices. In Chapter 2, I describe and explore the historical legacy of *bandidos*, Jesús Malverde and their cultural importance in Mexico's Revolutionary period. Second, I decipher and debunk the popular myth propagated by the mass media--particularly in the U.S.--that Santa Muerte is linked directly to criminality and violence. In Chapter 3, I explore some of these criminal representations of Santa Muerte in U.S. and Mexican mass media and highlight their exaggerated and stereotyped focus on drug traffickers and mystical *maldad* surrounding the image of “Holy Death.” As I point out, many Santa Muerte devotees are not wrongdoers, but rather, marginalized and economically impoverished members of society, just like many of those who flocked to the altar erected at Enriqueta Romero's home in Tepito. Third, I explore the transnational dimension of Santa Muerte as a sort of cultural commodity in the Postmodern Era. In Chapter 4, I present an ethnographic study of various neighborhoods of the Mexican and Latino diaspora in major cities of the U.S. and Spain. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will discuss how Santa Muerte brandishes a level of mystery and the occult, lending itself to commodification within a global market as an *en vogue* icon.
Chapter 2
Narcoculture and a Bandit Historical Legacy:
Using a Language of Oppression

I. Introduction

The bandit phenomenon of late 19th- and early 20th-century Mexico can be compared to the violence of present-day drug traffickers. In Disorder and Progress, Vanderwood defines bandits as: "self-interested individuals and their followers who found themselves excluded from the possibilities and opportunities, not to mention the benefits, of society at large, and who promoted disorder as a lever to enter a system reserved for a few" (xv). The bandit of the late 19th and early 20th century fought against the tide of Nationalism and revolution, seeking to reestablish a previous social order that was fading into the past (Hobsbawn 2). In Bandidos: The Varieties of Latin American Banditry, Slatta questions: "If class acts of injustice motivate individual peasants to take up the bandit life, then what social conditions gave rise to wider outbreaks of banditry?"

If bandits are to be considered a precursor to the current cartel situation in Mexico, we must ask the same question. Drawing from Hobsbawm, Slatta identifies several causes for the rise of banditry: "... 'pauperization and economic crises..., wars, conquests, or the breakdown of the administrative system' as circumstances likely to trigger a surge in criminal activity" (3). While those that retain and wield power in the hierarchy of drug trafficking may have inherited their position and not struggled with poverty, the illegality of their trade points to a way to skirt the system to accumulate wealth to avoid poverty or economic downfalls.

While a bandit's aggression was necessary to exert dominance, the organization of the drug cartels pushes this aggression to new heights to intimidate and demonstrate
superiority over other cartels and government agencies. This form of organized crime has developed a narcoculture which values luxury, *machismo*, and violence. Depictions of Jesús Malverde, a bandit of the early 20th century have also been adapted into narcoculture as a symbol of the marginalized and a justification for illegal actions. What are the implications of bandit culture being a precursor to narcoculture and what changes have occurred? I will argue in this chapter that while both diverge in periodization and customs, the motives behind both groups are the same: survival and self-legitimization of actions that are contrary to the state's policies. The U.S. and Mexican media by using a bandit narrative to justify military and violent actions in retaliation against cartel members and their spiritual beliefs, ostracize devotees of Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. On the other hand, it also serves to legitimate the illegal actions of cartel members from a marginalized perspective.

2. Banditry: Parallels between Banditry and the Cartel

In *Ideology: An Introduction*, Eagleton suggests that ideologies are: "...ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality" (1-2). The use of language to portray a narrative as counter-cultural or anti-establishment has been used in a similar sense as Santa Muerte beliefs have been attributed to narcoculture. U.S. and Mexican media mostly tie Santa Muerte to drug cartel violence and depictions of torture, furthering a suggestion that those who pray to her are somehow related. In *The Narcovirus*, Guillermoprieto describes the cartels as a disease: "What the drug trade is really like is the HIV virus: once it infects the social body, it has devastating
consequences, and there is no getting rid of it" (9). By relating it to a natural reality, or a disease, it furthers the notion that if you can "get rid of it" by any means necessary, it would be supported by the dominant culture.

The language used to describe drug cartels has also been historically used to describe bandits. In *Nightmares of the Lettered City*, when mentioning representational paradigms of banditry as natural and not social, Dabove observed that:

> By making banditry a catastrophe, a plague, a natural prodigy, the conflict that banditry enacts migrates from where it belongs (the political and economic order of social relations) into "natural history"...It naturalizes the social order against which the rebellion is posed while suppressing the political dimension of peasant resistance that the bandit represents. More importantly, it hides the dimension of violence that the state repression of banditry entails (uprooting a weed is not violence: it is a procedure). 287-288

To portray the bandit as foreign to the social concept of the state, dehumanizes them and denies their human rights.

In *Bandit Nation*, Frazer further argues that banditry has traditionally been used as a contrast that is essential in defining Mexican civilization and "the state as a vital instrument of state control" (12). The elite tried to control the power shift from Spain to Mexico after Independence and was burdened by the distraction of those who would not comply with the authority of the new state (9). Historically, government crackdowns on banditry use any means necessary to preserve and maintain the sovereignty of the state. Frazer mentions the unsuccessful attempts of 19th century Mexico to curb 70 years of banditry when he writes: "To enable the prosecution and extermination of bandits, one government after another suspended civil liberties, passed emergency laws, built or
expanded prisons, authorized summary execution, and granted extraordinary powers to courts and tribunals" (20-21).

Policy-making and weak institutions will not solve the cartel solution and a heavy-handed approach leads to concerns that revisit a militarized Mexico, still fresh in its historical memory. In *Mexico: War on Crime Triggers Activist's Suspicions*, Cevallos quotes Adrian Ramirez, president of the Mexican League for the Defense of Human rights, who argues: "The steps taken by the new government are aimed at legitimising the militarisation of the country, which will result in human rights violations and the criminalisation of social protest" (1). In the article *Mexico, War Crimes, and a Slippery Slope*, Gallahue mentions that in response to activists: "According to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the definition of armed conflict that is used by the ICC is intended to 'distinguish an armed conflict from banditry'" (1). The ICC's interpretation of the cartel conflict as banditry demonstrates that their definition is underestimating the level of influence of organized crime. Or could it be that the ICC recognizes that there are no simple solutions to the conflict? To label it as banditry implies that the state has no control over certain areas, acknowledging that whatever attempts made by the state to gain control are necessary.

While the actions of drug cartels can be interpreted as banditry, their organization is highly complex, hierarchical and has infiltrated the government through corruption that is characteristic of the Mexican political milieu. In *Corruption and Politics in Contemporary Mexico*, Morris notes that: "The Mexican culture of corruption is characterized by the proliferation of corruption throughout civil society, the cultural glorification of corruption among certain sectors of the population, the engendering of a
distorted middle-class morality, diversion of individual responsibility, and the diffusion of distrust and cynicism toward the government and public officials" (71). This distrust and cynicism towards the state lends itself to the image of the bandit as positive, working against those who would oppress. Bandits worked to circumnavigate the state while the drug cartels are continually trying to work within the state to obtain power or have officials turn a blind eye to their illegal activities. Concerns about corruption were precisely Calderon's argument for using a mano dura approach to cracking down on the drug cartels. The breakdown of barriers caused by decades of distrust and corruption called for strict, no-tolerance action. Ex-President Calderon's campaign during his administration to crack down on cartels using a mano dura approach has been questioned by human rights activists. Activists argue that Calderon should be charged with war crimes for his violent retaliation against the drug cartels.

The current situation in Mexico stems from a historical legacy and cannot be remedied overnight. In Mexico's Fight For Security, Poire suggests that: "There are areas in Mexico where crime is increasing, but in other areas federal and local authorities have brought a decline in criminal activity. One lesson that can be drawn from this case is that federal and local jurisdictions need to join in a systematic effort to improve security conditions" (26). A system of checks and balances by federal agencies and local police suggests that a strengthening of policing institutions would help Mexico become better organized in combating the drug trade and the corruption attached to it.

If the state cannot control organized crime, is the state truly sovereign? Is the desperate attempt to use retaliatory violence a way to deter or lessen crime? In Organized Crime and Violence, Guerrero mentions that: "The federal government can no longer
expect to tackle violence simply by sending federal police or the army to enhance or take the place of local public forces in new areas...federal forces may already be overstretched (even taking into account the recent expansion of the federal police)” (41). The non-policed areas of lawlessness bring to mind the concept of the wild roaming bandit, always one step ahead of the state's reach, using the vast territories to their advantage.

Media sensationalization of violence only serves to perpetuate and validate the actions of the criminal. When marginalized people feel that there are no solutions for survival other than criminality and violence, they take action by empowering themselves. The only power that they have immediate access to are their reputation and honor, which are proven or acclaimed through violent actions. In “Murder by Structure,” Black explains that: “Formalized systems of honorific and status-conferring violence—such as a duel or vendettas—more frequently emerge in social contexts in which (1) formal institutions of social control are absent or impotent, and (2) violence is condoned or promoted as an acceptable form of social control or ‘self-help’ ” (cited in Papachristos, 78-79). While the bandit is feared by "civilized" society and the elite, the marginalized interpret their actions as survival and counter-establishment, which serves as their unofficial champion or inspiration to continue fighting for them.

While the image of the bandit holds mixed cultural and historical significance for Mexico, there is a positive narrative from the perspective of the marginalized. The symbol of the bandit as a Robin Hood figure is interpreted as a champion for the poor or marginalized. With the perception that the state, Catholic Church or hegemonic influence of the U.S. is working against them, the marginalized seek the spiritual guidance of those who would help their cause. Vanderwood highlights that: "No wonder that governments
fear the idea of banditry, especially as rooted in that strain of religious inspiration that envisions an entirely new world about to come, one that strips the government of its power and delivers it to those whom the state meant to dominate" (xxxviii). Alternative forms of religious devotion may be perceived as counter-establishment yet are fairly common in Mexican culture. Folk saints are known to Mexicans as "spiritual helpers" and are considered to be a syncretic form of Catholic and indigenous beliefs (Kail 109). The beliefs of Santa Muerte or of “Holy Death” are criticized by the Catholic Church as being satanic and anti-Mexican, yet many who consider themselves Catholic continue to pray to her because she helps those who are in the most need. Alternative forms of religious devotion, such as Santa Muerte have been appropriated by both marginalized and narcotraffickers alike, associating it with repression and violence, although practitioners may be neither.

3. Narcoculture

Narcoculture provides as an escape from a life of crime through luxury and alternative forms of spirituality. The system of ethics and values of drug cartel members have evolved into a culture that has similarities with the bandit culture of the early 20th century. Because narcotraffickers face constant concerns about retribution by rival cartels and whether government officials will find their illegal contraband, a form of escape is needed. This escape is not only a distraction but a culture that reaffirms dominance, *machismo* and cunning. Masculinity and toughness are highlighted in narcoculture as essential for being respected or being taken seriously. The bandit's intention was to survive through the deceit of those they targeted while avoiding the state. Also anti-establishment and self-serving, the new narcoculture surrounds itself with what
Guillermoprieto notes as the only positive benefit of involvement in the drug-trafficking trade; material wealth. She writes that: “...They learn to kill, and in the emptiness and absence of meaning that follows a murder, they look desperately for redemption and for grounding. They find it in consumer goods – narcojeans, narcotennis shoes, narcocars – and in the new religions, the narcocultos” (Guillermoprieto 5). Today, with access to vast amounts of goods for consumption, cartel members have developed a culture based around consumerism and luxury. Narcoculture has been introduced into a globalized century and economy, further glamourizing wealth and violence.

While they may not find violence and homicide acceptable, the marginalized view the actions of drug traffickers as a means of upward social mobility. The main theme of narcocorridos is not necessarily about drugs but “about antagonism between those in power and the common people” (Edberg 104-105). Narcocorridos, or drug ballads have a non-narco following and the glamorization of the drug trade speaks to the struggling working class and marginalized. In El Narcotraficante, Edberg also eludes to the complexity of narcorridos and their role in popular culture when he states: "It would be easy to essentialize narcocorridos this way, under a schema wherein they are representations employing a traditional narrative form featuring a cultural persona that symbolizes resistance to the oppression of the class system in Mexico, global capitalism, and the United States (versus Mexico)--that they are at heart oppositional in nature, a discursive point of resistance, a counterdiscourse" (104). Edberg also suggests that those who listen to narcocorridos are not necessarily sympathetic to the drug trade but identify with the marginalization expressed in the songs or opposition to the system that they feel is working against them. (105) As such, narcoculture does not only have to be about the
drug trade, but about struggle and survival. However, the connection to narcoculture by those that feel marginalized raises a few questions. To admire the luxury of narcoculture and the message of anti-establishment by marginalized members of society is understandable but are they not indirectly supporting the violence caused to attain said luxury?

The glorification of drug trafficking in narcocorridos implies that there is an underlying problem along the Mexican-US border. High levels of unemployment and weak institutions that limit social spending have led young Mexicans, principally males, to desperation and to the search for more immediate means of survival, creating high rates of crime in Mexico (Bergman 86).

But how do those that listen to narcocorridos justify or account for the violence that is being promoted through this form of media? The music of the cartels might be considered as rhetoric against oppression, but the violence portrayed by media caused by narcos, leads to a negative depiction of their actions by the dominant culture, causing it to be ostracized. This in effect presses those marginalized by the dominant culture to accept or overlook the violence being committed as necessary to recreate a new social order.

These depictions in narcocorridos are comparable to the portrayal of Santa Muerte in media and the difference between narcotics and marginalized practitioners. Death is seen as sacred but it is not the focus of the marginalized. In fact, prayers and petitions for health, money or for love imply that a better life is being sought by the marginalized, and not necessarily the acceptance of the more violent members of the religion. However, the acceptance or non-judgment of the violent actors by the marginalized in either narcocorrido culture or Santa Muerte can be understood as a strategy of the oppressed.
Both groups feel at odds with the current power structure that they are trying to work within or against.

As is the case with religious practitioners of Santa Muerte, not all who listen to narcocorridos are necessarily criminals or violent people. In El narcocorrido religioso: usos y abusos de un género, Ramírez-Pimienta affirms that: “Por lo pronto ya hay varios corridos dedicados a ella [Santa Muerte], siendo quizá el compuesto por Beto Quintanilla el más famoso de todos” (189). The lyrics of “La Santísima Muerte” by Quintanilla are as follows:

Yo adoro y quiero a la muerte y hasta le tengo un altar
ya hay millones que le rezan, la iglesia empieza a temblar
abiertamente ya hay curas que la empiezan a adorar.

Mafiosos y de la ley se la empiezan a tatuar
políticos y altos jefes también le tienen su altar
yo le prendo sus velitas no es un delito rezar.

A la santísima muerte muchos la usan para el mal
es bueno que te defiendas pero nunca hay que abusar
la muerte es muy vengativa si no le crees no hables mal.

Quintanilla demonstrates his belief in Santa Muerte and points out that there are many others of all socioeconomic backgrounds who have an altar. He also calls out the Catholic Church, not only warning them to tremble in fear, but ridiculing them by saying there are priests among them who are also practitioners. His recognition that many pray to her for wrongdoing is accompanied by an admonishment that she should not be abused, either.

The connection between Santa Muerte and criminality and violence can better be understood by defining the role and origins of narcocorridos and the narcotraffickers. In “Narcocorridos and the Nostalgia of Violence: Postmodern Resistance en la frontera”,

...
Muniz writes that: “A musical derivation of the traditional polka- and waltz-like *corrido*, the *narcocorrido* (literally, drug ballad) is often dismissed and simplistically read as an archaic and ultraviolent form of the classic Mexican ballad, updated only in its replacement of revolutionary heroes with the glorified exploits of contemporary crossborder drug traffickers” (56).

**Jesús Malverde**

Known as the "narco-saint", the Mexican bandit, Jesús Malverde was hanged by police in 1909. (Kail 113) From the region of Sinaloa, it is no surprise that his image has become synonymous with the Sinaloa cartel, due to Malverde's legendary status as being a cunning bandit. In *Narcos Over the Border*, Bunker et al. highlight that: "Probably the earliest variant of mainstream religious tradition in Mexico to be recognized as associated with narcotraffickers by law enforcement officials in Mexico and the United States is the infamous 'patron saint of drug traffickers', Jesús Malverde, also referred to as 'the Angel of the Poor', 'the Generous Bandit', and most commonly, "The Mexican Robin Hood" (163). The image of the benevolent bandit has been adopted by marginalized members of society as well. As the Sinaloa region's helpful bandit, Malverde plays an important role in the spiritual representation for the local population. Social inequality and rampant corruption of government officials are cause for the marginalized to sympathize with the image of the bandit. In *Of Bandits and Saints*, Price discusses this concept when she writes that:

> The nagging presence of Jesús Malverde in the symbolic and material landscapes of northern Mexico signals the persistent deferral of the voices and visions of the variously disenfranchised in those landscapes, and their refusal to go away. Malverde's iconographic landscape at once works to
provide visibility and voice to those who are denied presence in the official landscapes of Church and State and remarks on their continued sublimation. (192)

The marginalized who find no place in the Church or State are searching for an alternative to spirituality and identity. The cult of Jesús Malverde and devotion to Santa Muerte demonstrate that these alternative forms of religious practice, due to their connections to narcotraffickers, have been depicted as anti-Catholic and anti-establishment.

The image of Jesús Malverde has become so connected with narcotraffickers in the U.S., that any picture of him has become "a red flag to law enforcement officers" (Bunker et al. 164). The connection between Jesús Malverde and criminality has been noted by Bunker et al. when they mention: "In Bakersfield, California, for example, some 80% of Mexican nationals involved in the drug trade in 2006 were said to possess a likeness of Malverde. In a landmark ruling, a Malverde icon has been upheld by an appellate court as a legal basis for developing probable cause" (164). While the First Amendment of the United States guarantees Freedom of Religion and the Free Exercise thereof, this ruling demonstrates that the court was not targeting those who had Malverde paraphernalia for their religious or spiritual beliefs but because the image bears a closer connection to the drug trade. The criminality that is attached to the image outweighs its spiritual significance. Here it can be observed that the image of Malverde is foreign enough to U.S. culture that the spiritual significance is downplayed or pushed aside. If Jesús Malverde were an American spiritual icon, would his image as cause for reasonable suspicion be admissible in a court of law?

The 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled that an Oklahoma couple be
given a new trial due to religious discrimination. In the *Huffington Post* article, "Death Saint La Santa Muerte Helps Get Drug Convictions Overturned," Russell Contreras mentions how prosecutors highlighted that the couple were Santa Muerte practitioners and used this as evidence against them for a conviction of selling methamphetamine (1). The expert on Santa Muerte mentioned that not all practitioners are involved in drug trafficking. However, it was found that prosecutors relied heavily on the couple's religious practices as evidence to convict them. Although it is recognized that there are non-violent practitioners with no involvement in the drug trade, criminal investigations do not ignore the possibility of a connection. This connection has been popularized in the television series *Breaking Bad*.

*Breaking Bad* explores the world of narcotrafficking as Walter White, the show's protagonist, sells crystal meth to help support his family when he discovers that he has lung cancer. Season 2, episode 7 begins with a narcocorrido music video by Los Cuates de Sinaloa entitled "Negro y Azul". The lyrics of the song relay how Walter White, or his alias Heisenberg, has angered the drug cartels with his sales and by invading their territory. Being from Sinaloa, Los Cuates have their guitars decorated with images of Jesus Malverde. An actor, dressed as Jesús Malverde follows the cartel members around as if observing their actions. A dead cartel member's body is shown surrounded by blue crystal meth (Heisenberg's specialty), guns and cash. The Jesús Malverde figure holds his arms over the dead body as if praying or blessing it, a religious gesture. This depiction of Malverde involved in cartel spirituality only perpetuates media representation of what have become known as narco folk saints. Because viewers likely have little knowledge of the imagery, the only exposure they have to Malverde is through cartel spirituality, while
the spirituality of the marginalized of Sinaloa who are not involved in cartel activities is muted.

Los Cuates de Sinaloa also have a song entitled after their album, "Mi Santito Preferido". The song clearly is about drug-trafficking and how Malverde is their favorite saint because he hides them from federal drug agencies. The lyrics state:

No te me rajes Malverde
que ya vamos a llegar
antes de entrar a Sonora
está el retén federal
traigo en la troca clavados
30 kilos de cristal

Yo tengo fe en tu memoria
y siempre me has protegido
Mis cargamentos me llegan
sanos a Estados Unidos
por eso tú eres Malverde
mi santito preferido

The song begins by asking Malverde not to abandon them or set them aside, entreating patience with the supplicant. The lyrics credit Malverde and their faith in him for the success of these drug trafficking ventures. The song demonstrates a strong faith in Malverde, highlighting the economic benefits of drug trafficking ventures. Each month, the protagonist needs to make his delivery to the U. S. and when he returns, he gives his thanks to Malverde.

Malverde no me ha fallado
y nunca me fallará
le llevo un viaje por mes
a los gringos de cristal
y de regreso festejo
con Malverde en Culiacán
U. S. consumption of the product should not be overlooked. Dependency theory would suggest that Mexican reliance on the U. S. through illegal trade is the consequence of Western hegemony. The lyrics and media representations are reflections of the realities of the difference in power structures and institutions crossing the U.S.-Mexican border.

The Colombian version of *Breaking Bad, Metastasis*, is an adaptation loyal to the original program but there are changes that produce new or divergent interpretations of the involvement of narcosaints and narcoculture. The opening of the fourteenth episode—the equivalent of season 2, episode 7 -- also begins with a narcocorrido yet the musical group, song and lyrics have changed. The most significant difference, however, is that Santa Muerte is heavily featured side by side with Jesús Malverde. An actor is dressed as Jesús Malverde, as in the Negro y Azul video, but a woman dressed in white with skeletal makeup and a scythe also appears throughout the video. Instead of depictions of Jesús Malverde on the musician's guitar, there are pictures of candy skulls, once again highlighting Mexican death iconography in a complicitous, and unnuanced manner.

In the Colombian adaptation, the Santa Muerte actress and Jesús Malverde actor stand facing each other with an altar behind them, with Heisenberg lying on top, black candles and a skull next to him. It appears as if both celestial beings are waiting for his soul, to see which it belongs to. Near the end of the video, a little person dressed as Heisenberg is shown dead on a pile of cash, symbolizing the soul, a miniature version of the drug lord. The little person at the end of the video is seen walking into the distance, holding Santa Muerte's hand. Throughout the video, Jesús Malverde is shown standing, rigidly upright and sometimes looking ahead, not noticing Heisenberg. Santa Muerte looks at Heisenberg, wherever he goes and at times is right next to him, staring into his
face. She is also shown, beckoning him to come to her. Jesús Malverde represents luck and life. The chances of Heisenberg getting his attention depends on his mood. Santa Muerte is always around the corner from Heisenberg, waiting for him, wanting him to come. His death is inevitable.

Each of these unique music videos set a mood for this particular episode which deals with cartel retaliation and narcosaints. In the U.S. version, Hank, White's brother-in-law, ironically works for the DEA and begins a new position near the border in El Paso, Texas. When first arriving at the new office, Hank notices that another agent has a large Jesús Malverde plaster bust on his desk and he asks him, "Hey, what's up with that?" The other agent responds, "Jesús Malverde, patron saint of Mexican drug dealers." Hank responds that he knows who it is but he wonders why it is there. He says: "Scumbags kneeling down, praying to him. [In a faux Mexican accent] Ay, Please! Señor Saint Ay! Ay, No DEA, please! Ay?" Hanks incongruous comments and mocking accent are ignored by the other agent, who places a smaller bust of Malverde on Hank's desk and explains Sun Tzu's philosophy in the Art of War: to know your enemy is to know yourself. The words chosen by writers suggest that they are focusing on cartel spirituality and that any association with Malverde necessarily implies criminal activity. The use of the word "scumbags" downplays the value of Malverde's devotees, and the suggestion that they only pray for protection from the DEA furthers this perspective. It is interesting to note that the other DEA agent finds a spiritual connection to Malverde as well. He indirectly mentions that he must know Malverde to know his enemies and has an extra plaster bust to give to Hank, implying that he too has a spiritual connection with the folk saint.
While U.S. media continues to suggest that Malverde is dominantly narco-related, Breaking Bad does hint at a more complex role for this folk saint, being appropriated by not only Sinaloa cartel members, but also those that are affected or somehow related to it.

In the equivalent scene in Metastasis, the "Scumbag" and "DEA" comments change. Henry Navarro (Hank) instead says, "Yo sé que todos los mejicanitos van arrodillados, arrastrándose así de rodillas, rogándole, 'Hazme bien Malrote [sic], para que me pueda chingar uno de esos putos gringos!" His play on the word Malverde and "Malrote" is intentional, as malrote implies destruction or spending money on vices. Also, instead of the satirized supplication to Malverde for protection from the DEA, the use of profanity and a blatant petition for the power to murder gringos only heighten the violence attributed to narcos and the Sinaloa saint.

6. Conclusions

The language used by Mexican and U.S. media in describing Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde has portrayed them in a negative light, depicting them as anti-Catholic and as being perpetuated by a narco counterculture. The historical and cultural representations of the bandit have been recalled to justify state action against the cartels. However, the image of the bandit does have a positive connotation for the most marginalized of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The portrayal of the bandit as the helpful Robin Hood who steals from the rich and gives to the poor offers the marginalized hope in times of desperation. The image of Jesús Malverde has an important significance to the poor of the Sinaloa area as a regional symbol of anti-oppression. While the expansion of the
Sinaloa cartels borders have brought Jesús Malverde's image through cultural exchange, the basic message of survival while circumnavigating the state is still applicable to both the cartel and the marginalized.
Chapter 3
Themes of Violence and Criminality: Media Depictions of Santa Muerte

While Mexican media highlights the counter-cultural aspects of Santa Muerte as anti-Catholic, U.S. media generally depicts Santa Muerte in nefarious and violent ways. Mexican and U.S. media alike tend to distort the practices, even in spiritual settings, to exoticize or exaggerate actions of devotees. The exoticism of the practices of Santa Muerte is readily observable in works of fiction, both literary and mediatic. The purpose of this chapter is to capture broad depictions of the strength and weakness that Santa Muerte brings to her followers in popular mass media representations. These strengths and weaknesses are consistently portrayed in negative ways: abuse of power, violence, criminality, and vengeance. In this chapter, I use a discourse analysis approach to highlight these selected literary, television, and filmic texts from both the U.S. and Mexico. In Media Research Methods, Barrie Gunter writes:

Discourse has been used to refer to written text, but it has also been used in connection with audio-visual media. Its application to the media grew out of semiotic studies attempting to assess the meaning of language in terms of its implicit ideological assumptions, and discourse analysis pays specific attention to the linguistic component of language use in the media. (86)

This approach has been chosen because of the significant influence of semiotics, which interprets signs based on their relationship and connections to other phenomena (Gunter 83). I have selected works of fiction depicting Santa Muerte that were produced in the U.S. and Mexico. The literature, film and television programs were chosen based on the limited depictions of Santa Muerte in fictional media. All productions chosen, except for one, prominently display Santa Muerte as a religious icon either during a significant segment in the plot or throughout the storyline. The one exception, "El Equipo," I argue
keeps the symbolic usage of Santa Muerte muted for ideological purposes. In *Qualitative Research Design*, Joseph Maxwell warns that preconceived notions or researcher expectations may raise "validity threats" (124). I follow Maxwell's suggestions to not attempt at defining a universal truth for my study, but aim to present the evidence collected (124). As the thematic organization of the chapter reflects, different portrayals of Santa Muerte emerge from Mexican and U.S. media. Mexican media has the tendency to highlight how Santa Muerte is a religion concerned with pettiness, weakness and vengeance. The U.S. tends to accentuate the aggressive, dominating side of Santa Muerte, focusing on the violence perpetuated by the drug cartels.

**Depictions of Strength, Abuse of Power, and Criminality in U.S. Media**

The abuse of the power of Santa Muerte for personal gain and nefarious purposes such as drug cartels, violence and criminality is endemic in the media portrayals on either side of the border. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in inner-city Chicago, Cynthia Pelayo has won the International Latino Book Award for her young adult novel, *Santa Muerte*. The novel centers around Ariana Molina, a young woman whose father works for the authorities in Mexico combating the drug cartels. "Ari" begins to have visions and dreams of Santa Muerte and finds herself being targeted and kidnapped by the cartel that seeks to eliminate her father. Throughout the book, Pelayo connects Santa Muerte to the drug cartels yet at the same time criticizes how the system of belief has been corrupted and abused. In a flashback, Ari's mother states:

Santa Muerte wants to be worshiped and praised and she has found that in the people on the edge; prostitutes, drug dealers, thieves and murders [sic]. They have brought the passion that she has longed for since the conquerors left. Lust, power, death, and revenge. These are the things she oversees and these are the things that her followers are begging for Ari,
but I want you to beware. There are those who abuse their gods. There are those who do not know for what they ask because they think that their earthly indulgences are all that matters, but the gods are no fools. Our god of death is commanded by no one. (181)

Ari's mother has restated that the marginalized are the people that Santa Muerte attracts yet is highlighting the criminal or illegal practices of the marginalized. Prostitutes or thieves may not be violent wrong-doers, but their activities are considered illegal and on the fringes of society, highlighting their criminality both in the present and the colonial experience.

It is to be noted, however, that there is a criticism of those who abuse Santa Muerte's gifts. In the conclusion of the novel, Santa Muerte herself recruits Ari as her agent among the living and tells her: "You will find my betrayers, find my detractors. I've been abused long enough by the living. The living do not command me. I command the living and I want death to those who have abused my powers and my strengths" (221). Pelayo has clearly constructed a unique Santa Muerte worldview in her novel, having a young girl serve as her living agent. Santa Muerte states that she wants death to those who have abused her, signifying that she alone does not choose who dies. The more neutral or benevolent beliefs of Santa Muerte are that God the Father is who decides when it is a person's time to die and that Santa Muerte is only the messenger who claims the soul. The more malevolent beliefs of Santa Muerte--which Pelayo insinuates in her novel is abuse of the religious system--do teach that if devotees are sincere and make adequate offerings, they can persuade Santa Muerte to kill or cause harm to an enemy.

Among the most popular U.S. television series depicting Santa Muerte are *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad*. Both of these shows deal with criminality and violence. *Breaking*
Bad’s theme includes drug trafficking and rival territorial violence in New Mexico. Breaking Bad also links Santa Muerte to criminality and the abuse of power, yet there are representations that imply that there are non-criminal believers as well. The opening of Season 3 of the series shows a large group of pilgrims crawling on the ground near the outskirts of a small Mexican village. The custom of pilgrimage may seem exotic to a general U.S. audience; however, it is an accurate portrayal of Santa Muerte practices. The antagonists of Season 3 of the series, two Mexican assassins who are brothers, drive to the village in a Mercedes Benz and join the locals, dressed in high-fashion Italian suits. The scene is eerily silent, and the two assassins seem out of place compared to the rest of the pilgrims. The assassins drop to the ground and crawl ahead of the others, who appear to have been crawling for a long period of time. The assassins approach a Santa Muerte shrine that is mostly dressed in the color red and decorated with red roses. They light a black candle and place a drawing of Walter White (Heisenberg), the show’s protagonist and their principal rival across the border, on the altar. While it is apparent that the assassins are praying for protection for themselves and for harm towards White, the locals who join them in the pilgrimage are not necessarily there for criminal intent. The red color scheme that predominates on the altar also signifies that it is not necessarily a shrine intending to cause harm or violence, but rather one that devotees ask for help in matters of love. The advantage that the assassins have by driving to the shrine in an expensive car and crawling a few yards also suggests that they abuse the Santa Muerte belief system. While the other pilgrims have their knees and elbows bandaged from a long journey and their dedication, the well-dressed assassins are only concerned with themselves and not true to their spirituality. While Breaking Bad sensationalizes Santa
Muerte through the assassins, it does render a more realistic portrayal of the common practices of non-criminal, non-violent devotees. *Breaking Bad* is also demonstrating that there is a heterogeneous group of followers.

*Dexter* portrays a benevolent killer of serial killers who works as a forensics expert in the homicide unit of the fictional Miami Metro Police Department. In the cases of both series, Santa Muerte is associated with violent crimes yet, in *Dexter*, it is more greatly sensationalized and misrepresented. In Season 5, Episode 2 of *Dexter*, for example, Detective Deborah Morgan investigates a scene of a decapitated female whose eyes have been gouged out and whose tongue has been removed. The decapitated head sits on a dull colored serape—a Mexican style quilt—surrounded by animal bones, candles, and two images of Santa Muerte. A Latina policewoman, Manzón—never before seen in the series—approaches Morgan and immediately concludes that, “It looks like Santa Muerte.” Morgan states that she knows what Santa Muerte is, but asks Manzón why she reaches that conclusion. Manzón notes that the gouged eyes and the missing tongue are characteristics of death by practices of Santa Muerte. She dismisses the statues of Santa Muerte, saying that there are “so many images now” that one cannot rely on them as evidence. Morgan takes note of her observations and concludes that the murder must be related to drug cartel activities because of the area in which the crime has taken place.

Manzón’s attribution of violence to Santa Muerte rather than the statues is particularly note-worthy. The Santa Muerte statue is the principal symbol of the faith, and to place it as secondary or peripheral to the act of violence demonstrates media bias. Morgan’s readiness to link the scene to drug cartels also hints to public perception of how
investigators view crime scenes related to Santa Muerte practices. Animal bones left as offerings or prendas and mistakenly attributed to Santa Muerte are actually used in Palo Mayombé practices. Clearly, this representation mixes in other pagan practices perhaps for dramatic purposes of the story. The sadistic rituals of tongue-gouging and head decapitation are also being conflated with the practices of Santa Muerte.

In a later scene of the same episode, Morgan and Manzón enter a local Miami botánica—a religious goods store that usually caters to Afro-Cuban religions—to question the owner about the paraphernalia found at the earlier crime scene. The botánica depicted on the show is divided into two different sections: front and back. The front of the store displays Catholic saints and various colorful objects. The windows allow for abundant sunlight which brightens up the room. A kind, older Latina woman asks the officers how she can help them. Morgan and Manzón ask to see the owner and are taken to a backroom full of images of Santa Muerte. The separation of Santa Muerte paraphernalia demonstrates once again how the series Dexter exoticizes the religious practice, giving it a sinister and hidden backroom. The backroom has the shades drawn and the lighting has a red tone, making the scene eerily distrustful. The owner is a seedy, unkempt middle-aged Latino who is conflictive with the police. The reality is that botánicas in Miami do indeed sell Santa Muerte religious goods out in the open, alongside other saints on the store shelves. The depiction of Santa Muerte in Dexter is as something hidden, relating only to the criminal, belonging to the underworld and, hence, a backroom. The religion is pathologized both in a spatial and synesthetic language, further depicting it as unnatural.

Similar depictions can be seen in U.S. film. In Oliver Stone's Savages, two
marijuana growers from California are in a polyamorous relationship with a young woman. When the fictional Baja Cartel makes them a business proposition to buy out their business, the two male protagonists decide to leave the country with their love to avoid conflict. The Baja cartel learns of their plan and kidnap the young woman, holding her for ransom and forcing the two men into indentured servitude. While the young woman is being followed by the cartel at a local mall before she is kidnapped, she is shown looking at purses decorated with sugar skulls in a store. The images of the skulls perhaps serve to foreshadow that she will be kidnapped, highlighting how Santa Muerte and Day of the Dead are connected to criminality and the cartels. It is noteworthy that all Mexican death iconography in the film can be related to the cartels if this scene does truly forshadow the kidnapping. Once again, folkloric iconography is conflated with Santa Muerte, in a blurry language of death, Mexicanness and drug-trafficking.

The opening scene of the movie shows those who have refused to work with the cartels, waiting to be executed. The scene flashes images of Santa Muerte statues as a camera pans the faces of the captured, implying that they will soon die. The executioner wears a skull mask with a wicked grin. The violence of the cartels and imagery of Santa Muerte already set the tone for the movie within the first minute.

During a torture scene in the movie, there are flashes between carnage and a Santa Muerte altar that is placed in a corner. It insinuates that these tortures are either being done for her or pleasing her. Lado, the torturer, is a killer and an assassin for the Baja Cartel. He has a lawn service that acts as a front for his operation and the loud leaf blowers that his associates use muffle screams or yelling. On the dashboard of Lado's car, there is a statue of Santa Muerte dressed in black. The beginning of one scene focuses
dashboard and the statue's movement as the truck drives through a neighborhood and the cinematographer focuses on the statue, thus capturing the movement of the truck. Again the scene is foreshadowing murder, however, as Lado arrives at a wealthy home to meet with someone who has double-crossed the Baja cartel. This connection is consistent throughout the movie; anytime that Santa Muerte is shown, death, criminality and violence ensue.

The first demand of the Baja Cartel on the two growers is that they must deliver 300 pounds of marijuana to an undisclosed location. The two protagonists are told to go to an alleyway behind a fish market, where there is a complex Santa Muerte public altar on display. The Santa Muerte altar serves as the background for the money pickup. A scene of criminality, domination and of the underworld, the religiosity of Santa Muerte is only seen in the great detail and pageantry of the altar setup. Unless it is because there was a recent pilgrimage, the altar's exposure to the elements and its positioning would not be so prepared. The robe she wears appear to be new, the flowers are all fresh, and the colors are bright, not yet dulled by the sun. One of the protagonists is told to put his hands on the wall while they empty the van of the 300 pounds of marijuana. He has his hands on a plaque that reads Santa Muerte, with what seems to be a paragraph about her. This public museum display of Santa Muerte seems out of place and only perpetuates the connection between criminality and the folk saint. As highly decorative and ornate as the display is, the juxtaposition of the actions around the altar demonstrate the true intent of its presence. Adorning Santa Muerte to place it next to acts of violence and criminality committed by drug cartel members, the scene also sanctifies her, displaying the homage, patronage, respect, and sense of awe in her presence, i.e. *mysterium tremendum et
One scene of the movie possibly suggests the conflation of Santa Muerte and Day of the Dead sugar skulls. After they are forced to deliver the money, the two protagonists decide to steal the money back from the cartel using friends who served in Iraq to act as snipers. Using sugar skull masks to conceal their faces, they attack the cartels and take back the money. When the local leader asks cartel members about the robbery, one witness mentions that the attackers wore Santa Muerte masks. The fact that this cartel member mistakes Day of the Dead sugar skulls for the image of Santa Muerte perhaps implies that he is a Santa Muerte believer. His personal association of all skulls with Santa Muerte is possibly part of his religious worldview. When a Santa Muerte believer sees depictions of the Angel of Death, skulls or any other cultural representation of death, they are reminded of that which they hold most holy.

**Depictions of Violence, Fear, Vengeance and Weakness in Mexican Media**

The intentions of a devotee are clearly evident on their altar setup and the colors that they choose. I question whether this is overlooked or intentionally used by authors and directors. The significance of colors and symbols are crucial in the intent of a Santa Muerte practitioner. While the Santa Muerte statue is usually the center of attention on an altar, other symbols can be used to draw empathetic energies, e.g. a picture or statue of a rabbit can bring luck or fertility. Mexican author Homero Aridjis’s short story collection *La Santa Muerte* ends up sensationalizing it. In the short story bearing the name of the collection, Aridjis writes:

En el altar cubierto con un mantel negro estaba la Santa Muerte. En sus cavidades orbitales se asomaban dos arañas capulinhas. En la mano huesuda esgrimia una criatura del
desierto de Chihuahua: un alacrán *Centruroides scorpion*.
En la mano izquierda, echada hacia atrás, se apreciaba la cabeza negra de una coralillo. Bandas negras y rojas, limitadas por anillos amarillos, circulaban el cuerpo de la serpiente venenosa. (126)

This depiction of a narcotrafficker's altar invokes a sense of fear through dangerous animals and the threat of death that they pose. Most Santa Muerte altars are in reality much more simply dedicated and less elaborate although some do feature these animals. The interpretation of the altar that Aridjis describes is also highly sensationalized and partially inaccurate, as in the following excerpt: “La Santa Muerte era un esqueleto envuelto en ropajes blancos, rojos y negros, representando sus tres atributos: el poder violento, la agresión artera y el asesinato cruel” (127).

White, red and black are the most common colors associated with Santa Muerte, and only black is associated with harmful intent. Chestnut notes that although “black is not one of the most popular votive candles among devotees, it completely outshines all other colors of the cult in the mass media and much of the Mexican public's perception of Santa Muerte” (97). The use of the black candle may be realistic for Aridjis's description of a narcotrafficker who is concerned with protecting himself and causing harm to his enemies, but the attribution of violence to the other colors can be construed as a projection of violence to other facets of Santa Muerte that are hardly malevolent, if at all.

Mexican evangelical production company Armagedon released *La Santa Muerte* movie in 2007. Paco del Toro has directed several movies for Armagedon, focusing on Christian evangelical spirituality and its worldview. In the movie, Santa Muerte is depicted as demonic and destructive, presented as the Devil in disguise.
The film suggests that Santa Muerte changes the lives of followers at first for the better, but eventually leads to their demise. The story follows a mother and father whose daughter is diagnosed with cancer. The mother searches for any cure available, from second opinions to homeopathic remedies, and even goes to a Santero priest to see if a ritual cleansing might help her daughter. Finding no recourse and growing desperate, the mother, Rubi, drives past an older woman praying in front of a Santa Muerte display along the street. The woman reveals to her that Santa Muerte is a miracle worker and only needs to be called upon. Later that night, when her daughter Perla takes a turn for the worse, Rubi prays to Santa Muerte and promises to raise an altar in her name if she will cure her sick child. Perla improves and Rubi forgets her promise. She is plagued by a sinister growl and voice (Santa Muerte) which calls on her to fulfill her promise. Perla then grows ill again and Rubi fulfills her promise, erecting an altar in the living room of her house. In moments of contemplation by Rubi or when offerings need to be made, the Santa Muerte statue emits a growl that only viewers can hear, giving it a demonic, angry presence. These post-production effects convey the notion that Santa Muerte is an evil entity.

As the movie continues, Perla's health remains but Rubi's obsession and devotion consumes her. She requires Perla to wear a Santa Muerte amulet and warns her that if she takes it off, she will die. A schoolmate notices Perla's amulet and asks her why she wears such an ugly thing. Perla tells her that her mother says she will die if she takes it off. The young girl invites Perla to her house for dinner and introduces her to her evangelical family. When the mother and father ask Perla about the amulet she wears around her neck, she says "La Muerte," and lowers her head in shame. The music played in the
background is soothing and gives the sense that Perla is in a home that is at peace, a contrast to the eerie music and demonic sounds that are heard in her own home. Perla is later convinced by her friend that if she prays to Jesus Christ she will not die. When Perla is found not wearing the amulet any longer, her mother begins to pull her hair and shake her violently until her husband Pablo separates them. The living room by this point has become fully decorated and dedicated to Santa Muerte. What started as a simple altar setup becomes Rubi’s obsession, bordering on neuroticism. Perla flushes her amulet down the toilet and Rubi begins to go insane. Rubi argues with Pablo over this and the stereo turns on by itself, as if Santa Muerte haunts the living room.

Another scene shows Pablo at a construction site, where he is the project manager. A fight breaks out among the workers and Pablo tries to calm the crowd. When he inquires what the fight was about, a worker points to an erected altar to Santa Muerte on the construction site. Once again, eerie music and sinister whispering are heard in the background. The man who placed the altar says that Santa Muerte is a miracle worker and that she will protect everyone from accidents. The other man who was fighting him says that he has brought demons to the work site and that Jesus Christ is the only one that can protect them. He also states that Christ resurrected and conquered death. This confrontation embodies the religious conflict in Mexico. While both men feel their religious worldviews are correct, Pablo determines that the altar must be removed. Eventually, he convinces Rubi to take down the altar at home and Perla takes a turn for the worse. Pablo and Rubi pray to Christ and ask for forgiveness, and Perla is seen in the hospital bathed in light, being fully healed.

The Mexican series "El Equipo" was rumored to be partially funded by the
Calderón administration as an attempt to establish trust in the Federal Police's war on the cartels (Ellingwood). The fictional television series follows Federal Police as they use state of the art technology and tactics to combat drug traffickers. In Season 1, Episode 9, low ranking cartel member Willie is introduced, wearing a t-shirt with the image of Santa Muerte on it. There is no mention of his religiosity or his worldviews but the fact that he is wearing the shirt suggests how Mexican media would like for him to be portrayed.

When the episode begins, three other cartel members are ridiculing Willie for his heavy drinking. Two young women enter the scene and one of Willie's associates realizes that one of the young ladies is the daughter of a wealthy businessman that had refused the cartel. They decide to kidnap the girl and while trying to capture them, Willie is sprayed with pepper spray. Trying to flee the scene, Willie and another cartel member are stopped by local police but end up overpowering them and throwing them in the trunk of their SUV. After the police begin to wake up, Willie is told to knock them out again and accidently kills one of the police officers by bashing his skull with his gun. When Willie realizes what he has done, he begins to panic and vomit. His associate makes fun of him and, in a later scene, Willie is found on the side of the road with the dead officers.

He is taken into custody and placed in jail. Federal police realize that local police infiltrated by the cartels will soon kill him if they do not intervene because Willie knows too much about cartel operations. He pleads for his life as Federal Police save him by placing him in their own detainment center. Deceiving Willie, they install an undercover police officer as his cellmate. Another undercover police officer is sent in wearing a Christian Audigier shirt that has the Catholic Sacred Heart on the front, surrounded by U.S. hundred dollar bills. He tells Willie that he was sent by the cartel boss and passes
him a bottle full of tequila, reassuring him that the boss will take care of him. After chugging down the bottle, Willie says: "¡Ya me ha tocado, vato! Después de tantos años de trabajo. Ahora que tengan miedo de mí." (It is finally my turn, man! After all these years of service. Now I am the one to be feared.) He continues telling his cellmate about his cartel's activities and the most important safehouses, leading Federal Police to locate the kidnapped woman.

Willie represents the lowest rank of cartel members and surely it is no coincidence that he is wearing a Santa Muerte shirt. If the intent of this program is to gain the trust of the Mexican people and empower Federal Police, they are indirectly deflating the power of Santa Muerte. Whether Willie is a true believer or not is unimportant. The symbolic representation of his shirt makes him the target of ridicule throughout the episode. He is tragically flawed and naive, making his association with Santa Muerte yet another aspect of his character to be ridiculed. When the undercover officer dressed as a cartel member enters, he is wearing a shirt with a popular Catholic symbol, representing the power of Christ. Symbolically, these are two opposing narratives in mainstream Mexican culture that have been inherent in cartel activities and national debate; the Catholic Church as the dominant discourse of the nation and Santa Muerte as the minority.

The present research uncovered extremely few representations of Santa Muerte in Mexican television fiction. Azteca TV does have documentaries on the topic of Santa Muerte, yet present it from an anti-Catholic perspective. In an informative news segment during Hanal Pixán, a Mayan term for the Day of the Dead celebration, Azteca Noticias presents both devotees of Santa Muerte and Catholic priests. Both are asked to present their views on the new religion. One devotee being interviewed is kept in the shadows to
not reveal his identity. He explains that his belief in Santa Muerte is hereditary and passed down by his family members. Hiding his identity furthers the exoticism and mystery behind Santa Muerte for Mexican mass media. The decision to interview this person in secret continues to place a shroud of the unknown around the religion, especially with the number of devotees available to cover the phenomena. Eerie music is played throughout the segment and when one devotee is asked if Santa Muerte is *mala* or evil, he explains that she is neutral and works for God. Before transitioning to the Catholic point of view, the narrator argues that religious people find worshiping Death to be a "*retroseso en la vida,*" or a step back in life. While he is explaining this, the scene is of a marketplace where Santa Muerte goods are sold. People are shown in front of the marketplace walking backwards; the camera effect is a slow, tape rewind effect. This is symbolic as the narration is strengthened by the bizarre camera effects, making Santa Muerte seem as something backwards and unnatural.

In conclusion, themes of abuse of power, criminality, fear, and violence in relation to Santa Muerta are readily apparent in literary, television and film productions in the U.S. and Mexico. It is noteworthy--as the organization of this chapter reflects--that the broad thematic tendencies are rather different on either side of the border. The U.S. media tends to portray Santa Muerte in violent or socially aggressive ways, and highlights the potential abuse of spiritual power inherent in Santa Muerte practices in order to subdue or defeat enemies and succeed in illicit or criminal activities. In this way, drug traffickers outmaneuver law enforcement officials and the legal system. On the other hand, Mexican media tends to deflate Santa Muerte, minimizing its power and pointing
out weaknesses or cowardly aspects of its followers. Themes of vengeance and fear are used to underline less reputable facets of this religious practice.
Chapter 4
An Ethnographic Study of Santa Muerte Beliefs and Paraphernalia

*Pinches Tacos (Los Angeles)*:

After parking my rental car, I made my way to Santa Monica Place, a middle to upper-middle class shopping center with a Nordstrom and Bloomingdales. Wanting a quick lunch before my adventure, I stopped at the food court. Most restaurants in the food court were recognizable chains that can be found across the United States, except for one, Pinches Tacos. I placed my order and stood to the side waiting for my food when I see through a crack, a window display that has *la Catrina calavera*. This area could have been used for more space to be used efficiently within the restaurant stand, but instead it is set aside for the display. The strategic decision to incorporate *la Catrina* as part of the restaurant shows that the owners wanted to portray *Mexicanidad* in order to convey or maybe convince that the food was authentic. This began my search across Los Angeles; a search for any Mexican representation of death.
1. Methodology

In this chapter, I document Santa Muerte religious goods in *botánicas* and use an ethnographic approach to understand their function and meaning in the new religion. *Botánicas* are religious goods stores that have traditionally catered to Santería, Palo Mayombé and other non-mainstream religions. While my previous chapter focuses on how Santa Muerte is depicted by the U.S. and Mexican media, by visiting *botánicas* I am able to draw a clearer portrayal of the religion by its practitioners. By visiting *botánicas*, I was able to document what objects practitioners are using for their religious devotion and rituals. My methodology began by questioning: What are the basic tools needed for practice and where do devotees find them? Also, if there is no central church, what are some of the ideas or worldviews that devotees will encounter while they purchase the tools they need for devotion? Mexican and Mexican-American communities may be practitioners, as well as migrant workers entering the U.S., both illegally and legally. Media may have already influenced Santa Muerte practices but I found that it was crucial
to document the ideologies that may have reached some consensus in the communities I have documented.

Using the 2010 U.S. Census Data, I pinpointed neighborhoods with high Latin and Mexican Ancestry. The GIS program Simply Map 2.0 uses census data to display the density of a selected group on an interactive map. This color-scaled density map pinpoints a concentration of the targeted group, in this case, those with Mexican Ancestry. The U.S. Census Bureau defines ancestry as "a person’s ethnic origin or descent, "roots," or heritage, or the place of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States" (2). I decided to visit both Los Angeles and Chicago because of their high population of Mexican Ancestry. Also, the location of each city portrays a different region of the U.S., i.e., West Coast, Midwest and Southeast.

In Miami, the high Latino and Cuban population suggested that I would also find some evidence of Santa Muerte in local botánicas. I was also able to visit Madrid and Barcelona while conducting my research. I draw data from the Instituto Nacional de Estatisticas, the Spanish equivalent of the U.S. census to note the Mexican population as well. The main differences are that the U.S. census was done in 2010 while the Spanish census was done in 2011. Spain also only documents those with Mexican nationality or as place of birth, therefore Mexican descendants are not reflected.

Within the U.S., I used the zip codes with the highest densities of Latin and Mexican Ancestry to find botánicas listed on the internet. I focused on neighborhoods of Mexican Ancestry, hypothesizing that they would have a higher intensity of iconography and a higher possibility of Santa Muerte paraphernalia in local botánicas. I also took note of dollar stores in the area as well. It is possible that these stores may also carry the basics
of what is needed in ritual, i.e. candles, incense, etc. Other areas that may have commodified Santa Muerte were also explored, documenting places, such as marketplaces and tattoo shops.

There were four items that I would document in these stores:

1) Santa Muerte statues, the central focus of an altar or adoration of a practitioner

2) Candles with Santa Muerte images, lit as a devotional act

3) Books on Santa Muerte, information and literature that can generate a consensus of practices within the community

4) Santa Muerte amulets, for personal protection.

Statues, which are the main focus of Santa Muerte devotion, and their placement were noted. Are they kept near other Mexican folk saints, mixed in with Catholic Saints, or Afro-Cuban gods? What are the colors of her robe that are being sold? Most were indiscriminately placed on shelves, yet some botánicas did have them in little Santa Muerte sections next to other related objects. The colors also varied, although there was a vast amount of variety in densely populated areas I have observed. i.e., Los Angeles, Chicago, Madrid. .

The second item on my checklist were Santa Muerte candles. Red, black and white candles are the most popular colors (Chestnut) and were the colors usually available. Books or pamphlets on Santa Muerte were also important since this is the information that is being circulated around the community. La Biblia de la Santa Muerte, for example, lists rituals and commandments that would help shape the worldview of a Santa Muerte follower. Amulets or charms were also added to the list as these are
extremely significant as well. Amulets have been used since antiquity to protect the
wearer from malevolent magical forces and has empathetic values, which attract the
energy or the deity it represents (Ferguson 233). I also noted Jesus Malverde depictions
or paraphernalia being sold to see if any details stood out for analysis. While my main
focus is on Santa Muerte, there are comparable elements to Jesus Malverde as both are
considered "narco-saints" and prayed to by drug traffickers.

I would always wear "neutral" colors because some of the neighborhoods I was
visiting had high crime rates and gang involvement. When first entering a store I would
greet the attendant and begin browsing the shelves. If asked if I needed help, I would ask
if the store sold books or amulets of Santa Muerte. Santa Muerte candles and statues are
the most common objects to find, so I made sure to target the smaller objects that might
be behind the counter. After they would let me know about the books or amulets they
would usually lead me to the statues or candles without asking. I would use this
transitional point in moving around the store to ask questions. I would ask the following
questions depending on the situation and what seemed appropriate: "Are mostly
Mexicans buying these things or do other Latinos, non-Latinos buy them? What color
candle sells the most? Did you run out or do you not have X because they sell that much?
I would then ask if they also sold Jesús Malverde candles or statues as my final question
before leaving the store because he is a different saint and can be seen as unrelated.

*Botánicas* must be approached carefully for study. Store owners and workers
many times have a sense of distrust towards outsiders due to mainstream views of
Santería and pagan rituals. (Murphy 49) For this reason, I had to be able to get the
information I was looking for without making the store attendant uncomfortable. This
would allow me to ask more questions in a relaxed environment. I made sure to speak only in Spanish. Many times I am perceived as not Latino because of my phenotype, however Spanish is my point of contact for entry. I also made sure that my somewhat neutral accent reflected that I was Cuban-American. Being identified as Cuban would remove a layer of distrust as the Cuban community is known to be one of the targets of *botánica* sales. I also had distractor questions that were coded with an insider's speech. Do you know of anyone who does tarot readings or Ifa? Ifa is a divination tool used by high priests of Santería and inquiring about these services would insinuate an insider's knowledge. After collecting this data, I had to find a system of organization.

2. Document Analysis

In *Qualitative Media Analysis*, Altheide proposes five steps in information collection and analysis (23). His process of qualitative document analysis are broken up into the following steps: 1) collection of documents or primary sources; 2) protocol development 3) coding 4) data analysis 5) findings. These steps are crucial in organizing the data being collected. Having spent time in cities, which have a high percentage of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, I observed that Santa Muerte, *La calavera Catrina* and Day of the Dead are used in media to express cultural familiarity. Mexican culture recognizes depictions of skulls and death as Collecting pictures, business cards, anecdotes and field notes, I was able to obtain sufficient depictions of the phenomenon I am trying to study. I have collected these samples to depict the reality of Santa Muerte "on the ground". The strengths of collecting different types of media is that the variety, exposes a multi-layered complexity.

The second step that is mentioned by Altheide is protocol development and data
collection. The mistake that I made and was able to repair on the field was lumping together all three depictions of death. Revisions of protocols are suggested as many investigators go into the field with their initial plan of action but many times will find that they have to make adjustments or changes to help further or enrich the research. It was after I revised my protocol that I was able to code the three cultural representations of death separately and the data collection became smoother and began to take shape.

Altheide sets the third step as coding. While the three cultural Mexican depictions of death are separated into three categories for data collection, coding entails breaking down their components. In what socio-economic level neighborhood was this depiction found? Is it targeting Mexicans, Latinos, or a general public? When I began to notice the similarities within each neighborhood, Altheide's fourth step, data analysis became apparent. I draw a line between my ethnographic research and my media collection. One is to observe depictions of Santa Muerte in a realistic context that is on the ground, while the other is how media is portraying the religion. Being able to look at a phenomenon through subcategories allows for synthesis and evaluation that may bring to light connections or contrasts that require more investigation. Altheide's final step is to report the findings.

The pictures and data collected for the ethnographic portion of this analysis ranged from restaurants and tattoo shops to dollar stores and religious good stores. Where the data was collected or recorded was also made into subcategories to demonstrate how the three depictions of death are used more for commodification in one place than another, e.g. a touristy area or an artisan marketplace. When compared, these subcategories suggested that a spiritual hybridity and transculturation was taking place.
3. City by City

I organize the analysis and discussion as follows: Each area has U.S. census data listed based on state, county and city. This is to demonstrate the demographics of the areas being studied. I have included the Cuban population statistics as well due to the fact that botánicas have traditionally been operated by the Santería community. In the case of Spain, I use 2011 statistics from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, which is the U.S. census equivalent. Next, a table showing a statistical summary of the four objects will be listed. Finally, a description of findings for each area will be analyzed.

Miami:

Miami was chosen as a city for investigation because of the number of botánicas due to the high number of Cubans. The population percentages of Cubans in Miami are similar to the percentages of Mexicans in Los Angeles and Chicago, i.e. roughly 30% countywide, over 80% in neighborhoods. While Santa Muerte is the main focus of this study, the botánicas have traditionally been operated by Cubans. I chose to analyze Southwest Miami and Hialeah separately to note if there was a higher presence of Santa Muerte objects in botánicas where there is a higher Mexican population.

- **Southwest Miami**

*Percentage of Population According to the 2010 U.S. Census*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Florida</th>
<th>Miami-Dade County</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>22.50%</td>
<td>65.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ancestry</td>
<td>3.30%</td>
<td>2.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>6.50%</td>
<td>34.30%</td>
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</table>
The first *botánica* that I entered in Southwest Miami, ironically was owned and operated by a Mexican immigrant. When asked about Santa Muerte, she took me around the shop and said that she sold statues, books, candles and amulets. She said she did not pray to Santa Muerte, because she asks for a lot in return and she is not ready to pay the price that Santa Muerte asks. When asked the price, she responded, "Todo. Le tienes que dar todo." (*Everything. You have to give her everything.*) She quickly changed the topic and we talked about color correspondences in the occult, e.g. red means love or passion.

After visiting several *botánicas* in the Southwest area, I found that the majority had all four objects. When asking shop owners who bought these objects and where were they from, they immediately knew that this was a Mexican religion. Some did say they've seen Central Americans but that Mexicans living in the area are the main purchasers. I question whether or not this may be true because they are not asking customers where they are from. This question may come up in casual conversation between a shop attendant and customer, but it would not necessarily be the norm, implying that shop attendants were assuming the nationality of customers. My question after, "Quienes son los que compran esas cosas [Santa Muerte]?" (*Who buys these things?*) However, my follow up question, "Y hay otro Latinos que compran cosas de Santa Muerte?" (*And are there other Latinos who buy Santa Muerte objects?*) For them to answer Central American could have been a regional association and my question was leading them after

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statues</th>
<th>Candles</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Amulets</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Miami</td>
<td>66.66%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>66.66%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
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careful analysis. Many did not know about the religion and one shop owner told me he didn't want to know, he just had to sell what the public wanted. There had been enough of a demand by migrant workers living in South Florida that botánica shop owners, whether it conflicts with their beliefs in Santería, realized that they were the only point of contact for these purchases. While the internet does offer these same objects, migrant workers may not have a permanent address or no access to a credit card for purchases.

• Hialeah

Percentage of Population According to the 2010 U.S. Census:

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Miami-Dade County</th>
<th>Hialeah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>65.00%</td>
<td>94.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ancestry</td>
<td>2.10%</td>
<td>0.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>34.30%</td>
<td>73.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hialeah has one of the highest percentage of Cubans living in South Florida. The census data shows that there is a smaller percentage of those with Mexican Ancestry living in Hialeah than the county. There were less Santa Muerte objects in Hialeah than the Southwest area. Although there was a higher percentage of stores with candles in Hialeah, this could well be that they are not being bought.

Santa Muerte Objects in Botánicas in Hialeah:

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Statues</th>
<th>Candles</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Amulets</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hialeah</td>
<td>42.80%</td>
<td>71.40%</td>
<td>28.50%</td>
<td>14.20%</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The first store I entered, the owner, a devotee of Yemaya, said she didn't sell Santa Muerte because she did not like it. She was friendly about the situation however
and did try to find another local botánica that would sell it. Although Santería has a goddess of the cemetery, Oya, she is both highly feared and respected for her temper and close affinity to death, although she is not Death. Life force or ashe is seen as the divine sacred energy and the lack of it, or death is often seen as ajogun or an evil force (Gonzalez-Wippler 10). It is also interesting to note that Oya and Yemaya hate each other and cannot be together in the same room during ritualized possession. I wonder whether or not the Yemaya devotee's association of Santa Muerte with Oya as a reason she responded, "No lo vendo porque no me gusta." (I don't sell it because I don't like it.)

Other than the first store I visited, all the other botánicas in Hialeah did have Santa Muerte items, just not to the extent or variety of the Southwest area. Only one store only had a single Santa Muerte amulet made of gold. I asked the owner why did they only had one amulet and not the candles or statues and she responded that there were not enough people who would buy them. The one amulet, in fact, was a risk because they were not sure if anyone would buy it.

**Los Angeles:**

On the opposite side of the United States, Los Angeles has a higher percentage of those with Mexican ancestry than Miami. California once pertained to Mexico and there is still a strong connection between the two. In *The California-Mexico Connection*, Lowenthal et al. suggests that: "Transnational alliances among workers, investors, environmentalists, human rights advocates and others all contribute to a tangle of overlapping interests and incomplete sovereignties that is captured in the phrase we have coined, the 'California-Mexico Connection'" (ix). Because of this reasoning, it was essential to document a city on the West Coast near the border and with a high Mexican
population. Also, because of the proximity to Mexico and *Mexicanidad*, there were additional locations, besides *botánicas* that needed further investigation.

*Percentage of Population According to the 2010 U.S. Census*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>California</th>
<th>Los Angeles County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>37.60%</td>
<td>47.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ancestry</td>
<td>30.70%</td>
<td>35.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>0.20%</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Tinta Rebelde Tattoos:*

Known for Grauman's Chinese Theatre and the Hollywood Stars that line the sidewalks, Hollywood Blvd. is a must stop when visiting Los Angeles. Located right in front of Frank Sinatra's star on Hollywood Boulevard. is Tinta Rebelde Custom Tattoos. An elaborate window display portrays Mexican iconography of *calaveras, lucha libre* masks and folk saints such as the Virgen of Guadalupe. The tattoo shop also serves as an art gallery to promote the work that the owners have produced over the years. Many of the tattoos in the gallery are of *calaveras, Catrinas* and Santa Muerte. These can also be seen by visiting their official website: www.tintarebelde.com, which displays tattoos done by the artist Chris "Suicide" who specializes in Mexican iconography and at times mixes it with pop culture. The Day of the Dead iconography mixed in with pop culture, suggests that there is a demand for the Mexican imagery, commodified art for personal style. Tinta Rebelde also posted on their facebook fan page that they have specials on Dia de los Muertos and invite fans to celebrate at their store.
A tattoo of Santa Muerte is seen many times as the ultimate dedicatory action of a believer. They have decided that they will be a Santa Muerte believer for life, and since there is no central church for Santa Muerte, this act of devotion helps the believer feel that they belong to a community. In *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, Sanders and Vail write: "In general, they define that tattoo as a mark of affiliation--demonstrating connection to significant groups, primary associates, or those who share specific interests--or as an isolative symbol of unconventionality, or unique personal decoration" (57).
L.A. Tattoos:

Across the street from Tinta Rebelde is L.A. Tattoos, which displays and sells 50-60 different graphic tees that are seen in many novelty stores. There were many renditions of modern looking Catrinas and Day of the Dead skulls. The store also sells pipes and water bongs for marijuana usage. One bong was shaped as the Grim Reaper (I was not allowed to take pictures). When asked if there was a Santa Muerte shirt, the young lady behind the counter said she did not recall ever seeing one but suggested that I check out Olvera Plaza, which was on my list of places to go for research.

Olvera Street:

Olvera street is a working-class to middle-class historical marketplace that sells Day of the Dead artisan work, acting as a cultural central with programming and a museum. Only two stores specialize in Saint statuary on Olvera street: Memo's Place and Casa California. Memo's place had 3-foot and 2-foot statues of Santa Muerte for sale. A Jesus Malverde statue first appears to be sitting indiscriminately between a St. Lucy and St. Pancras statue. St. Lucy and St. Pancras are recognized by the Catholic Church while Malverde is not. However, it is to be noted that all three figures are categorized as martyrs by their devotees.

Casa California specializes on Catholic saints and also had Catrinas/Day of the Dead iconography for sale. When asked if they sold any Santa Muerte depictions, the woman helping me was obviously disturbed. Casa California's business card depicts the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joesph) which implies that the owners are very Catholic. I found it interesting that the owners sell Day of the Dead culture and Catrina depictions as secular art even if it has spiritual meanings for others. The ultimate sanctification of
Death as Santa Muerte is bothersome to the more devoutly Mexican Catholics. (Chestnut 54)

The only other representation of Santa Muerte that I found on Olvera Street was in a Mexican artisan craft store. The owner said he also sold candles, incenses and perfumes for people who had spiritual needs but according to him it was mostly to pay the rent. A small bowl had small 3 inch plaques of Santa Muerte prayers.

*Lotería de la Muerte:*

One stall in the marketplace was selling a *Catrina* card game. I purchased the game to search the cards for symbolism or cultural clues to give me insight into what I was looking for. When I opened it, I discovered that it is basically a Bingo game. To play, you receive one of ten (Bingo) lottery cards and another person chooses cards from a deck. Whoever gets their card filled first, wins. Death is one of the boxes; a friendly cartoon Grim Reaper. While a non-Santa Muerte practitioner might see a caricature, the devotee would see the sacred.
• **Alvarado Street:**

Although Alvarado Street is considered part of Los Angeles proper, Simply Map 2.0 showed that the percentage of Mexican Ancestry residences in the area is higher than 80%. I have listed the census information of East Angeles which shares a border with the Alvarado street neighborhood.

*Percentage of Population According to the 2010 U.S. Census*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Los Angeles County</th>
<th>East Los Angeles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>47.70%</td>
<td>97.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ancestry</td>
<td>35.80%</td>
<td>88.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
<td>0.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Santa Muerte Objects in Botánicas in Los Angeles:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statues</th>
<th>Candles</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Amulets</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alvarado Street is a working-class neighborhood that has several 99 cent stores and *botánicas*. Entering most of the 99 cent stores and searching their candle sections, St. Jude and The Virgin of Guadalupe were prominent but no Santa Muerte candles were sold. Ironically, walking out of one of the 99 cent stores a woman was selling jewelry and pendants on the sidewalk. She had Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde pendants, printed pictures in small leather frames and Silver/silver plated amulets of Santa Muerte. Seeing that I was interested in her wares, she kept offering me an elephant pendant in English. She was surprised to see that I spoke Spanish when I responded, "Muchísimas gracias."

*Botánica Mi Destino*, was the first *botánica* I visited in the L.A. area. They only sold Santa Muerte candles but on the counter was a 3-foot, wooden version of Santa Muerte with a bright red apple sitting at her feet as an offering. When asked if they sold amulets, the woman behind the counter told me there was a Santa Muerte altar down the street and around the corner that probably sold them. She handed me her business card and I was quite interested to see that she had another unrelated business on the other side of the card. The other business was for children's party rentals, i.e. bouncy castles, helium tanks for balloons. This was significant as it demonstrates that the woman is not ashamed of her religious disposition. Her involvement in tarot readings and occult religious goods is seen as a source of income. I question whether she may lose out on business opportunities for her party rentals if a potential client has conflicting religious
worldviews. A Mexican Catholic or Evangelical may shy away from her party business because they do not agree with her other business ventures. The fact that she has both businesses on both sides, implies that whether one is secular and the other is spiritual, she likely sees both as potential for income.

A few stores down was botánica Oaxaca. Three people were working there. One man was having lunch at the counter and I greeted him by saying, "Buen provecho." Another man answered my questions about the four objects I was looking for and when I asked my distractor question, he asked a woman in the back who was making a flower arrangement. This store sold all four items and had Jesus Malverde statues as well. At this point in my field research I revised my protocol and began to ask more questions about Jesus Malverde objects being sold. Since I did not encounter Jesus Malverde religious goods in Miami, I had to start taking special notes since there are parallels that I draw on both folk saints in chapter 2. I asked for a business card and did not notice until later that on the back there was a prayer to Santa Muerte. The most notable part of this prayer is that Catrina, and not Santa Muerte, is depicted on the card. Here again, the three categories of Day of the Dead, Catrina and Santa Muerte, overlapped. While all three can be identified as separate, the overlapping and understanding of their relationships are suggested on this prayer card. The prayer reads:

ORACION A LA SANTA MUERTE
ATRAER LA BUENA FORTUNA
EN LOS NEGOCIOS Y EN EL HOGAR
(Si reza esta oración la santa muerte auxiliará en sus ventas y en paz en su hogar.)

Muerte querida de mi corazón no me desampares de tu protección y desde este momento cubre mi casa, trabajo o negocio para que atraigas energías blancas del universo para que nunca falte nada y que todas
This prayer reflects a more benevolent aspect of Santa Muerte that Mexican and U.S. media tend to downplay as seen in Chapter 3. Santa Muerte can easily be interchanged in this prayer for a saint recognized by the Catholic Church, a form of syncretism. She is being asked to intercede in the believer's life and petition God the Father on their behalf. There is no offering of the soul or violent actions to placate her. All that is required for her intervention are three "Our Fathers" and lighting a white candle to show appreciation. The spiritual concern with protection from harm and those that will cause harm is present but this is common in ideologies that perceive the metaphysical world can cause harm if one is unguarded. Also, the petition to attract positive people as part of good fortune implies that there is a search for a community, others of like-minded worldviews. The prayer is also concerned with financial matters yet the petition clearly states that riches are not their priority but what is needed for survival. This does not fit well into the worldview of narcoculture which highly values materialism and the accumulation of wealth.

Following the earlier tip about the Santa Muerte altar, I continued around the corner to El Indio Amazónico. Taking pictures of the front of the store, I noticed elementary school children running around the sidewalk, in front of the store. The image of Death standing at the front of the store does not frighten them and they barely glance at it. Entering the store, a woman came out from behind a curtain and she asked how she
could help me. I asked about the Santa Muerte amulets and how much they were. She responded $20 and asked if I needed anything else. I told her that the altar she had displayed was pretty, she thanked me and went back behind the curtain. It was obvious that many come and visit the altar by the offerings left. It was curious that she ignored me the rest of the time I was in the store. Most botánica storeowners will continue to follow you or try to find out what you are looking for.
While the altar uses different colors, the most popular (red, white and black) are used. Red is used for those who need help in love. The couple kissing within a red heart next to a married couple tied together towards the bottom represent petitions to have a lover or spouse stay; also known in the occult as "un amare" or "to tie down." Black represents protection and harm, protection from one's enemies and harm to come to them. According to a local news story, "A Saint for Sinners," a similar small black Santa Muerte figure in a box on the right red column was found by the FBI in a Richmond, Virginia drug trafficker's home altar after they had been torturing fellow cartel members. (Lagoe) The skull to the bottom right has fangs dripping with blood to symbolize aggression. The white Santa Muerte on the left, symbolizes spirituality and peace which implies that this altar has multiple uses and meanings for believers.

**Nu Botanics:**

After visiting a few other botánicas, I was content with the information and pictures I had gathered and was ready to leave the area. Driving down Alvarado Street, I stopped at Nu Botanics, a wholesale botánica. This was the first time I had ever encountered a botánica of this size, which had more of a discount warehouse feel than a religious goods store. They had Santa Muerte statues in all sizes and some could even be seen from the street. Santería and Palo Mayombe religious goods were also sold. I was impressed by the amount and variety of candles, soaps and incenses. Not only was this botánica out of the norm due to its sheer size, but the variety was targeting several alternative religious practices, such as Wicca and Voodoo. Behind the store was a Jack-in-the-Box restaurant, a corporate chain, which provided an interesting contrast.

An alternative religious goods store next door to a mainstream corporate
American food chain recalled Benjamin Barber's argument in the book *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Barber claims that an encroaching Westernized culture will dominate traditional or competing cultural ideology. While my first impression was to label Nu Botanics as a foreign concept or non-American (Jihad) and to perceive Jack-in-the-Box as a symbol of Americanization (McWorld), it was not necessarily bilateral. Barber states that: "Jihad not only revolts but abets McWorld, while McWorld not only imperils but recreates and reinforces Jihad. They produce their contraries and need one another" (5). Nu Botanics can be seen as a McWorld concept or McWorld dominating Jihad. While most *botánicas* are small to medium in size and have limited supplies or variety of products, Nu Botanics was a McWorld version of a *botánica*. The wholesale capitalistic selection and lower prices would clearly meet a community's demand while cutting the need for competition. More importantly, Barber states: "The politics of commodity offers a superficial expansion of options within a determined frame in return for surrendering the right to determine the frame" (220). A clear example would be a statue I found in Nu Botanics of three Grim Reapers depicted as the Three Wise Monkeys, i.e. "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil". The popular mainstream culture of the artist imposes on the determined frame of Santa Muerte's worldview. A Buddhist philosophy superimposed onto Santa Muerte redefines it and the end result is commodification. From a phenomenological view, mainstream culture must be seen as separate from commodification, although it is a characteristic of modernity that the latter is usually a product of the former. The religions that are being catered to in *botánicas* are not part of the mainstream dominant culture, and hence difficult to commodify. The beliefs are marginalized (in perception) by society and adopted by marginalized members of society.
or those who sympathize with them. Santería, Palo Mayombé and Voodou are possession religions, which have been argued by scholars to be religions of the oppressed or marginalized in mainstream societies (Wood 2007; Schmidt 2010). These similarities can clearly categorize botánicas into Barber's system of classification under Jihad for how they are perceived to be under the scrutiny of mainstream culture.
Chicago:

California's Mexican population shares a border with Mexico and there is a constant flow of transnational exchange because of this proximity. Chicago's high Mexican population is due to mass labor migrations of the early and mid-20th century (Fernandez 41). Because of this difference in geographic location, Chicago was selected as a city for investigation.

Percentage of Population According to the 2010 U.S. Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Illinois</th>
<th>Chicago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>15.80%</td>
<td>28.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ancestry</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>21.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>0.20%</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I again used the 2010 U.S. Census to locate the highest populations of Mexican Ancestry in Chicago. I found that the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods were ideal locations and after cross-referencing on the internet, there were also plenty of botánicas to document in both areas.

**Pilsen:**

The local displacement of Mexican communities to the Pilsen neighborhood in the early 1960s was due to expressway construction and a new University of Illinois campus (Fernandez 208). According to Fernandez: "Pilsen soon became the new port of entry for incoming Mexican immigrants and Tejano migrants (Mexican Americans from Texas) who continued arriving throughout the sixties and seventies" (208). The high percentage of Mexicans, the National Museum of Mexican Art and its reputation for graffitti art, made me conclude that Pilsen needed further investigation.

**Santa Muerte Objects in Botánicas in the Pilsen Neighborhood:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statues</th>
<th>Candles</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Amulets</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilsen</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>66.60%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the National Museum of Mexican Art in the Pilsen neighborhood in Chicago, there are many Day of the Dead, Calavera Catrina artisan crafts available in the gift shop. Using my methods of qualitative semiotic analysis, I searched for La Santa Muerte on their shelves and only found one small statue to be a close representation of her. A shrouded saint skeleton, holding a skeleton baby, clearly an adaptation of Virgin with Child but as *calaveras*. I asked the woman behind the counter, "¿Cuánto para la estatua de la Santa Muerte con el bebé?" (How much for the statue of Santa Muerte with the
baby?) She responded, "Eso no es la Santa Muerte, es...") (That isn't Santa Muerte, it's...) She trailed off not knowing what to call it. When I looked at the price tag, it read "MUERTE CON BEBÉ ". The conclusion I drew from this interaction was: 1) that the woman was likely not a follower of Santa Muerte; 2) A follower of Santa Muerte would probably recognize any representation of Death as holy and a direct symbol of their most sacred; and 3) With any religious symbol, people of different faiths connect differential connotations with symbols, as discussed in chapter 3. The swastika, for example, evokes Nazism and anti-Semitism for Jews but is the cosmic spiral for Hindus. If this woman identified herself as Catholic or Protestant, then she would likely consider that the representation was not necessarily of Santa Muerte and not to be used for spiritual but rather purely artistic purposes.

Leaving the Museum, I was advised that a local Mexican artist's studio was around the corner and that he sometimes opened his studio to the public. Taking this advice, I arrived at his studio and told him about my research on Santa Muerte and how I was familiar with his usage of symbolism in his artwork. He immediately went to a corner of the studio and asked me to help him move some large canvases. Hidden behind these other canvases, he pulled out a large canvas that had an abstract depiction of a saint with a body of corn. He told me it is not finished but that he is going to title it, Our Lady of Monsanto. He said the face will be of Santa Muerte but her body will be a corncob and that each kernel will contain an image of a skull. The usage of calaveras as social commentary are quite common, but his decision to use Santa Muerte to criticize a corporation is a newer adaptation.

Two other Chicano local artists arrived and we began to discuss symbolism in art
and how the images of death and skulls are very typical of Mexican culture. I asked them if they had suggestions of places to visit and they said if I continued walking down 18th Street in the Pilsen neighborhood, I would pass by the botánicas I had on a list. They told me to end up at Catrina Cafe, a trendy, local coffee shop, decorated with Catrinas by different artists. I documented the botánicas along the way and stopped in the dollar stores as well. The most interesting discovery was that in the Pilsen Discount store, I was able to find several different types of Santa Muerte candles. This was the first dollar store I had come across that sells these objects. In Los Angeles, dollar stores sell candles with the images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Saint Jude, but I was not able to find any candles of Santa Muerte or Jesus Malverde, even though there are merchants selling these depictions in front of these stores on the street.

I had researched local botánicas in the area before my arrival and noticed one had moved, being replaced by a thrift shop. There was still evidence that it had been there, however. On the outer facade of the building, next to the door, there was a mural designed with tiles, mini mirrors and small Santa Muerte statues. Exposed to the elements and the public, there were chipped tiles and pieces missing. One empty spot had a glue stain that was obviously an outline of a miniature Santa Muerte statue. It had been ripped off the wall and taken. This was most likely an act of devotion yet an act of thievery or vandalism, demonstrating some simple element of criminality. The other side of the door had depictions of the Afro-Cuban gods of Santería, demonstrating how the botánica catered to both communities.
Centro Botánico Guadalupano is mostly an herbal supplement and health care store, or as referred to in Mexican culture, a *botica*. Many times, spiritual goods are also sold in *boticas*. The store windows mostly display advertisements for health products and the awning of the store name states: *Yerbas Medicinales, Tienda Naturista, Artículos Religiosos, Mayoreo & Menudeo*. While the store windows do not display any religious
goods, the back of the store serves as a traditional botánica. All the items that I check for are available and with considerable variety for such a small space. Afro-Cuban religions are also heavily represented, and there are signs advertising for Ifa readings which are consulations with Santería's divine oracle, done by a high priest. Although the Cuban population for this area is low compared to Miami's, it must be noted that nationality must not be confused with religion. It is possible for a Cuban to be a practitioner of Santa Muerte and a Mexican can be a practitioner of Santería.

Little Village:

Fernandez categorizes both Pilsen and Little Village as traditionally heterogeneous and that both are: "composed of US-born second and third-generation Mexican Americans (many of whom did not speak Spanish), migrants from Texas, and recent arrivals from Mexico" (221). Although U.S. census data shows a lower percentage of those with Mexican ancestry for Cook County, when the data is entered into Simply Map 2.0, the residential areas of Pilsen and Little Village show over 80% Mexican Ancestry.

**Percentage of Population According to the 2010 U.S. Census**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chicago</th>
<th>Cook County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>28.90%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ancestry</td>
<td>21.40%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Santa Muerte Objects in Botánicas in Little Village:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statues</th>
<th>Candles</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Amulets</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little Village</td>
<td>83.33%</td>
<td>83.33%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I spent another day visiting several *botánicas* in the Little Village neighborhood and came to the conclusion that in predominately Mexican neighborhoods, one will find Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde candles, posters, statues, soaps and incense. However, one shopkeeper told me that she found it odd that I asked about both folk saints because customers usually want one or the other. This can likely be attributed to the popularity of these folk saints in their respected regions. Malverde is patron saint of Sinaloa people and cartels, while Santa Muerte has more followers in Mexico City and along the Gulf. That Malverde is found in Chicago is evidence of his translocal elements. In *Translocal Geographies*, Brickell et al. state that: "One of the possible circumstances of translocalism is of spatially widely dispersed groups of people who are involved both with the specific place where they live and also with a distant place (such as a natal hometown) that they all have in common" (128). A Sinaloa diaspora community would be the perfect example of a translocal community that purchases Malverde depictions and paraphernalia to connect to their hometown.

The only other outlier that I found was that I was not allowed to enter one *botánica* in the Little Village neighborhood. I approached one store and the door was locked. Two women were inside, one behind the counter staring at the door and another one talking on the phone standing by the door. The posted hours of operation stated they were open, so I found this strange. The woman on the phone shakes her finger no and I smile. When she sees that I will not leave, she opens the door, "¿Qué quieres?" I respond, "Hola, era para ver lo que venden que estoy de compras." She immediately says, "No, estamos cerrados." She then locks the door and begins looking out the window up and
down the street as if expecting someone. I was able to see from the window that various Santa Muerte statues were on the shelves and was able to spot a Jesús Malverde as well.

4. Spain: Transnational Implications of Santa Muerte

Having the opportunity to travel to Spain while I was doing my research allowed me to discover the transnational effects of Santa Muerte. Observing the phenomenon in two culturally different regions of Spain (Castile and Catalonia) has reinforced the conclusion that Santa Muerte is not an exclusive religion of the drug cartel or even just the marginalized. Since the new Constitution of 1978, Spanish culture has made a turn to a more secular, individualistic spiritual understanding; Arroyo Menéndez discusses how New Age religions are having an impact on Spanish culture when he writes: "La
corriente *new age* aporta una serie de elementos creenciales muy en línea con las sensibilidades de los individualistas. Asistimos así a la formalización de una estructura de plausibilidad y la cristalización de representaciones colectivas de una religiosidad altamente individualizada" (271). Menéndez explains that spirituality since the implementtion of the new Democratic Constitution has become defined by an extreme individualism that privileges personal freedom. Spain's continuing influx of Latin American immigrants over the past decades has also most likely brought cultural ideologies as well. According to Zapata-Barrero, the Spanish Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales estimated: "the number of immigrant workers increased from less than 200,000 in 1996 to more than 3,000,000 in 2007" (99).

*Spanish Population Demographic According to the 2011 Instituto Nacional de Estadística Census*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Country of Birth - Mexico</th>
<th>Country of Birth - Cuba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>46.8 million</td>
<td>24,691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comunidad de Madrid</td>
<td>6.4 million</td>
<td>12,807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barcelona</td>
<td>5.5 million</td>
<td>10,025</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Madrid:*

In *Madrid: The History*, Jules Stewart writes: "On the face of it, the city has undergone a radical transformation since the 1990s. Yet not so much has really changed. Madrid has never stopped being Madrid" (214). As the capital of Spain and the center of Castillian life, Stewart suggests how Madrid is a city that continues to preserve Spanish culture even during a globalizing age. With the large influx of Latin American immigrants, Madrid was an ideal global city to check for Santa Muerte.
Santa Muerte Objects in Botánicas in Madrid:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statues</th>
<th>Candles</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Amulets</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madrid</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just one block north of Puerta del Sol in Madrid, La Santería Milagrosa is across the street from the central Madrid police station on Calle Montera. A Cuban-owned botánica, it includes a museum of Santería which customers can visit and very elaborate window displays that change seasonally to attract customers who may have some curiosity of the occult. I had visited this store on several occasions previously prior to my studies of Santa Muerte. I entered and introduced myself to the young Cuban woman behind the counter. When I told her that I was studying Santa Muerte and wondering if they had any requests for statues or candles, she pointed to a shelf over my head holding fifteen to twenty different Santa Muerte statues of different sizes and colors. She said that Latin Americans and Spaniards alike were buying them.

Not too far from this location is the botánica, Santería Okantomi. I asked about Santa Muerte religious goods and the woman behind the counter pointed to two small statues next to her. She said that they had candles also but they were sold out. She, too, insisted that while many Latin Americans are buying Santa Muerte representations, Spaniards are as well. She mentioned that Spaniards are very open to other forms of spirituality, especially after the Constitution of 1978. She explained how she is a Santera but a madrileña and that it was her Cuban husband who had introduced her to the religion.
Barcelona:

In *Thinking Barcelona: Ideologies of a Global City*, Edgar Illas discusses how Barcelona has traditionally been known as a tourist city and how the post 1992 Olympics promotions furthered this notion. (2012) Illas writes: "The ideology of cosmopolitanism contributed to renew the image of Barcelona [...] While the international tourism represented a safe incarnation of this urban cosmopolitanism, the arrival of a new and unsolicited contingent of foreigners to Barcelona destabilized the premises of this ideology" (123). This can be viewed as problematic as Barcelona is the capital of the Catalan region, which seeks independence from Spain (11). As foreign ideologies are being introduced into the Catalan region, they may or may not coincide with the ideas of Catalan independence. However, as seen with the Catalanian waitress (Chapter 1), Santa Muerte's attraction to the marginalized perhaps fits into the worldview of Catalonians.

*Santa Muerte Objects in Botánicas in Barcelona:*

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In Barcelona, the metaphysical store Mystic caters to all forms of esotericism, mysticism and even sells pop-culture items that have a "magickal" or fairy tale twist. I was approached by one of the three women working and asked if I needed help. When I asked about Santa Muerte, I was taken to the back corner of the store and showed several candles, statues and amulets. I asked her who mostly bought these and she said Latin Americans. I asked if Catalonians were buying them and she said no, that only Mexicans
and Central Americans were purchasing them. I was a bit skeptical since I had already seen two Catalans (or at least Catalan speakers) with Santa Muerte tattoos. Mystic is found in the Sants-Montjuic neighborhood, less than a 5-minute walk from Plaza Espanya. Other than the Palau Sant-Montjuic, the Plaza de Espanya and the Arenas Mall, the neighborhood that Mystic caters to is working class and off the beaten path for tourists. This area is also has the reputation of having a large number of immigrants from around the world. That Mexicans and Central Americans from this area constitute the majority of purchasers of Santa Muerte religious goods may perhaps lead this shop attendant to perceive this as an exclusively Latin American cultural practice.

Across the street from Mystic is the botánica Vishnu Laxmi Narayana which, although it caters to the Santería population, also focuses on Hindu spiritual goods and imagery. Santa Muerte candles, statues and amulets were also being sold and placed indiscriminately on the shelves. The shop attendant stated that these objects were sold to Latin Americans and Catalans alike, however she did mention that the majority from the neighborhood were immigrants. She said that Catalans or Spaniards that came in to buy the Santa Muerte goods were very eclectic in their beliefs and accepting of other forms of spirituality.

5. Findings

Looking over the data collected, I noticed that there were no books on Santa Muerte in Spain. The books I found in the U.S. botánicas were mostly published in Mexico. While all the other religious goods that I was documenting can be reproduced by local crafters or artisans, the books are copyright and are most likely more difficult to acquire. I also took note that while Mystic is not a botánica, all of their Santa Muerte
paraphernalia was kept in the back corner of the store.

In neighborhoods with higher Mexican Ancestry, such as the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhood in Chicago, botánicas are beginning to display more Santa Muerte objects than traditional Santería. Counter spaces in several botánicas had Santa Muerte statues on display, some even with offerings, e.g. a red apple or money. Statues of Catholic saints and orishas, or Santería's African gods, are usually on shelves and counter spaces are used for small, last minute purchases such as trinkets or prayer cards. While Santería continues to be the main religion botánicas cater to, I question whether or not, botánicas in predominantly Mexican neighborhoods will begin to focus more on Santa Muerte items.

When looking at the data for Miami, the lower rates of Santa Muerte religious goods in botánicas in Hialeah can be attributed to the high Cuban population. Only one store in Hialeah sold a gold Santa Muerte amulet and had no other related items. Those that are concerned with magickal protection in Hialeah have access to traditional Cuban Santería methods in these stores. A Santa Muerte practitioner would have to travel further south to find religious goods that may better suit their needs. The Southwest area has a higher percentage of Mexicans and is much closer to the migrant worker community. Santa Muerte may appeal to other nationalities and individual worldviews, however, it continues to have a correlation with Mexican practitioners.

6. Conclusion: Cultural Representations of Death

While searching through Day of the Dead culture, calaveras, and Catrinas for Santa Muerte, I found that it was crucial to understanding each within Mexican culture. The image of death does not point to Santa Muerte in Mexican culture but quite the
opposite. Searching for Santa Muerte imagery within the large quantity of *calaveras* in artisan marketplaces was my first mistake. Rarely are the two ever mixed or found together. In fact, once I was able to differentiate the cultural significance, I was able to pinpoint better where Santa Muerte imagery would be located.

My last day in L.A. brought me back to Santa Monica for a visit. While sitting at a restaurant window, thinking how I would rather be eating at Pinches Tacos, a young woman in a black jersey was crossing the street. I quickly pulled out my camera and was able to get the back of her jersey, the section where athlete's names are supposed to be, read "Muerte." I returned to Pinches Tacos after this and after ordering, casually asked the cashier if the owners were believers in Santa Muerte. She pointed at a gentleman pouring drinks and indicated that I should ask him. I was lucky enough to talk to him for a few minutes. After I asked if he believed in Santa Muerte, he jokingly said he prayed to the Devil. It took me a week or two to understand why he made this comment. After being able to separate Day of the Dead, *calavera, Catrinas* and Santa Muerte, I realized I had lumped them in all together when I asked the gentleman if he was a Santa Muerte practitioner. With all of the bad press that Santa Muerte has received because of narcoculture, he casually dismissed my comment by reflecting what Catholic Mexicans compare Santa Muerte to, i.e. praying to the Devil. The restaurant's choice to use
*calaveras* and *Catrinas* as their style of decoration for the restaurant was not religious but cultural.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Santa Muerte and Globalization

I have discussed cultural manifestations and representations of Santa Muerte in the present day as a historical product of the Mexican Aztec perception of death, and the great sacred importance attributed to death. Icons and imagery of death have long had great cultural relevance in Mexico, as the use of *calaveras* in art and spirituality from the pre-Colonial to the Revolutionary Era clearly demonstrates. In the present day, mass media tends to (re)present Santa Muerte as something sinister, bound up in drug cartel activity or criminality. Despite this tendency, the benevolent, spiritual aspect remains for devotees of Santa Muerte not just in Mexico, but also, in recent years, in the US and in other countries such as Spain. By documenting Santa Muerte paraphernalia in *botánicas*, we stand to gain a clearer understanding of the practices of those devotees.

Mass media has begun to bring Santa Muerte into the realms of public discourse and popular culture. Like Santa Muerte in the present day, religious practices like Santería, Palo Mayombe and Voodoo have in the past received negative media attention for their non-mainstream rituals. For example, in a 1985 Sun Sentinel article titled "Deputies Find Evidence of Black-Magic Rituals", Santería rituals are defined as black magic and connected to the criminal activities of the believers (Uhler 1.B). Uhler writes: "Worshipers in some of the religion's twisted forms think the ritual can make them invisible when they commit crimes, deputies said." The article does not state that Santería is a syncretic religion, but that it is split into two separate factions of practitioners. The African parts are considered black magic and used by those seeking to cause harm or who are involved in criminal activities. The article stresses that these are the practitioners who sacrifice animals. The Catholic aspects of Santería are depicted as white magic, as
practitioners only light candles and "build shrines around statues of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus." Their motives are portrayed as benevolent. Today, there is a greater understanding of the practices and rituals of Santería and a recognition that the canonical or consensual beliefs of the community are separate from the actions and intentions of individual practitioners. As more data is collected and trends continue to develop, a better definition of Santa Muerte will perhaps help dispel some of the myths and misconceptions around it.

Although mass media depictions may be biased, information regarding the practices of Santa Muerte is reaching a more global audience. Santa Muerte has attained a transnational status due to the effects of globalization and commodification. The commodification of Santa Muerte in botánicas has also helped secure its position as a proper religious practice, sharing shelf space with other practices. As more botánicas carry Santa Muerte paraphernalia, recognition of it will likely become more widespread. In fact, Mexican cultural depictions of death have already begun to cross over into mainstream U.S. popular culture. On October 20, 2014, the popular merchandise website Ebay offered almost 2,000 items for sale related to "Santa Muerte", nearly 3,000 for "Catrina", and over 37,000 hits for "Day of the Dead". The commodification of Mexican death iconography is growing quickly not only in the U.S. but on the global market as well. In "Day of the Dead Growing in Popularity in Non-Latino Community", Crystal Chow argues that Day of the Dead has become a mainstream phenomenon and movies such as 20th Century Fox's "The Book of Life" will probably only strengthen its appeal to U.S. audiences. In the animated feature "The Book of Life", the benevolent female goddess of death, La Muerte, is depicted as La calavera Catrina. The male Xibalbá,
named after the Mayan underworld, is seen as a dark, indigenous hybrid of the grim reaper. The cultural icon of Catrina, although depicted as a death goddess, is portrayed in a positive light, while the more indigenous male figure of Xibalbá is depicted as negative. The use of Catrina as a protagonist can be linked to the rising popularity of Catrina-esque makeup, as evident on websites like Pinerest. Searching the trend #santamuerte on Facebook during the 2014 Halloween season, the posts were roughly divided by Santa Muerte believer and makeup selfies.

The Internet has thousands of articles like the eHow post by Willett, "Día de los Muertos Costume Ideas," published in 2012. La calavera Catrina and sugar skull makeup have been gaining popularity among youth and many have posted pictures of themselves wearing the makeup on social media, further communicating or introducing these cultural representations to peers. User-generated website HubPages has an article entitled, "Dress as Santa Muerte for Halloween" (Carrie B.) which states: "If you are reading this: CONGRATUALTIONS! YOU ARE A VISIONARY! AHEAD OF YOUR TIME. As of October, 2013 no official 'Santa Muerte' costume kits exist." The celebration of the ingenuity of choosing Santa Muerte as a Halloween costume is suggestive of an acceptance of the icon through commodification and cultural incorporation. In Rome, entertainment venue Circolo degli Artisti is promoting their second annual Santa Muerte Halloween Party, demonstrating how European markets are also incorporating Santa Muerte and Day of the Dead for commercial purposes. In this thesis, we noted its extension to the cities of Madrid and Barcelona as well.

While some U.S. and Mexican mass media attempt to exoticize and demonize Santa Muerte, the attention given to it has also made it a highly sought cultural product.
Why? Because of the fascination with the occult, the taboo, \textit{lo prohibido}? Most non-mainstream religious practices that have penetrated the U.S. and global markets through \textit{botánicas} traditionally have not had this degree of success or recognition due to lack of exposure or dissemination. Scholars must continue to document the beliefs of practitioners as Santa Muerte travels across national borders and comes into contact with other cultures. By analyzing Santa Muerte practices as they evolve and adapt to a globalizing world and commodification in popular culture, the intricacies and ideologies that surround those practices will be brought to light.
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