

Bare Life in Contemporary Mexico: Everyday Violence and Folk Saints

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Necropolitics and *homo sacer*

The postcolonial critic Achille Mbembe offers “necropolitics” as a corrective complement to Michel Foucault’s broadly known idea of “biopolitics.” Foucault underlines that modern liberal governments have moved away from controlling the population through the imminent threat of death to use subtler disciplinary techniques to achieve the (un)conscious subjugation of the subject and its body. The validity of the influence of bio-power rests with the constant reproduction of living subjects. However, Mbembe points out that biopolitics is not sufficient for explaining how the work of death continues to prevail as a technique of governance in the contemporary politics and everyday life.¹ His arguments lie in that the sovereign, whose role is to defend society from potential threats, is still given the power to determine who may live and who must die. Thus, the relationship between politics and death is essential to understanding “how the state has emerged through its reproduction of death and to examine consequent transformations in the meaning and representation of death in everyday life for its citizens” (Mbembe, 2003, p.16).

To demonstrate the presence of necro-power, Mbembe, unlike Foucault’s reliance on Western European cases, draws examples from the more politically volatile state of peripheral regions and countries.

For instance, in many African states, the political economy of statehood has changed drastically over the past few decades. Governments have failed to maintain the economic underpinning for political authority and order, and in turn have been forced to forfeit their monopoly on violence and control over death. Therefore, “other armed forces such as urban military, armies of regional lords and private armies all claim the right to exercise violence to kill” (Mbembe, 2003, p.26). These armed powers share a complicated relationship with the state, at times usurping control and undermining state power and at others allying with it to eliminate competing armed groups. Rather than writing this situation off as a simple “failure of the state,” Mbembe claims that this is a form of *war* in which survival of the fittest governs any and all human action, leading to an incessant chain of violence and terror.

According to political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in such chaotic situations, the sovereign power is summoned again to intervene and resolve the crisis. The government transforms itself into a war machine by proclaiming a “state of exception,” in which constitutional laws are superseded to restore the status quo, and military power is mobilized and all violence pardoned. Agamben states that *homo sacer* is reborn in this paradoxical circumstance. In ancient Roman law, *homo sacer* is an “accused man” expelled from his own community and deprived of all rights and functions, and hence can be killed without the killer being punished as a murderer; yet he is still a “sacred man,” in that his life maintains sanctity that prevents him from being sacrificed in a ritual ceremony (Agamben, 1998, p.27). In this fashion, *homo sacer* becomes a modern-day symbol of subjects who are unprotected in the everyday, such as criminals, outlaws, and illegal immigrants, yet are exposed to all types of violence in war-like circumstances. The life of *homo sacer* is disposable and replaceable for the sake of society, and their existence is tantamount to the “living dead,” whose value as a human being is denied and is ultimately destined to die under precarious conditions.

Necropolitics extends itself to other parts of the globe, to contemporary Mexico. Melissa W. Wright contemplates the relevance of necro-power at the turn of the 21st century by examining the infamous femicide that took place in Ciudad Juárez, one of the largest border cities of Northern Mexico. The corpses of more than 300 women who were sexually abused, brutally murdered, then dumped across the city not only shows that the local police and federal government were unable or unwilling to find the perpetrators, but also serves as a visual reminder of imminent danger, justifying unlawful government actions taken under the pretense of protecting the lives of citizens and residents (Wright, 2011, p.709). However, the violence

did not end here. Followed by this tragic chain of female deaths on the US–Mexico border, Mexico became the hotspot for unprecedented drug violence that made a larger part of its territory a bloody and chaotic battleground, and for this very reason, put the entire population into a state of panic and fear of death.

Mexican war on drugs

It is well known that the neoliberal economic reforms launched in the late 1980s and driven by the administration of Carlos Salinas brought dramatic changes in Mexican society. Both positive and negative impacts of the reforms are manifested in the aftermath of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994), a symbol of globalization and an embracing of the open market. While it brought industrialization and relative economic prosperity in the country's northern border region adjacent to the US, NAFTA caused a critical impact on the national economy, desecrating rural areas and those of lower socioeconomic classes. Consequently, those impacted sought to escape their economic predicament in two ways: on the one hand, there was a large-scale exodus from rural areas to the northern border cities to find work, with many seeking jobs in *Maquiladora* factories. Others went even further by crossing the border and trying to start a new life for themselves in the US.

Alongside the massive migration to the north, on the other hand, the rapidly growing informal economy has been one of the striking results from the neoliberal transformation, in which state intervention in the market was reduced to prioritize the national security and safety of citizens. Anthropologist Keith Hart coins the term “informal economy” while studying emerging urban labor markets in Africa. He distinguishes self-employment and small-scale entrepreneurial activities including small traders, peddlers, hawkers, street vendors and others with no fixed location from waged employment in large firms or government agencies. The former activities are referred to as the “informal economy” as opposed to the “formal economy” because these activities are unregistered and unregulated, and hence operate without paying taxes. Robert Neuwirth (2011, p.18) notes that, according to the OECD's 2000 report, half of the workers in the world—close to 1.8 billion people—work in the informal sector. In many developing countries, the informal economy is growing faster than any other part of the economy and is a rising force in world trade. During the most recent financial crisis and neoliberal transformation, desperate workers

in Latin American countries turned to the informal sector in the hopes of escaping their destitute conditions.

The informal economy encompasses another business world that exists in the criminal underground. The clandestine cartels that traffic human organs, drugs, and armed weaponry also operate outside the law. They are commonly referred to as the black market or shadow economy because these illegal activities are well known to legal authorities and chased down by law enforcement. Moreover, this informal sector is the target of moral stigma and condemnation. Historically, drug trafficking has been one of the largest informal sectors in the Latin American economy. Colombia established itself as the hub of the international drug industry in the 1980s, supplying narcotic commodities to the world, particularly the US—in 1982, 79% of marijuana and 75% of cocaine consumed in the US originated from or was processed in Colombia (Villar and Cottle, 2011, p.45). Colombia became the target for Washington, with the CIA partnering with anti-drug organizations to halt the flow of cocaine into the US. For over a decade, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was centrally involved in the drug wars in Colombia and after the death of Pablo Escobar, legendary drug lord, there was a gradual decline in Colombian drug production and a decrease in the number of active cartels.

When drug cultivation and manufacturing is pushed out of one country it inevitably pops up in another. This so-called “balloon effect” shows that as long as there is a market for illicit drugs, production will shift to another country or region to meet demand. Colombia began to hand over its central position to Mexico, which as one of the main entry points to the US, also has had a long history of drug trafficking. Local and small-scaled production that formed around the Pacific region in the early 20th century transformed into a transnationally industrialized business due to US demand for medical marijuana during World War II, and since then drug trafficking cartels and organizations have expanded to all over the country.

The geopolitical transition of power in the continental drug industry alongside the social implications of the free market economy implemented by NAFTA reshaped and expanded the narcoeconomy. Drug cartels bought bankrupted farms at cheap prices and increased the cultivation of poppy and marijuana on lands that used to grow corn, bean, and other staple crops. The unemployed found dangerous but “well-paying, steady jobs in the recession-proof drug trade as farmers, drug couriers, truck drivers, chemists, street sellers, informants, *sicarios* (hired killers), and armed security guards” (Grillo, 2011, p.56). The election of Vicente Fox in 2000, which broke the

Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)'s 71-year hold on power, led to the transition of political power and a reorganization of federal and state police and political institutions. This effectively ended the PRI's domination and control of the drug trade by dismantling the *plaza* system.² The failure to impose a structure and order to the drug trade by the new administration created a power vacuum that was quickly filled by cartels who wanted to act more independently. They attempted to negotiate or even intimidate local authorities into ensuring the safe transportation of their drug products. The fight for control of the international drug market and various transit routes led to bloody competition among cartels and an outbreak of violence in Mexican society at large. In the meantime, an estimated 77% of cocaine in the US traveled through Mexico in the mid-2000s. US officials expressed concerns that a "narco state" was emerging in Mexico, as both a parallel to the official state and as the *de facto* force behind the official government (*Economist*, 2009).³

Violence in Mexico only intensified during the presidency of Felipe Calderón, Fox's successor, whose legitimacy was disputed from the beginning due to suspicion of election fraud. To avoid people's attention and to firmly establish the legitimacy of his role as commander-in-chief, one of Calderón's first endeavors in office was declaring a war on drugs. In 2007, the government deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to the major sites of drug-related crime such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Michoacán, and Acapulco, which were rumored to be occupied by drug-related organizations. However, this militant strategy only fueled further violence: on the one hand, the government faced heavy opposition from the cartels that did not want to lose their clout over the illicit market to local or federal authorities, who in fact were as complicit in the illegal drug trade as the cartels. While still fighting each other, the drug cartels fought back against local police and the federal army to thwart government intervention. Moreover, the Mexican military, which has an extensive record of human rights violations, rampantly attacked civilians suspected of being accomplices to cartel activity. Far from reducing violence and cleansing society of crime, Mexico's war on drugs resulted in a dramatic surge of murder, torture, and other appalling abuses, which only exacerbated the climate of lawlessness in Mexico (García, 2016). This "war" has not been contained to a battle between and among the government and criminal organizations but has spread to terrorize civil society with unending violence and ever-growing casualties.

Accordingly, the tragic consequence of narcoviolence was the construction of the "fear system." Social activists, intellectuals, and

journalists expressed their concerns and anxieties as they sought to uncover the truth behind official discourses. Mexico became one of the most dangerous places in the world for media workers and activists were under the constant threat of death and mysterious disappearances (Grillo, 2011, p.287). What was at stake was the freedom of speech. The widespread censorship of crime and corruption-related stories contributed to the difficulty of estimating the exact numbers killed and those who have murdered and maimed with impunity. Mexican society was trained to be silent and to turn a blind eye as fear of violence and terror grew. Yet, an increasing subset of people continued to confront government action and tried to make their voices heard. Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity was one of these efforts. The Movement began in 2011, when the poet Javier Sicilia, whose 24-year-old son was murdered by alleged drug traffickers, called for social action from all citizens of Mexico to push for a stop to the mafia bloodshed and for new anticrime strategies and reforms. He organized a march from his hometown, Cuernavaca, to Mexico City. The ranks of the rallies quickly grew from hundreds to hundreds of thousands, culminating in a caravan march through a dozen cities, where family members held up pictures of victims of the drug war, asking for open dialogue and investigation among all the members of Mexican society.

Folk saints tradition in Mexico

While trying to break the silence in the public sphere, Mexican society also looked to religion to cope with this overwhelming situation. In fact, despite appearing anachronistic, religious practices have always remained a part of even secularized modern life. With the sweep of globalization bringing unprecedented vulnerability and uncertainty to societies, it is not surprising to see the return of religion as a powerful transnational phenomenon. From the colonial period to the present, the Roman Catholic Church has had a strong presence in Mexico, serving as the *de facto* official religious institution by intervening in the political system and dictating social values. At the same time, the Church offered a unique space of consolation and protection for those who were persecuted and those whose problems seemed impossible to solve in a failing system. Many, if not most, Mexicans pray for compassion and forgiveness to the Virgin Guadalupe, who historically acts as a symbol for Mexican Catholicism, simultaneously embodying national Mexican identity and acting as a defender of the Catholic faith.

Alongside its unique devotion to the Virgin Guadalupe, Mexican Catholicism has a long and rich history of revering folk saints. Paul J.

Vanderwood explains the appearance of laic saints such as Teresa Urrea, Niño Fidencia, and San Judas Tadeo and their popularity in terms of intimacy and identification. Folk saints offer an affective connection to their devotees—God is glorious and eternal but alien, while folk saints are mortals in contact with life and death just like human beings. They are worshiped not for being divine but more for being equals to *us*—they are compassionate and mysterious, yet at times flawed and imperfect, and unpredictable (Vanderwood, 2004, p.208). The degree of affinity that people feel toward these folk saints can also be attributed to the perceived lack of care and attention from the government and the official church. The cult of folk saints is mainly created and spread among those who are excluded by mainstream society. Hence, laic saints are far from a sign of stunted development or backwardness. They function rather as an inherent and unique part of modern religiosity that often reveal the poor's dissatisfaction with the dogma of Catholicism and institutionalized religion (Graziano, 2006, p.11).

As drug violence worsened and fear grew, we see the emergence of new folk saints and an upsurge in their following. Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte (Saint Death or Holy Death in English) stand out among others as the emblematic figures who bear witness to the transformation of Mexican society and underscore the unique condition of their followers. They are not accepted by the Catholic Church and even rejected within religious communities. Their names function as a type of taboo and their devotees are morally condemned due to their supposed association with *narcomundo* (the drug world) and crime. Despite being labeled as the non-approved patron saints of drug traffickers or prisoners, their cult followings seem to revel in this uncomfortable and conflicting image by drawing further public attention and provoking controversy in civil society. Could we consider these figures as contemporary, alternative versions of the folk saint tradition that draws attention to the unjustness and exclusivity of the official system? Do they effectively represent the intimate desires of those whose lives were made destitute through the lawlessness that pervades Mexican society? Or are they yet another example of deviant occult practices of Western esotericism that have developed as a pathological symptom of the ever precarious 21st century?

Jesús Malverde

The spiritual universe of Malverde has crossed various borders, elevating his status to that of a transnational legend associated with both narcotrafficking and migration to the US. The mythical saga

of Malverde goes back to the turn of the 20th century.⁴ According to the stories in *True Tales of Another Mexico* (Quinones, 2001), *Folk Saints of the Borderlands: Victims, Bandits, and Healers* (Griffith, 2003) and *Jesús Malverde: El Santo Popular de Sinaloa* (Esquivel, 2009), Jesús Malverde was born in the state of Sinaloa around 1870. He lost both parents to starvation as a child and took odd jobs in construction and the railroads before eventually becoming an outlaw, hiding in the mountains. He is remembered as the Mexican Robin Hood, who stole from the rich and divided the booty among the needy. Despite his fame, he was betrayed by one of his comrades and finally arrested and executed by the governor of Sinaloa. It is said that the governor ordered that his head be hung from a tree as a warning to his followers and forbade the burial of his body. After his death, he became a figure of worship among the working class in conflict with state power, with his followers conferring the name “Jesús” in the Christian tradition to celebrate his martyrdom.

The social injustices that took place before the Mexican Revolution allowed Malverde to find his niche within folk religiosity for those who looked to the bandit-saint for unclaimed justice. José Genis explains this connection with the concept of *compadrazgo* (godparenthood). In addition to *compadrazgo* being associated with the Catholic tradition of having patron saints, *compadrazgo* also serves as a basis to structure “myths about apocryphal saints of folk religion, saints that are not accepted by the Church but that popularly receive a special cult” (Genis, 2003, p.81). The idea of Malverde as being *like us* brings him down to an earthly plane, facilitating social relations among those who identify with him. In this sense, devotees who are not favored by the official system and may even engage in criminal acts can share in Malverde’s mythical condition and feel a sense of affinity. Thus, a social bandit is reborn as a religious figure.

The figure of Malverde as a folk saint has evolved further since the 1980s, taking on the title of “narco-saint,” who offers special protection to those who are involved in the drug business. As the informal sector gained power, his name has become more popular and influential throughout the northern part of Mexico, spreading to the other side of the border to encompass the territory impacted by the transnational drug trade. Nowadays, we can find shrines of Malverde not only in Sinaloa and Tijuana, but in Los Angeles, California and Cali, Colombia (Sada, 2000, p.7). His current international character distances Malverde from saints like the Virgin Guadalupe who have already been institutionalized within the Mexican religious tradition,

causing controversy and criticism as the leaders of cartels try to identify with Malverde to assume the image of generous bandit and local hero.

However, Sam Quinones points out that the media has overemphasized Malverde's character as narco's patron saint. Although it is undeniable that he is venerated by drug-traffickers, not all his devotees are linked to the drug industry. The cult of Malverde has been uprooted and rewritten to reflect the upheaval of the local population of Sinaloa (Quinones, 2001, p.230).⁵ The continental drug trade has led to the transformation of this peripheral region into one of the central hubs for illicit business. Sinaloa was the cradle of opium cultivation in the early 20th century, but demand from the US for its medical use during World War II transformed Sinaloa into a strategic point for the production and transport of drugs. Consequently, the regional economy was reorganized around this illegal business, and local farmers gradually adapted to this transnational current and established a powerful cartel that administrated the drug market in northwestern Mexico.

Ironically, the development of the drug business clearly stems from a stealthy transnational economic project implemented by the official order, despite prohibitionist anti-drug policies. Hence the drug business in Sinaloa is destined to have a complex and conflicting relationship with legality (Astorga, 1996, p.20). For Sinaloa and its residents, this condition is perceived as "original sin" that has cast this region under the shadows and made it difficult for residents to live within the legal system and appeal to it when necessary. Despite corrupt authorities including federal government and local police being furtively complicit in drug trafficking, association with the drug industry is still heavily stigmatized. Those involved benefit economically but at the same time are trapped in the wave of violence that accompanies the transnational drug industry, which has constructed a landscape of bloody competition among the cartels as well as increasing tension with the law. No man emerges from this battleground unscathed, from low-level *gomeros* (growers) and minor traffickers to powerful kingpins. In fact, no resident of Sinaloa, regardless of their involvement in the drug related business, is immune to the threat of assault, kidnapping, and assassination that has overshadowed the region.

Life in Sinaloa does not follow any "natural" logic but is driven by the logic of the "war on drugs." The savage battles for control and dominance over the illicit market, unpredictable but ubiquitous, have entangled the region in a web of chaos, terror, and casualties. This situation, unlike a real war, is particularly tragic due to the indiscriminate violence that constantly interrupts the daily life of citizens. Sinaloa is the privileged place of narcotrafficking within the national and global

context and this everyday war consolidates a culture of death (Gómez Michel and Park, 2014, p.209). As a local symbol, Malverde represents the prevailing precariousness of the region. He is appropriated as the religious icon in the process of reconciling this region's "original sin." People of Sinaloa share with him the fate of living outside the law and staying in the margins of Mexican society. They plead for salvation that can only come from a supernatural and divine force and, to receive a saint's grace, healing, and protection, they strategically grant Malverde patron-sainthood, the role of mediator between the heaven and earth. Their devotion to Malverde is connected to a communal strategy that attempts to evade imminent and premature death.

It is worth clarifying that even though devotional veneration to Malverde is a part of "narcoculture," Malverde is not a saint exclusively to drug traffickers. Since the protective function of Malverde lies at the heart of his cult following, his cultural influence is extended to the regions and communities across the continent entrenched in the booming informal economy and drug-related violence. In this way, this local saint acquires transnational resonance and draws a new spiritual map of folk religiosity. Malverde performs the dual function of maintaining ties to the Christian tradition while also embracing a range of elements that lie outside of Catholic dogma (Creechan and Herrán-García, 2005, p.8). This strange interweavement of criminality and religiosity in his portrayal embodies the people's desire to call for care of and attention to the marginalized. The cult of Malverde thus attempts to compensate for the ignorance and neglect of official institutions. Among his devotees, Malverde has become an integral complementary figure to the Catholic Church, reshaping the religious landscape of Mexico and beyond.

La Santa Muerte

While the transformation of Jesús Malverde as a folk saint tells the local history of the birth of the drug world and a cry for public attention throughout the 20th century, Santa Muerte is a relatively new unofficial saint. The very name Santa Muerte, which means "Holy Death" in Spanish, explains much about her identity.⁶ Santa Muerte is depicted as a skeleton female figure clad in a long robe, holding a scythe and a globe like the grim reaper. The color of her clothes and the flowers, candles, and other accessories that adorn the icon vary widely from devotee to devotee and according to the region. Her origin can be traced to the 20th century, with Oscar Lewis' classic of Mexican anthropology, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*,

being the first to mention her worshipers (1961, p.306). However, from the beginning of the 21st century, the clandestine status of La Santa Muerte has quickly evolved. Santa Muerte had her public debut when homemaker turned religious crusader Enriqueta Romero initiated a large shrine for her in the street of her Tepito neighborhood, known to be the informal market for illegal trade and drug trafficking (Villamil Uriarte and Cisneros, 2011, p.35). Santa Muerte became even more famous through a massive public street ceremony in Mexico City and has now reached an unprecedented popularity and following. Although condemned and sanctioned by mainstream churches, it is estimated that Santa Muerte currently has millions of worshipers in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and the southwestern US.

Interestingly, this saint addresses in her celebrated name a direct connection with death. In *The Idea of Death in Mexico*, anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz explores Mexicans' changing perceptions of death and the afterlife from the Spanish Conquest to modern day. Interwoven with the religious cultures of Catholicism and indigenous worldviews,⁷ the notion of death has been deliberately designed by those in power to effectively govern and subjugate the poor, who are trained to accept and even embrace their vulnerable condition that lies close to death (Lomnitz, 2005, p.83). *El día de los muertos* (The day of the dead) is one of the examples in which Mexicans intertwine life and death and intermingle with the dead in their everyday life. Lomnitz views death as a national totem in Mexico. From this perspective, he argues that the cult of Santa Muerte is a contemporary resurgence of this close relationship with death—however, unlike the past, it highlights the complete disappearance of the role of the state as the defender of the population. Instead what has emerged is the idea of the neoliberal penal state. Loic Wacquant (2009, p.8) argues the global trend of “zero tolerance” on crime—including smuggling, piracy, drug dealing and minor delinquency—emphasizes punishing the misconduct of the disposed concentrated in marginalized neighborhoods, while reducing assistance to the poor. He notes that Mexico City is no exception. Police officers routinely inspect passers-by; street vendors have been forced out through frequent raids on informal markets. Bars and nightclubs have sprung up rampantly in the more notorious areas around the historic center as well as in the outdoor markets. The result of massive crackdowns by the government to address the general public's perception of escalating crime rates has been an increase in the prison population.

It is therefore no coincidence that those in marginalized sectors seek care and protection that they cannot find in the official system. Santa

Muerte was reborn in the context of insecurity, anxiety, and state violence. She was first adopted by the prisoners as their patron saint, and her following expanded throughout prisons including prison officers and police. She serves as the bridge between prison-torn families by connecting prisoners with their family outside, who pray to her for their imprisoned family member's health and safety. For this reason, she is considered by the worshipers as a family member. It is not difficult to find the shrines to this skeleton saint in the streets of Mexico City's Tepito area. Her devotees also set private altars in their home adorned with candles and colorful flowers around her icon to foster an even more intimate relationship with her. Santa Muerte has a special association with prisoners and their families, yet this skeleton saint has taken on other important roles as she has gained more popularity among the urban poor. She acts as a supernatural healer, love doctor, money-maker, and angel of death. This flexibility of her powers reflects her detachment from the official circuits of the State and Catholic Church—she is only subject to individual needs (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 2015, p.106). Santa Muerte is an embodiment of the variety of dreams, hopes, and demands from those of low socioeconomic class spanning the urban poor, immigrants, blue-collar workers, and minority races.

Considering that most prisoners are males, it is also significant to note that the death saint appears as a female figure. Worshipers call her mother (*madrecita*) and godmother (*conmadre*), among others, but also baby girl (*nena*) and sister (*hermana* and *manita*), which is popularly used in Mexico to address one's youngest sister. As a result, Santa Muerte is not limited to a singular character and her familial position is not fixed. For some worshipers, she becomes a judicial policeman to hinder them from crime and foul behavior like drinking, smoking, and negligence. In other cases, this saint has a flair for expensive clothes and fine food to decorate around her statue and shrine. She is considered benevolent and merciful when hearing of her devotee's fears, anxieties, and sadness. Yet some devotees believe she is easily angered and may punish them severely if betrayed. Anthropologist Regnar Kristensen points out that Santa Muerte takes on a more capricious character than ordinary folk saints. Her multiple characters that may appear contradictory embody the diverse female roles in the family. Indeed, these characters somewhat reflect stereotypes of Mexican women. She is portrayed as a "typical temperamental female while also fulfilling the traditional trope of the self-sacrificing, silent woman promoted in the notion of *marianismo*." (Kristensen, 2015, p.558)⁸

Accordingly, her multiple characters lead to the reproduction of ambiguous roles within social relations. As a female member who is

humble, merciful, and benevolent, she contributes to the reunification of the family by paying attention to other members' difficulties, sharing their emotions and providing them with kinship and comfort. If betrayed and neglected, La Santa is transformed into the icon of vengeance who is thought to punish the wrong-doers severely without tolerance or forgiveness. Her conflicting characters as peaceful but violent, an affectionate protector of family but also a potential castigator, heroine but potential demon makes her a powerful friend for families. Her diabolic energy is taken advantage of by her devotees, who ask her for protection and at times plead for her favor to perform black spells and seek revenge on their neighbors, competitors, and enemies.

Andrew Chesnut's study shows that her worshipers use different colored candles depending on their request. For example, red candles indicate the skeleton saint's role as love doctor; golden candles refer to her role as job finder and angel of economic prosperity; black votive candles indicate a desire to harm others. This demonstrates the variegated nature of the cult of Santa Muerte. Yet, at the same time, Chesnut underscores the fact that the black candle of crime and punishment outshines the other colors (Chesnut, 2012, p.187). Worshipers not only pray to resolve concrete issues in the family, but to curse other people by repeating "death to my enemies," which can lead to an exacerbation of tension and conflict in real life. Since her role is not limited to protective work but includes punishment and vengeance, Holy Death may also bring negative social effects to communities.

In this sense, Santa Muerte carries a double-edged sword. She embodies the ambiguous modern Mexican family wherein the distinction between good and evil, friend and enemy, formal and informal, has become blurred since "people often find themselves forced to operate on both sides of the moral chasm in the everyday" (Kristensen, 2015, p.564). Their prayers seek an end to the logic of premature death from the war on drugs. Yet, at the same time, when people take advantage of Santa Muerte to apply the logic of death to other individuals, this religious practice leads to the reinforcement of an incessant chain of violence and fear. Therefore, the cult of Santa Muerte continues to raise ethical dilemmas and moral discussion on whether this following is merely an alternative practice of spirituality or a dangerous occult practice entangled with the world of crime.

Living with death or postponing death?

The devotion of folk saints demonstrates that religiosity is inseparable from social change and cultural transformation. The current social climate driven by the logic of premature death is deeply present in people's everyday life, casting a constant threat of danger and sense of insecurity. The western concept of *Memeto Mori* ("remember that you will die") was introduced in the Americas during colonial times and has since been interwoven with ancient indigenous cosmology and historically modified by the state, which has appropriated death to effectively govern its population. As a result, Mexicans live side-by-side with death, infusing death into everyday life and celebrating it as a harmonious state of existence. However, the extreme insecurity that Mexican society faces through its ever-growing drug violence has placed this cultural tradition in jeopardy and made its population create new religious practices. Unofficial saints are born when they take on the role of patron saint for those who were cast aside in the neoliberal transformation and excluded from the official system. And the rise of new folk saints has divided public opinion between stigmatization and celebration.

Malverde and Santa Muerte are considered representative folk saints in 21st century Mexico. Both share the role of performing miracles for their devotees who are forced to live with death yet desperately want to postpone it. However, apart from the fact that La Santa is physically more aggressive symbol than that of Malverde, there is a crucial difference in terms of their characters. Malverde's role focuses on the healing of damaged spirituality by lending an ear to the difficulties and hardships of worshipers. While Malverde solely provides mercy and forgiveness, Santa Muerte appears as an ambiguous and even contradictory figure. She is affectionate yet punishes and seeks revenge if betrayed. She also uses violent power to curse and perform black magic toward enemies. Her name has often become associated with the drug world as traffickers seek her power to fight against their rivals or the government officials. It is in this sense that although her character remains ambivalent, it is virtually impossible to avoid at least some condemnation of Santa Muerte. Her devotional practice is accused of intensifying violence and aggravating the existing volatile social landscape rather than spreading a message of peace and solace. The media demonizes folk saints and the Catholic Church forbids their worship. The Mexican government have demolished nearly 40 shrines devoted to Santa Muerte on the US–Mexico border since 2009.

Nonetheless, to forbid worship and criminalize followers may not be the solution. The cult of unofficial saints reminds us of the polarization within Mexican society and the problematic marginalization of the poor, who tend to be abandoned by the state and excluded from civil society. Malverde and Santa Muerte are witnesses to bare life in contemporary Mexico. It is critical to examine the cult of folk saints as a reaction to the crisis of the state and explore its significance as an alternative answer to the prevailing culture of death. The future of this new religious movement appears bleak because it is difficult to separate it completely from the world of violence. However, it offers important insights into tenacious ways the people of Mexico wrestle with necro-power, endure pervasive fear and terror, and fight against the dehumanized conditions of life, even in the darkest hours.

Notes

- ¹ One of the main contributions that Foucault brought into the realm of modern politics is to highlight the negative function of modern state and its institutions, which at first glance are operating under the consent of its population but are used by the dominant power to achieve control over it. The regulatory devices and disciplines in modern democracy are the essential technique of governing the subject, replacing dictatorship and autocracy. For him death threat is outdated and no more efficient, and thereby it is excluded from the possible strategies of contemporary politics.
- ² *Plaza* system is crucial to understanding the contemporary Mexican drug war. Since 1970 narcotrafficking had formerly been integrated into the PRI corporatist state, an under-the-table equivalent of labor, peasant, and business organizations. Thus it was subject to a certain degree of regulatory control and to unofficial taxation in return for the de facto licensing of smuggling. However, the abandonment of this furtive structure with the introduction of the PAN government contributed to the independent growth and power of organized crime syndicates followed by their conflictive relation with the state and local police.
- ³ In covering an increasing drug business and violence, the mainstream media tends to underscore the failure of state that has lost control over the illegal organizations and cartels. Yet, this perspective often leads to an easy conclusion in which Mexican government should recover its power and sovereignty on the civil society.
- ⁴ Malverde in Spanish literally means “bad green.” In fact, *verde* can refer to the green of marijuana, as well as the green of dollar bills. He appears as a mustached middle-aged man in a white suit, showing he is an ordinary man like his devotees.
- ⁵ Literary representations of Malverde also focus on the locality of this folk saint. *The Horseman of the Divine Providence* (Oscar Liera, 1984), *Every Breath You Take* (Elmer Mendoza, 1991), *The Queen of the South* (Arturo Pérez-Reverte, 2002) and *The Curse of Malverde* (Leónidas Alfaro Bedolla, 2004), among others, draw Malverde’s origin and character in association with local history of the state of Sinaloa by highlighting that this patron saint is dedicated especially to this region.
- ⁶ Santa Muerte has various nicknames such as Skinny Lady (*la Flaquita*), Pretty Girl (*la Niña Bonita*), White Girl (*la Niña Blanca*), and Bony Lady (*la Huesuda*). Her

devotees sometimes refer to her as a “cabrona,” which is equivalent to “battle-ax” in English, to express their identification and intimate relation with this unofficial saint.

- ⁷ Perla Fragoso attempts to see the origin of Santa Muerte from the pre-Hispanic tradition and religious practices (2011, p.6). In Mesoamerica there had been a long history of the cult of death that unlike Judeo-Christian culture was not the end of earthly life, rather a part of the circle of constant renovation. In this sense the cult of Santa Muerte can be understood as an example of Latin American syncretism that inscribes indigenous cosmology and ideas in western Christianity.
- ⁸ Santa Muerte is secular and profane rather than sacred although her figure represents modern day sanctity. Therefore, unlike the Virgin Guadalupe who maintains a coherent image of generosity and mercy, the uncanny combination of contradictory female elements provides her with a special position in the Mexican religious landscape.

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