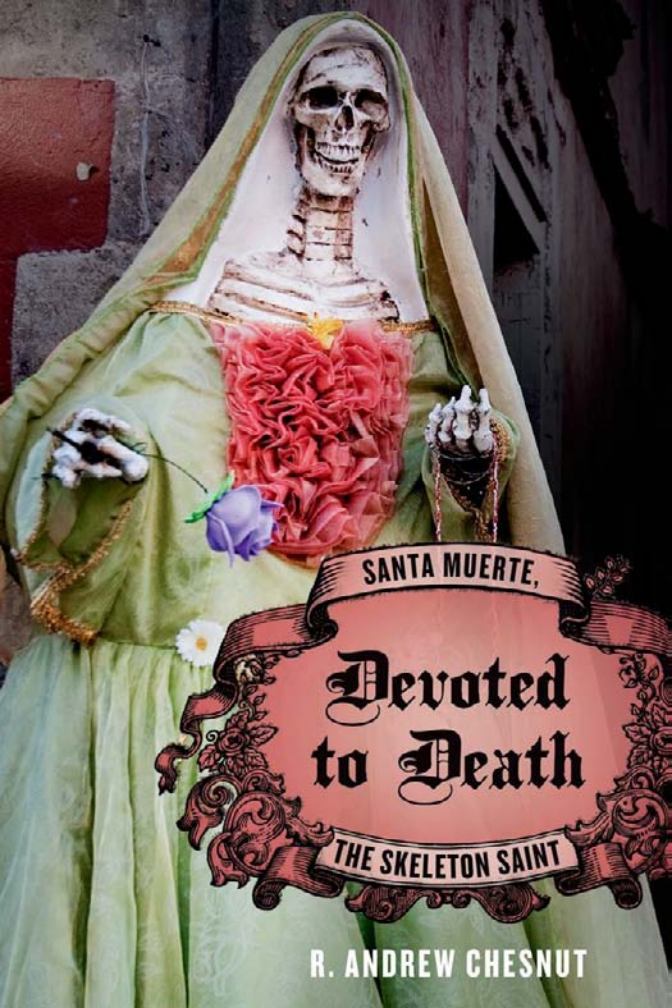
SANTA MUERTE,
Devoted to Death
THE SKELETON SAINT
R. ANDREW CHESNUT

DEVOTED TO DEATH

This page intentionally left blank

DEVOTED TO DEATH

Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint

R. Andrew Chesnut

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Chesnut, R. Andrew.
Devoted to death : Santa Muerte, the skeleton saint / R. Andrew Chesnut.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-19-976466-2 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-19-976465-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Death—Religious aspects. 2. Grim Reaper (Symbolic character) 3. Death (Personification) I. Title.
BL504.C44 2011
202′.30972—dc22 2011009177

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book wouldn't have been possible without the collaboration of numerous individuals and support from my university. First and foremost are the tens of devotees who freely discussed their faith in Santa Muerte with me. Before beginning to conduct interviews for the first time, during the summer of 2009, I was unsure how I would be received by devotees, who for a number of reasons might be suspicious of a gringo researcher. My fears, however, were quickly allayed as one Santa Muertista after another candidly talked to me about their devotion to the skeleton saint.

Their high level of cooperation is probably in part because of the collaboration of the cult's founding mother, Enriqueta Romero. Doña Queta, as she's affectionately known, graciously allowed me to interview scores of devotees at her famous Mexico City shrine. As the pioneer of the cult of Saint Death, she also shared valuable information on the founding and development of the cult with me. My stepson, Eric Martinez, took many good pictures at the shrine in Tepito.

A few miles away from Doña Queta's shrine, David Romo, founder and head priest of the first Santa Muerte church, generously gave me over two hours of his time, during which he recounted the

church's struggle with the Mexican government and Catholic Church, among other things. As this book goes to press, the self-styled archbishop and his wife have just been arrested in Mexico City and are charged with belonging to a kidnapping ring. Also in Mexico City, the novelist and environmentalist Homero Aridjis and his daughter Eva, an accomplished filmmaker, candidly discussed their observations about the cult.

In Morelia, Michoacán, a number of individuals made invaluable contributions to my research. My nephew, Roberto, gave me a firsthand account of devotion to Saint Death in the state penitentiary where he works as a guard. At Guillermo's esoterica store, Guillermina was a treasure trove of information on the cult in Morelia and Michoacán in general. She generously allowed me to interview her clients in the shop, and she even encouraged some of them to talk to me after purchasing Santa Muerte products. On the outskirts of town, Saint Death shaman Vicente Pérez Ramos gave me a detailed tour of his home shrine, Morelia's most elaborate, and shared the most original myth of the saint's origins that I have come across. My brother-in-law Gerardo kindly lent me his car for my Santa Muerte road trip through southern Mexico during the summer of 2010.

On Michoacán's Pacific coast, in the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, two other family members aided me with my research. My sister-in-law Angelica graciously allowed me to interview her dental patients as they sat in the waiting room before their appointments. A surprisingly high percentage of her patients were either current or former devotees. Her son Alfredo accompanied me to several shrines both in Lázaro Cárdenas and Morelia.

Here in the United States a number of individuals helped bring the book project to fruition. In Los Angeles, Santa Muerte shaman Guadalupe Santiago gave me unfettered access to his temple and revealed new rituals to me. Interim LAPD chief Michael Downing took time out of his busy schedule to meet with me just two days

before Christmas. My former graduate student Scott Pridie, a law enforcement agent, provided me with rare photos of Santa Muerte altars in Houston.

Several colleagues across the country collaborated in significant ways. Candy Brown made useful comments on the manuscript. Philip Jenkins suggested some catchy book titles and emailed me every bit of relevant news, just minutes after they appeared on the Internet. Frank Graziano provided me with research contacts in Argentina and helped me contextualize Saint Death. Across the ocean, in Denmark, Regnar Kristensen shared the findings of his own research with me.

My parents, Robert and Janet Chesnut, also provided useful commentary on the manuscript, and my father came up with the euphonious title. I am deeply indebted to them for their unconditional support throughout the years. My sister graciously allowed me to include her own experience with the White Girl in the book.

At Oxford, my editor, Cynthia Read, and her assistant, Charlotte Steinhardt, enthusiastically supported the project from its inception. Generous research support was provided under the auspices of the Bishop Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Also at VCU, Executive Associate Dean Catherine Ingrassia generously granted me a semester of research leave. All translations from the Spanish are my own.

Finally, my deepest gratitude to my wife, Fabiola, who collaborated in so many ways, most importantly by taking hundreds, if not thousands, of photos of the cult and its devotees. I thus dedicate *Devoted to Death* to her, "*mi flaquita*."

This page intentionally left blank

DEVOTED TO DEATH

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction: Blue Candle

Insight and Concentration

BECKONED BY THE BONY LADY, AKA SAINT DEATH

Some people become devotees on their own initiative, actively seeking out Santa Muerte upon the recommendation of friends or family members. Others receive an unexpected call or visit from the Skinny Lady (*la Flaquita*, one of her many nicknames) in which she offers to solve their problems. Such was my own path to the skeleton saint, a surprise visit in the spring of 2009. For several years I had been doing research on the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint. I had decided to study her as I neared completion of my second book. As a specialist in the religions of Latin America, I wanted to tackle a monumental topic for my next book project. As empress of all the Americas and queen of Mexico, the mestiza Virgin towers over the region's religious landscape. Of course fellow researchers and devotees had already written many books and articles on her, but I was sure there was still much to say about the world's most important avatar of the Virgin Mary. But as the semesters passed, first at the University of Houston and then at Virginia Commonwealth University, my enthusiasm for the project waned. The kind of passion that had driven my previous research and writing just wasn't there, and I wasn't sure why.

It was in this context of research malaise in the early spring of 2009 that the Bony Lady (*la Huesuda*, another common nickname)

appeared on my laptop and summoned me to contemplate her. More specifically, it was the news of a military assault against her on the U.S.-Mexican border that ultimately led me to replace Guadalupe with a figure who at first glance seemed to be her antithesis, a sort of anti-Virgin. In late March the Mexican army demolished some forty Santa Muerte shrines on the Mexican border with California and Texas, mostly on the outskirts of Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo. Army bulldozers had leveled the very same roadside altars that we had passed numerous times on our long road trips from Houston to Morelia, state capital of Michoacán and my wife's hometown. I started making the eighteen-hour drive in 2006 and noticed that on each subsequent trip the number of makeshift roadside altars on the main highway linking Nuevo Laredo and Monterrey had multiplied. The crude concrete shrines, often obscured by the SUVs and pickups of the devotees, were our signpost on the return trip, letting us know that the Texas border was just a half an hour or so away. What on earth had Saint Death done, I wondered, to deserve such an aggressive desecration of her holy sites at the hands of the Mexican government?

As images of her shrines reduced to rubble flickered across my computer screen, I had an epiphany. My flagging passion for research on Guadalupe would be replaced by a quest to understand why the Mexican government had declared Santa Muerte a virtual enemy of the state. More broadly, I would seek to discover why in less than a decade devotion to her had grown so much that her popularity now eclipses every other saint in Mexico except Saint Jude. Never one to balk at an epiphany, I turned my back on the Virgin and decided to stare Saint Death straight in the face. What follows is my attempt to explain why devotion to Santa Muerte has transformed from an occult practice, unknown to most Mexicans, to a burgeoning public cult that counts millions of devotees in Mexico and the United States among its followers.

Figure I.1 The White Girl in white, Santa Muerte chapel, Santa Ana Chapitiro, Michoacán.

DEATH ENCOUNTERED

Some readers will have come across the White Girl (*la Niña Blanca*, another popular sobriquet) on trips to Mexico, while others will have encountered her as decals on cars and trucks or as votive candles in supermarkets in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, and other cities with large Mexican immigrant communities. But most, I suspect, are meeting the Godmother (*la Madrina,* also a common moniker) for the first time. I ask those already familiar with her to

bear with me as I briefly introduce her to who have not encountered Saint Death before.

As her name would indicate, Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint who personifies death. Whether as a plaster statue or on a votive candle, gold medallion, or prayer card she is most often depicted as a female Grim Reaper, wielding the same scythe and wearing a shroud similar to her male counterpart. Unlike official saints, who have been canonized by the Catholic Church, folk saints are spirits of the dead considered holy for their miracle-working powers. In Mexico and Latin America in general such folk saints as Niño Fidencio, Jesús Malverde, Maximón, and San La Muerte (the Argentine counterpart of Santa Muerte) command widespread devotion and are often sought out more than the official saints.

The great majority of folk saints, unlike the official ones, were born and died on Latin American soil. Niño Fidencio, for example, was a *curandero* (folk healer) in early twentieth-century Mexico, while Pedro Batista led a religious commune in the backlands of Brazil during the same period. Thus folk saints are united to their devotees by nationality and often by both locality and social class. A Mexico City street vendor explained the appeal of Santa Muerte to her, saying, "She understands us because she is a battle-ax [*cabrona*] like us." In contrast, Mexicans would never refer to the Virgin of Guadalupe as a *cabrona*, which is also often used to mean "bitch." Where the Skinny Lady differs from other folk saints, including the skeleton saints of Argentina (San La Muerte) and Guatemala (Rey Pascual), is that for most devotees she is the personification of death itself and not of a deceased human being.

The very name Santa Muerte says much about her identity. *La muerte* means death in Spanish and is a feminine noun (denoted by the feminine article "la") as it is in all Romance languages. A few casual observers of the White Girl have erroneously attributed her female identity to the feminine gender of the word "la muerte" in

Spanish. However, the fact that both the Guatemalan and Argentine saints of death are male figures shows there must be other explanations for the saint's female identity. In any case, she and the Argentine San La Muerte are the only saints in the Americas that actually include the word "death" in their names. For devotees and nonbelievers alike, it is obvious that the hollow stare of the skeleton saint is the gaze of death.

"Santa," the first part of her name, is also revealing. It is the feminine version of "santo," which can be translated as "saint" or "holy," depending on the usage. For example, *Espíritu Santo* is translated as Holy Spirit, while Santa Bárbara becomes Saint Barbara. While many bloggers refer to the White Sister (*la Hermana Blanca,* yet another popular nickname) as Holy Death in English, I think Saint Death is a more accurate translation, which better reveals her identity as a folk saint. Santa Muerte is first and foremost an unofficial saint who heals, protects, and delivers devotees to their destinations in the afterlife. The word "holy" expresses her sacredness but lacks the personification implied by the term "saint." Having said this, there is a variant of her name, Santísima Muerte, which is best translated as "Most Holy Death." The difference here is the Spanish superlative suffix "-isima." Devotees tend to call her "Santisma Muerte" in their rituals such as the Santa Muerte rosary. Thus her name, Santa Muerte, and her myriad nicknames neatly reveal her identity as a female folk saint who personifies death. Readers who speak Spanish will know that the "San" (an abbreviation of the masculine "santo") in San La Muerte denotes the male identity of the Argentine saint.

No introduction to Saint Death would be complete without brief consideration of one of her most unique characteristics—her gender. While folk saints abound in the Americas, and other supernatural skeletons work miracles in Guatemala and Argentina, Santa Muerte stands alone as the sole female saint of death from Chile to Canada. Her asexual skeletal form contains no hint of femaleness. Rather, it is

her attire and, to a lesser extent, her hair that mark the saint as female. Devotees and manufacturers of mass-produced images of the Bony Lady usually dress her as a nun, the Virgin, a bride, or a queen. Red and black medieval tunics, white bridal gowns, and flowing bright colored satin robes normally cover her skeletal body, leaving only her bony hands, feet, and face exposed.

Like her male counterparts, San La Muerte and Rey Pascual, the Godmother typically sports a bald skull. However, following the lead of the great devotional pioneer Enriqueta Romero (affectionately known as Doña Queta), many devotees adorn their statuettes with brown and black wigs. In fact, one enterprising Santa Muertista runs a thriving business in Mexico City where devotees bring their statuettes to be dressed and coiffed so they look like the Pretty Girl (*la Niña Bonita,* yet another sobriquet). But more than just a Pretty Girl, Santa Muerte is most importantly the Powerful Lady (*la Dama Poderosa*) whose miracle-working skills make her the most potent of Mexican folk saints and a rival of the national patroness, Guadalupe.

DEATH'S DEVOTEES

It is precisely her reputation for being a prompt and efficacious miracle worker that has propelled the meteoric growth of her cult since 2001. A brief profile of the devotees of Saint Death will shed light on her tremendous popularity. Since her cult is generally informal and unorganized and only became public ten years ago, it is impossible to know exactly how many Mexicans and Mexican and Central American immigrants in the United States are among her devotees. The other great devotional pioneer, "Father" David Romo, founder of the first Santa Muerte church, in Mexico City, told me and members of the Mexican press, in separate interviews, that some five million Mexicans venerate the Angel of Death. When I questioned him about how he arrived at such a figure, he explained that he is in contact with believers throughout both Mexico and the

United States who give him estimates of the size of the cult in their cities, towns, and regions.

That approximately 5 percent of the Mexican population of 100 million would be devotees of Saint Death doesn't seem far-fetched in light of other evidence of her popularity. Sales of her paraphernalia (votive candles, figurines, prayer cards, etc.) at the thousands of shops (*hierberias* and *tiendas esotéricas*) and market stalls that sell religious articles, magic potions and powders, and "medicinal herbs" across Mexico and in many larger cities in the United States dwarf those of other saints. One shopkeeper after another told me that for the past five years or so clients have been buying more Saint Death products than anything else, including San Judas Tadeo (Saint Jude), one of the country's most popular saints. In Morelia, Guillermina, whose father owns three esoterica shops in town, stated that since 2004 the Skinny Lady has accounted for approximately half of the total sales at their three stores. She occupied much more shelf and floor space than any other saint at each of the dozens of shops and market stalls I visited in the summers of 2009 and 2010. And the street vendors who sell a colorful array of goods to motorists stuck in traffic waiting to cross the border into the United States offer far more figurines of Santa Muerte than any other saint, even Guadalupe. Finally, the monthly worship service, called the "rosary," at Doña Queta's landmark shrine in the rough-and-tumble Mexico City barrio of Tepito, attracts several thousand faithful.

For the past five years the Bony Lady has been accompanying her devotees in their crossings into the United States and has established herself along the two-thousand-mile-long border and in cities with Mexican immigrant communities. Unsurprisingly, it is border towns such as El Paso, Brownsville, and Laredo where evidence of her cult is strongest. Her Grim Reapress image, in the form of black and white decals, rides on the back windows (often darkly tinted) of countless pickups and SUVs, announcing both the occupants' devotion and

her growing presence. At the same type of religious paraphernalia shops as those found in Mexico, merchants along the gritty border do a brisk business selling Santa Muerte incense, lotions, and, above all, votive candles. Almost all of the TV news coverage of her rapidly increasing cult in this country has been provided by local stations in these border cities. As one might imagine, these news reports tend to be sensationalistic, playing up Saint Death's alleged ties to drug trafficking, murder, and even human sacrifice.

North of the border area the Godmother hears the prayers and petitions of Mexican and (to a lesser extent) Central American immigrants who ask her for the favor of getting ahead in their new land. Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, and New York, with their large Mexican and Central American communities, are obvious places to find the Powerful Lady protecting her faithful. Home to the largest Mexican immigrant population in the country, Los Angeles is the American Mecca of the cult of the skeleton saint. In addition to at least two religious-article stores bearing her name (Botanica Santa Muerte and Botanica De La Santa Muerte), the City of Angels offers devotees two temples where they can thank the Angel of Death for miracles granted or ask her for the favors of health, wealth, and love. Casa de Oracion de la Santisma Muerte (Most Holy Death House of Prayer) and Templo Santa Muerte (Temple Saint Death) stand alone as the only two temples dedicated to her cult in the country. The latter offers "masses," weddings, baptisms, and rosary and healing services. The gothic-inspired Templo Santa Muerte website (http://templosantamuerte.com) broadcasts devotional music and some of the masses.

Houston, where I lived for eleven years, doesn't have any public houses of worship yet, but the White Sister appears on votive candles and packages of incense, among other products, on hundreds of shelves at local supermarkets and religious-article shops. In June of 2009, as I was exiting the parking lot of Fiesta (a large local supermarket chain catering to Latinos, especially Mexicans) in central

Houston, I spotted a four-feet-tall white statue of the saint riding in the bed of a late-model Ford pickup. The truck's tinted rear window also sported a decal of Most Holy Death. Devotees in the Bayou City can choose from at least three religious-article shops that bear Santa Muerte's name.

Beyond these big cities, devotees and the curious can even find the skeleton saint in towns with relatively small Mexican immigrant communities. When I got the call to write this book I was sure that I wouldn't be able to find her in my new hometown of Richmond, Virginia. Unlike Houston and Los Angeles, where Latinos make up half the population, the capital of Virginia can't even claim a population of 10 percent. Nonetheless, to my great surprise I found both votive candles and even statuettes of the Pretty Girl in two mini-marts in a part of town that is not predominantly Latino. The Salvadoran clerk at the grocery store catering to her *paisanos* (compatriots) eyed me suspiciously (probably thinking of the DEA, ICE, or FBI) when I asked her about sales of Santa Muerte votive candles and statuettes, but she nevertheless revealed that the former sell well, much better than the more expensive plastic figurines. Across the street at Bodega Latina, which caters more to Mexicans, the affable young clerk from Guadalajara didn't seem to take me for an agent of the law and enthusiastically reported that the votive candles sell very well and that she sees more signs of devotion to Saint Death in Richmond than in Guadalajara. My wife, who was with me at the time, and I both suspected that she hadn't been back to Mexico for a while. In any case, over the past five years, the Skinny Lady has accompanied tens of thousands of her devoted followers across the border and into the big cities and smaller towns of this country, wherever they try to make a new life for themselves.

Santa Muerte has devoted followers from all walks of life. High school students, middle-class housewives, taxi drivers, drug traffickers, politicians, musicians, doctors, and lawyers all are among the ranks of

the faithful. Rodrigo is a successful twentysomething lawyer whom I met at Doña Queta's famous shrine in Tepito. He was there with a white candle in hand to give thanks to the White Girl for freeing him from kidnappers. Also at Doña Queta's was Claudia, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, who became a believer in the saint's miraculous powers on the operating table. Before an operation for a lung infection, Claudia's surgeon gave her a statuette of the Powerful Lady and suggested that Claudia invoke her healing powers. Like so many others who come to the Tepito shrine, Claudia was there to give thanks to Santa Muerte for having been cured of an illness.

Because of her association with organized crime, especially drug trafficking and kidnapping, and condemnation by both Catholic and Protestant churches, more affluent believers tend to keep their devotion to the saint of death private. Home altars are where well-heeled devotees prefer performing the rituals that summon the saint to act on their behalf. According to Mexican novelist and intellectual Homero Aridjis, the Angel of Death had an ample following among high-ranking politicians, movie stars, drug lords, and even among higher-ups in the Catholic Church in the 1990s, before her cult went public. Aridjis includes a fictionalized account of attending a bacchanalian birthday bash in 2000 with such devotees in his recent novel *La Santa Muerte*. Niurka Marcos's 2004 wedding lends some credence to Aridjis's claims. The Cuban-born Mexican TV star had David Romo, founder of the first Santa Muerte church, perform her nuptials at an exclusive hacienda outside of Mexico City.[1]

Still, in a country whose citizens have an average educational level of eighth grade, the majority of devotees are taxi drivers, prostitutes, street vendors, housewives, and criminals drawn from Mexico's vast urban working class. Typical of most devotees is the godmother of the cult of Saint Death, Doña Queta. Before her historic act of displaying a life-size statue of the Grim Reapress in front of her home on All Saints

Day in 2001, Enriqueta Romero supplemented the family income by selling quesadillas to neighbors and passersby. Often wearing the blue-and-white checkered apron that is the quasi-uniform of working-class women in Mexico, Doña Queta has no more than an elementary school education. Her colorful blue-collar Spanish, liberally peppered with vulgarities, reflects the tough barrio, Mexico City's infamous Tepito, where drug gangs, kidnappers, prostitutes, and *contrabandistas* rule the streets. Doña Queta started off her Santa Muerte rosary ceremony in August 2009 with a warning to the faithful to return home quickly right after the end of the ritual lest they be accosted by "all the fucking thieves and thugs around." One of her seven sons did time in prison, and Doña Queta attributes his release to the divine intervention of her Beautiful Girl (*la Niña Hermosa*).

Nineteen-year-old Raquel, an unemployed high school dropout from the gritty outskirts of Mexico City, is another typical devotee. Looking anorexically thin when I interviewed her at Doña Queta's shrine, Raquel said she had became a devotee after the Powerful Lady appeared in the midst of a gang fight and pulled Raquel back a few steps at the very moment a switchblade was about to be thrust into her stomach. Raquel, like so many other believers, was at the famous Tepito shrine that day with a gold Santa Muerte votive candle. Before talking to me about her devotion she placed the lighted candle at the base of the altar, alongside scores of others, and asked the life-size skeleton saint standing behind the protective glass for a miracle of employment.

By all accounts, Raquel fits the normal profile of devotees in terms of sex and age. Unlike the United States, Mexico, with an average age of twenty-four, is a country of young people. The godparents of the cult, Doña Queta and David Romo, confirm that the majority of believers are teens or in their twenties and thirties. Likewise, both said they see more women and girls at their shrines than males. Father Romo stated that more than two-thirds of those who attend weekly services at his church are female. During the many days that I

hung out at Doña Queta's shrine interviewing devotees, I also noticed that about twice as many girls and women came to see the regally dressed saint.

Doña Queta's monthly rosary services, however, are practically all-male affairs. No more than 20 percent of devotees at the service in August 2009 were female. The most likely explanation for the dearth of women and girls is Tepito's notoriety as the Mexican capital's most crime-ridden barrio. Doña Queta's words of warning at the beginning of the service only confirmed such fears. Security concerns during the summer of 2009 compelled the cult's godmother to change the late-night monthly services to late afternoon. This way, devotees can make it out of the dangerous barrio before nightfall, thus avoiding nocturnal assailants.

DEATH OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Not so paradoxically, Santa Muerte has a special appeal to assailants and others who live on the margins of Mexican and American law. After all, the very origins of the public cult are tied to crime. Doña Queta's life-size effigy of the saint, which is the object of devotion of tens of thousand of *chilangos* (a slang term for residents of Mexico City) was a gift to her from one of her sons to thank the Powerful Lady for his speedy release from prison. Along with the infirm and pregnant women, "those in prison" are the object of special collective prayers at the monthly rosary service.

In Mexican, Texan, and Californian penitentiaries, the cult of the Bony Lady is so widespread that in many she is the leading object of devotion, surpassing Guadalupe and even Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. My nephew Roberto has been working as a guard at the maximum security state prison in Morelia for the past three years. Over a couple of beers in June 2009, Roberto not only detailed the devotion to Saint Death among prisoners but also painted a picture of an entire penal system involved in her veneration. Of the roughly 150 cells in the

prison, Roberto estimated that in approximately forty inmates had erected makeshift altars to the Powerful Lady whom they trusted could free them sooner rather than later. Lines of cocaine, prison moonshine (known as *turbo*), cigarettes, and marijuana joints figure among the common offerings at her altars. Offerings are also inked onto inmates' backs, chests, and arms by fellow prisoners who charge between four and thirty dollars per tattoo. Tattoos of the Angel of Death, according to Roberto, are more popular than ones of any other saint.

In addition to those who are there to serve time, many guards, social workers, and even attorneys belong to the cult of Santa Muerte. Roberto said that ten of his forty-eight fellow guards are devotees and that is it not uncommon to see lawyers and social workers at the prison sporting gold medallions of the saint on their chests. In such a dangerous workplace, full of drugs and prison shanks, one can imagine the appeal of supernatural protection offered by the Powerful Lady. In less than a decade she has become the patron saint of the Mexican penal system and is also increasingly popular in American prisons, especially in the Southwest and California.

Many of those yet to be caught for their crimes look to the Skinny Lady for supernatural protection from their enemies. The Santa Muerte votive candle that exclaims "Law, stay away!" (usually printed bilingually in Spanish and English) is found at shops throughout Mexico and the United States. Likewise, "Death unto my enemies," the seven-colored candle, sells well among those whose line of work brings them in close contact with death on a regular basis. Indeed, even before the astronomical growth of the cult initiated by Doña Queta, the godmother of devotion, the first exposure many Mexicans had to Santa Muerte was through the crime pages of the daily tabloids. After kidnapping more than twenty people in the 1990s and collecting more than 40 million dollars in ransom, Daniel Arizmendi López was arrested at his home in August 1998. Known as "el Mochaorejas" (the Ear Chopper) for his gruesome habit of

Figure I.2 "Death to my enemies," Santa Muerte votive candles, Santa Muerte temple, City of Puebla.

sending the severed ears of his victims to their family members, Arizmendi made even bigger headlines for his devotion to the then-almost-unknown saint of death. Mexican law enforcement agents discovered an altar to Saint Death at his home and bizarrely allowed him to take his statuette of her to prison where he could continue his devotion behind bars.[2] Thus, three years before Doña Queta initiated the public cult, one of the most infamous kidnappers in the country's history violently introduced Santa Muerte to the Mexican public.

Since then the White Girl has become a regular on the crime pages of Mexican tabloids and often makes the news reports of local TV stations on the border. Mexican and, increasingly, American police routinely discover Santa Muerte altars and devotional paraphernalia at the homes and in the possession of suspected criminals,

especially drug dealers. Mexican police arrested Angel Jacome Gamboa in March 2009, charging him with murdering twelve police officers in Rosarito Beach at the behest of his reputed boss, one of Tijuana's major organized crime figures. One of the hitman's weapons displayed to the press was a revolver with a gold embossed image of Santa Muerte on the handle. The saint of death couldn't have been any closer to the hired gun as he squeezed the trigger and dispatched his victims to her bony embrace.

Violence has also visited the major figures in the cult. Born and raised in Tepito, Comandante Pantera (Commander Panther) was a rising star among followers of the White Sister. On the hardscrabble outskirts of Mexico City, in Ecatepec, the young cult leader and motorcycle enthusiast, also known as Jonathan Legaria Vargas, erected a black, seventy-two-feet-tall statue of the saint. Even before construction on it was completed, the gargantuan effigy and its patron became embroiled in controversy. Municipal officials, alleging that it violated zoning laws, ordered Comandante Pantera to remove the impressive statue, which can be seen from one of the major avenues crossing the city. Ignoring the complaints of parents in the neighborhood who claimed their young children were so spooked by the larger-than-life skeleton saint that they couldn't sleep at night, Legaria not only refused to comply with municipal demands but hinted that violence might erupt if law enforcement agents attempted to forcibly remove the monumental statue. Both American and Mexican media gave ample coverage to the controversy and its charismatic protagonist. Devotees and curious residents flocked to the temple grounds in Ecatepec to get a firsthand look at the "world's largest Santa Muerte statue."

Violence, but not the kind that Comandante Pantera had in mind, struck in the early morning hours of July 31, 2008. The Bony Lady came for one of her most prominent devotees just a few minutes after he had finished his late-night radio program dedicated to her devotion. Several gunmen sprayed Legaria's Cadillac Escalade

with almost two hundred bullets, some fifty of which struck the twenty-six-year-old cult leader, killing him instantly. Saint Death spared his two female companions, who were critically wounded but survived. Such overkill is typical of drug-related assassinations, but like so many other homicide cases in Mexico, more than a year afterward it remained unsolved.[3]

Another unsolved cult-related murder, allegedly involving human sacrifice, compelled its devotional godfather, David Romo, to literally change the face of death, or at least the image of her venerated at his church. In early 2007 assassins working for the Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico's most powerful drug syndicates, murdered three handcuffed men in front of a Santa Muerte shrine on the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo. Well aware that the shrine-side murders could be interpreted as an act of human sacrifice, Romo took almost immediate action to distance his Saint Death church (Iglesia Santa Católica Apostólica Tradicional Mex-USA) from what he regarded as a horrific sacrilege, an abomination of the faith.

Just a few months after the executions in Laredo, the articulate and politically savvy priest of Saint Death unveiled a radically new image of her at his temple in the Morelos district of Mexico City. A life-size statue of a beautiful brunette angel with a porcelain complexion and feathered wings replaced the traditional skeleton saint in the main sanctuary. Romo baptized the new icon as the "Angel of Death" and asked church members to replace their images of the Bony Lady with the pretty new face of death. Three years later the rest of the church remains filled with figurines, paintings, and votive candles of death in her skeletal form and the sales booths, both inside and outside the temple, sell almost nothing but images of the Grim Reapress depicted in her traditional skeletal form. Romo blamed the lack of Angel of Death paraphernalia on vendors who aren't interested in proffering the new image when the old one sells so well.

SEVEN COLORS OF CANDLES OF DEATH

Thus in just ten years Santa Muerte has become one of the most important religious figures among millions of Mexicans from all walks of life and thousands of Mexican and Central American immigrants in this country. While there is no denying her special appeal to those who live, work, and die in the criminal underworld, including law enforcement agents, one of the main objectives of this book is to consider the saint of death in her fascinating totality. If we were to focus solely on the black votive candle, representing the dark side of devotion, we would be ignoring the even more popular red, white, and gold ones, which are lighted by devotees for purposes far removed from crime and punishment.

With its rainbow shades, the powerful seven-color candle neatly captures the Powerful Lady's multihued identity. This candle, among the better selling ones, is offered by devotees to their saint when they are looking for supernatural intervention on multiple fronts. The one I bought in Morelia, which ended up on my desk next to the printer, typifies the many purposes of the colorful candle. Framed by a border of fourteen white skulls, the likeness of Saint Death on the front of the candle jar holds balanced scales, representing justice and stability. In crude dripping type, recalling the blood-scrawled messages on the walls in American horror flicks, the base of the candle, just beneath her tunic, reads *MUERTE CONTRA MIS ENEMIGOS* (death unto my enemies).

On a somewhat lighter note, the prayer to the Pretty Girl on the reverse side of the multicolored candle doubles as both a specific petition to bring back a wayward husband or boyfriend and as a general request for protection and favors. With unfaithful male partners in mind, the prayer begins, "I want you (Santa Muerte) to deliver (John Doe) to me humbled at my feet so that he lives up to his promises." It ends on a grand scale. "I beg that you agree to be my protectress and that you grant me all the favors that I ask of you till my last day, hour,

and second." In a single rainbow-colored ritual object the Godmother dispatches justice, restores balance, neutralizes enemies, returns unfaithful men, and grants myriad favors. Consideration of the full spectrum of colors of votive candles, and not just black, will allow for a richer understanding of the dramatic rise of the cult of Saint Death over the past decade.

Colored votive candles, among the most important of ritual objects, provide a natural organizational framework for the book. In the cult of Santa Muerte each color symbolizes an important aspect of her spiritual work with devotees. For example, we have already seen that black candles are associated with the dark side of the saint, typically lighted and placed at her altar for works of vengeance, harm, and protection from "black magic" and enemies. Accordingly, each chapter will explore a different colored votive candle and the facet of the cult which that particular color symbolizes. By the end of the book the distinct colors of the cult will come together to form a single kaleidoscope, represented by the seven-color candle.

Though not one of the more popular candles in the cult of Saint Death, the brown votive candle will help illuminate chapter 1. Devotees offer an earthen-colored candle to the skeleton saint for matters of enlightenment, discernment, and wisdom. The Argentine San La Muerte seems to devote much more time and energy than Santa Muerte helping his devotees find their lost and stolen objects. Mexican and Central American cult members don't seem to seek the help of their saint as much in the retrieval of missing belongings. However, when they do, a coffee-colored candle is the right one for the job. The first chapter explores the often enigmatic origins and history of devotion to Saint Death. How is it that a female version of the Grim Reaper, a figure considered macabre and frightening in most of the Western world, has become the object of adoration among millions of Mexicans and Central American and Mexican immigrants in the United States? Is the Pretty Girl a mestiza (of mixed Spanish and

indigenous ancestry), as some devotees claim, or is she essentially Aztec, as many others assert? The wisdom and discernment of the brown candle will help to answer such questions and others.

In contrast to the brown devotional candle, the white one ranks as one of the top sellers at market stalls and esoterica shops. In addition, this candle is often the most common one at public shrines in Mexico, such as Doña Queta's and David Romo's. Purity, protection, gratitude, and consecration are the most frequent attributes of the colorless candle. This, combined with the fact that the skeleton of the Bony Lady is white and that two of her most common nicknames refer to her absence of color (White Girl and White Sister), makes for a white chapter 2. The flame of this candle will shed light on the beliefs and practices of the cult. Drawing heavily on Catholic modes of worship, devotees employ a colorful range of ritual in venerating Saint Death. In regard to beliefs—the set of ideas that underpin the faith—this section will consider the extent to which the Santa Muerte cult can be considered a new religious movement. Is its belief system just a macabre variant of folk Catholicism, or does it point toward a relatively autonomous new religious movement, free from its Catholic moorings? Of perhaps greater importance are the ritual acts that compel the Powerful Lady to act on the believer's behalf. Much more than an object of contemplation, she is a saint of action, one who protects and provides. And it is the prayers, pilgrimages, and promises of devotees that activate the saint's supernatural powers on their behalf.

Whereas the white devotional candle ranks among the top sellers and abounds at public shrines, the black one is among the slowest selling and rarely appears at devotional sites on Mexican roadsides and sidewalks. Of course, because of its association among the general public with "black magic" and witchcraft, many devotees who regularly or even occasionally use a black candle probably prefer to light it in the privacy of their own homes, concealed from critical eyes. Nonetheless, in the many private altars I have personally visited

and those I have viewed in photos, including crime scenes, this, the darkest of candles, is among the least popular. In any case, in the competitive religious economies of Mexico and the United States the black votive candle serves as one of the cult's most unique products.

Devotees looking to neutralize enemies, to avenge themselves of real and imagined wrongs, or to protect a shipment of cocaine headed to Houston or Atlanta can attempt to enlist Saint Death in their cause by making her an offering of a black candle. Having been raised as Catholics, practicing or not, most devotees feel far more comfortable asking the nonjudgmental folk saint to perform decidedly un-Christian miracles than the official saints who would probably refuse to bless a drug shipment or other such illicit things. Thus black-colored chapter 3 will tackle Santa Muerte's notorious association with crime and punishment. Special attention will be given to her role in the Mexican drug war, which has claimed over thirty-four thousand lives there since President Felipe Calderon assumed office in late 2006.[4]

Red, along with white and black, figures as one of the historical colors of the cult and ranks as the top-selling votive candle in my survey of merchants in both the United States and Mexico. As a researcher I always come across intriguing surprises during the course of field work. Before heading to Mexico in the summer of 2009 I had no idea of the supreme importance of red candles and the purpose they serve. A comprehensive literature review, including newspaper articles, blogs, devotional websites and booklets, and the few academic studies that exist, gave no hint of Santa Muerte's all-important role as a supernatural love doctor, especially for Mexican and Central American women and girls. Interviews with devotees, cult leaders, and vendors of religious articles revealed a Powerful Lady who probably spends more time attending to affairs of the heart than any other matter. Rosa, a thirty-two-year-old house cleaner from Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, for example, placed a lit red candle on her home altar so

that the White Sister would keep her abusive ex-husband away from her and their four young children.

Symbolizing passion and love, the red candle burns at altars from Chiapas to Chicago, where jilted lovers and jealous girlfriends ask the saint, who is often dressed as a bride, to mend their broken heart or to bring back their wayward boyfriend or husband. Indeed, the first written references to the skeleton saint in the twentieth century mention her in this context. In her 1947 book *Treasury of Mexican Folkways* Francis Toor mentions several Santa Muerte prayers involving the domestication of men behaving badly.

In Oscar Lewis's classic anthropological study, published in 1961, *The Children of Sánchez*, Tepito resident Marta tells the American anthropologist that her sister Antonia had recommended Saint Death for ending her husband Crispín's extramarital affairs. "When my sister Antonia first told me about Crispín's wanderings, she had advised me to pray to the Santa Muerte at midnight for nine nights, with Crispín's picture and a candle made of suet in front of me. She promised that before the ninth night, my husband would forget all about the other woman. I bought the *novena* prayer from a man who sold these things in the *vecindad* [barrio] and memorized it."

The prayer that Antonia went on to recite is the same one cited earlier in the introduction, a petition for his return "humbled at my feet." So red chapter 4 will look at the saint's role as a "Powerful Lady" who heals the wounds of love (mostly female) and punishes those who cause them (predominantly male).

Beyond the three traditional colors, gold Santa Muerte candles vie with white ones for second place in sales at market stalls and shops selling religious products and are, along with the white ones, the most common candles at public shrines, including Doña Queta's and David Romo's church. Gold is the cult's color of money, prosperity, and abundance. In the wake of the layoffs and underemployment

of the worst economic recession in both the United States and Mexico since the Great Depression, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have left a gold votive candle at Saint Death's bony feet in exchange for financial blessings. Many devotees at Doña Queta's historic shrine were there with golden candles in hand to beg the Powerful Lady for a job.

The saint, who has a reputation for "getting the job done," has become the official patroness of numerous small business owners throughout Mexico and in parts of the United States. Thirty-four-year-old Yolanda claimed the Godmother helped her start her own hair-styling salon in Mexico City and even had set up an altar there at the business to ensure a steady flow of clients. So grateful is Yolanda to her patron saint that every other month she pays a mariachi band $160 to play in musical tribute to the Skinny Lady at the monthly rosary service. Interestingly, the energetic hairstylist had asked both Guadalupe and Saint Jude to help her start her own business before approaching Saint Death. Yolanda described her new patroness as more reliable than the others. Gold chapter 5 will not only examine the saint's role as an employment broker and divine philanthropist for her adoring flock but also her position in the commercial economy, where sales of her likeness on ritual objects and even T-shirts, hoodies, and tennis shoes are a multimillion-dollar business.

Beyond the world of money, Santísima Muerte performs an indispensable role as a divine healer. In my previous work on Pentecostalism and charismatic Catholicism I have shown how faith healing is the driving force behind the impressive growth of these spirit-centered forms of Christianity. In a similar vein, one of the great paradoxes of the cult is that a saint who is the very personification of death is charged with preserving and extending life through her awesome healing powers. Here Santa Muerte isn't the Grim Reapress harvesting souls with her scythe but the Mother of all Physicians mending broken bodies and fractured

bones. Chapter 6 then will be purple, the shade of the Saint Death candle symbolizing supernatural healing.

One of the curious paradoxes of the cult lies in the disparity between the great emphasis placed on curing by devotees and the relative absence of lavender candles at shrines and shops. It might be that as one of the newer colors it has yet to catch on among devotees, or it could be that many who seek a miraculous cure prefer the comprehensive coverage of the seven-color candle, which includes purple in its rainbow of hues. Whatever the case may be, the purple candle will illuminate the ways in which the saint of death acts to preserve and extend human life in the context of the pervasive pathogens of poverty in Mexico and the United States.

Santa Muerte, in the spirit of the times, is a formidable multitasker. As if the roles of physician, employment broker, love doctor, and avenging angel weren't enough, she also serves her devotees as the patron saint of justice. Adherents with legal problems and those seeking a just solution to their problems offer green devotional candles to the Powerful Lady, who is often represented with the scales of justice in her right hand. Green chapter 7 will consider the saint not so much in the role of judge but rather as supernatural lawyer or advocate. Judges judge, and, as mentioned previously, one of her great appeals among believers is her nonjudgmental attitude. As a divine advocate Saint Death is more interested in getting the best deal she can for her devoted clients than in establishing their innocence or guilt. In a country where justice and equality before the law are often in short supply, millions of Mexicans feel that only through divine intervention do they have a chance of resolving their legal problems. And if their supernatural defender isn't able to help them win their case, devotees can find a measure of consolation in the thought that sooner or later the perpetrators of injustice, along with all Mexicans, will face the leveling scythe of the Grim Reapress.

Of course it is the seven-color jar candle that best represents Santa Muerte's great multitasking powers. It is easy to understand why this, the newest of the colored candles, is one of the best selling, along with red, white, and gold. Probably based on the seven-powers (*siete potencias*) candle of Santería, Cuba's main African-derived religion brought to Mexico by immigrants, the rainbow-colored devotional object unites all the saint's awesome powers in one candle. In a country beset by one of its worst economic recessions in decades, pandemic violence, and a deadly drug war, many Mexicans look to the Godmother to help them on multiple fronts. The multihued conclusion will thus complete the portrait of the saint of death in her full range of colors, a palette that includes but isn't limited to the important shade of black.

Chapter 1

Brown Candle

History and Origins of the Cult

DEATH, MADE IN MEXICO

Before delving into the rather murky origins of the cult, it should be noted that most devotees have little interest in the history of the skeleton saint. As religious pragmatists they are chiefly concerned with the folk saint's miraculous powers. The rest is academic. Hence, much, if not most, of the book will focus on what Saint Death does for devotees. However, in order to better grasp her modus operandi, we first need to consider her identity. Who is she, and how did she become what she is today at the start of the twenty-first century? In looking at her past we will consider both myth and reality in the development of her cult. A small minority of more sophisticated cult members are interested in the history of their beloved saint and have well-defined views on the matter. Others, who are not believers themselves, have embraced Santa Muerte and often death itself as an icon of Mexicanness and spun their own interesting stories about the origins of her devotion. While I will attempt to distinguish between what I believe to be fact and fiction, I think we will find that the myths surrounding the cult are often just as revealing as the reality and tell us much about the nature of the cult.

Most Americans and western Europeans would immediately recognize Santa Muerte as a sort of female Grim Reaper with origins in medieval Catholicism. Spaniards wouldn't even have to make allowances for her gender since their own personification of death,

known as La Parca, is a female skeleton. Mexicans, however, are more likely to regard the skeleton saint as an adapted version of an indigenous goddess (usually Aztec or Mayan) of death. As odd as this may seem to foreign observers, for many Mexicans the realities of indigenous history and the myths of nationalism converge to give the White Sister a local birthplace in pre-Columbian Mexico.

The most common version of the story of the saint's indigenous identity highlights her purported Aztec origins. More specifically, Santa Muerte is thought to have originated as Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec goddess of death who along with her husband Mictlantecuhtli ruled over the underworld, Mictlan. Like the Bony Lady, the deathly couple was typically represented as skeletons or human bodies with skulls for heads. Aztecs not only believed that those who died of natural causes ended up in Mictlan but also invoked the gods' supernatural powers for earthly causes. With its persecution of indigenous religion, the Spanish Conquest drove devotion underground and into syncretism with Catholicism. Thus, according to this version, it is the Aztec Mictecacihuatl who publicly resurfaced at Doña Queta's shrine in 2001. 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.

One of the most prominent cult leaders in Morelia agreed that the White Girl is of indigenous heritage but claimed she was Purépecha, the major indigenous group in the state of Michoacán who were never conquered by the neighboring Aztecs. Vicente Pérez Ramos, a native of Pátzcuaro, in an interview at his home traced Saint Death's origins to Santa Ana Chapitiro, a small town outside of Pátzcuaro where one of the country's most ornate Santa Muerte shrines is found. Don Vicente claimed that the saint of death had been born in the sixteenth century to a Purépecha couple from Santa Ana Chapitiro. Unlike normal babies, she was born the size of an adult woman with a light complexion and chestnut hair. Afraid that rich people

(Spaniards) would steal their beautiful daughter, the young indigenous parents kept her locked up in their hut.

One night she escaped and began wandering from village to village. Villagers who came across her were afraid, thinking that this woman, who at times was dressed in a white robe and at other times wore black, was some kind of spirit. Village rumors of the beautiful wandering spirit led Inquisition officials to arrest her and convict her of witchcraft. Executioners failed to properly bind her to the stake at which she was to be burned alive, allowing her to bend her left arm upward (into the position often seen in her statuettes today). As the flames of the Inquisition reduced to ash others there who had been found guilty of practicing witchcraft and sorcery, the crowd gasped in amazement, noticing that

Figure 1.1 Death at the side of the road. Sign says, "Shaman Ramos . . . Cult of Santa Muerte, Quinta el Refugio en los Triguillos (the name of a small town on the outskirts of Morelia, Michoacán, where shaman Vicente Pérez Ramos opened a second shrine).

the beautiful girl's skeleton had remained intact. Friar Juan Pablo yelled at the crowd, "Don't be afraid, you have nothing to fear. On the contrary, give thanks to God that he allowed you to see our Most Holy Death (Santísima Muerte)." So according to Don Vicente, it was the Franciscan cleric who gave Santa Muerte her name. The charismatic cult leader ended the story with the allegation that the saint's skeleton lies in a coffin hidden somewhere in the town of Santa Ana Chapitiro.

HERETICAL DEATH

In contrast to Don Vicente and many other cult members, both the few Mexican academics who have studied her and the cult godfather, David Romo, trace the White Girl's origins to medieval western Europe. Mexican anthropologist Katia Perdigón Castañeda, for instance, writes, "The history of the present concept of death and its iconography, reflected in the contemporary Santa Muerte, are more related to Judeo-Christian religion (Catholicism in this particular case) than the forgotten and unknown voices of the vanquished, in other words, the pre-Hispanic peoples."[1] David Romo and others specifically locate the genesis of the saint in the figure of the Grim Reaper of medieval European Catholicism. The bubonic plague (black death) made death a familiar and constant presence for fourteenth-century Europeans. It was at this time, when the disease claimed at least one-third of European lives, that death first became personified as the skeletal figure we know today. Painters, sculptors, and priests began to employ the skeletal representation of death in their work. In one of the most vivid depictions of death, usually set in cemeteries, Catholic clerics had actors in skeleton costumes perform the dance of death, in which some of the performers would move to the rhythm for the last time before being escorted by the Grim Reaper to the spirit world.

Spanish clergy employed the Grim Reaper and his female counterpart, La Parca, in a similar didactic fashion among the indigenous

peoples of the Americas. Often drawing on their own traditions of sacred ancestral bones and interpreting Christianity through their own cultural lens, some indigenous groups, such as the highland Maya in the state of Chiapas and Guatemala, and the Guarani in Argentina and Paraguay, took the Church's skeletal figure of death for a saint in its own right. This is most evident in Guatemala and Chiapas, where the sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan saint Pascual Bailón was syncretized with Mayan religion and became popularly, but not officially, represented as Rey (King) Pascual, a skeleton with a crown atop his skull. Although the Spanish friar never visited the Mayans of Mexico and Guatemala in his lifetime, he is believed to have appeared in a vision to a Mayan man in the 1650s, in the midst of a virulent plague which he is credited with ending. Apparently it was the Mayan who received Saint Pascual's supernatural visit who first depicted the Franciscan as a skeletal figure.[2] During the Spanish colonial period, efforts on the part of the Church to eradicate veneration of such skeletal saints drove devotion to them underground, where it has remained until very recently.

Specific references to Santa Muerte first appear in the Spanish colonial record in the 1790s, almost a century and half later than Rey Pascual. A 1797 document from the archives of the Inquisition titled "Concerning the Superstitions of Various Indians from the Town of San Luis de la Paz" mentions Santa Muerte for the first time. Focusing on the Chichimec people of the present-day state of Guanajuato, the Church record speaks of thirty Indians who "at night gather in their chapel to drink peyote until they lose their minds; they light upside-down candles, some of which are black; they dance with paper dolls; they whip Holy Crosses and also a figure of death that they call Santa Muerte, and they bind it with a wet rope threatening to whip and burn it if it does not perform a miracle." The miracle in question was apparently one of local political control, and the punishment for such "superstitions" was the destruction of the chapel where the effigy of

the Bony Lady was kept, recalling the recent demolition of Saint Death shrines on the border.[3]

Inquisition records from the same era and same central region of New Spain (as Mexico was called in the colonial period) cite a very similar case of "Indian idolatry." In this case, however, the skeleton saint is a male figure, who also had his own chapel. In 1793, in the present-day state of Querétaro, a Franciscan friar and vicar filed a complaint against a group of Indians, who in the middle of Mass deposited at the altar "an idol whose name is the Just Judge and is the figure of a complete human skeleton standing on top of a red surface, wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow."[4] This, along with evidence from Argentina, would seem to point toward an extraordinary fusion of the figure of Christ, the Just Judge, with the Grim Reaper.

In his insightful study of Latin American folk saints, Frank Graziano mentions two monikers for the Argentine saint of death, San La Muerte, which associate the male skeleton saint with Jesus. The first, San Justo (Saint Justice), and second, el Señor de la Paciencia (Lord of Patience), relate directly to the image of the Lord of Humility and Patience, which in Mexico and Central America is better known as the figure of Christ the Just Judge.[5] This is the representation of the despondent, defeated Christ after his flogging and before his death on the cross. Hence indigenous groups in both central Mexico and northwest Argentina and Paraguay made the same syncretic association between two of the main figures of Catholic evangelization efforts—the Grim Reaper and Jesus. Interestingly, the Argentine San La Muerte survived persecution at the hands of the Church and is thriving there today, while the Mexican Just Judge has been eclipsed by his female counterpart, Santa Muerte.

In response to persecution by the Church, devotees of the Skinny Lady made their veneration of her even more clandestine, to the extent that she disappears from the Mexican historical record for the next century and a half. Mexicans declared independence from

Spain, lost a war against the United States, and fought in the twentieth century's first great revolution. No doubt the Powerful Lady was there alongside her disciples, witnessing such events and countless others, but neither Mexicans nor foreign observers recorded her presence again until the 1940s. And the Saint Death who resurfaces in the historical record for the next fifty years or so, until the end of the twentieth century, is almost exclusively the Powerful Lady of love, symbolized by her red votive candle.

DEATH TO HIM

Four anthropologists—one Mexican and three American—mention her role as a love sorceress in their research from the 1940s and '50s. In addition to Frances Toor and Oscar Lewis, previously discussed in the introduction, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, writing in the late 1940s, refers to love-related prayers to Santa Muerte among a community of predominantly African descent on the Pacific coastal state of Guerrero. Along with Isabel Kelly's and Oscar Lewis's references to her role in love magic, this clearly shows that by the end of the 1950s the Pretty Girl's geographic reach was extensive, if not fully national. Toor and Lewis rediscovered the saint of death in Mexico City, Aguirre found her on the southern Pacific coast, and Kelly came across her amatory prayers in north-central Mexico.

Research conducted in the following decades of the 1960s and '70s discovered devotion to her in far-flung parts of the country, such as the mountainous region of Veracruz around the town of Catemaco, a renowned center of witchcraft and sorcery,[6] and even down into the southernmost state of Chiapas, where Rey Pascual holds court.[7] In her book *Mitos y magos mexicanos* (Mexican myths and magicians) María de la Luz Bernal was one of the first researchers of the period to document actual organized devotion to the Bald Lady (*la Pelona*). Based on research conducted in the 1970s, she writes of groups of women dressed in black kneeling before an altar of the skeleton saint,

clutching lighted candles, chanting in unison prayers for domination of the men in their lives. With cries of "Most Holy Death, torture him, mortify him," the female devotees sought to enlist the supernatural aid of the Powerful Lady, who they hoped could help them assert control over their errant husbands and boyfriends.[8]

DEATH IN CAPTIVITY

While women in black petitioned the White Sister, devotees in the central state of Hidalgo initiated what in all likelihood is the oldest continuous devotion to Santa Muerte in the same area. Like the syncretic skeleton saints, the Just Judge, Rey Pascual, and the Argentine San La Muerte, Saint Death from the small town of Tepatepec is fused with the image of Saint Bernard (San Bernardo Clairvaux), the medieval French holy man whom local folk Catholics associated with the skeletal figure of death. One of the oldest and most unique representations of Santa Muerte, a wooden statute that is now venerated at the Cruz family shrine is about four feet tall and is usually dressed like a queen with a satin robe, crown, and scepter in her left hand. Unlike most statues of the skeleton saint, which depict her standing, this one is seated on a wooden chair. Particularly striking is the wooden idol's mummified-looking face. This isn't the Bony Lady's typical skinless skull but rather a fleshy face with an elongated mouth that appears to be stitched shut.

The Cruz family apparently had the two-hundred-year-old image in their possession for several generations, going back at least until the late nineteenth century. The octogenarian matriarch of the family reported that her great-grandparents used to lend out the image for Holy Week processions in which it rode seated in a cart along with figures of Christ of the Holy Sepulcher and the Virgin Mary. Believing it to be the likeness of Saint Bernard, devotees would also parade the statue through the town on August 20 in celebration of the feast day of the French saint. Though devotees no longer parade her

through the town as part of Holy Week, they continue to celebrate the same August feast day. In fact, Doña Queta invited me to join her caravan from Mexico City to commemorate the important date in 2009. Far from the public eye, the skeleton saint spent most of her time at the family shrine where they and several neighbors venerated her.

In a bizarre turn of events, sometime in the 1950s, a town priest stormed into the Cruz home and abducted the skeletal effigy. Alleging that devotees prayed to the statue for evil purposes, such as murder, the cleric took the statue to his parish church, the main one in Tepatepec, where he placed it for public viewing in a side chapel close to an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. According to the elderly matriarch, the priest had enlisted the aid of his nephew, who also happened to be a relative of Doña Cruz's husband. It seems that the two hoped to profit from the greater number of donations they expected "Saint Bernard" to bring in. For more than forty years Doña Cruz and the rest of her family were forced to venerate their abducted saint in her place of captivity. The skeleton saint made no bones about her displeasure at the situation. Recalling her visits to her Santa Muerte statue at the town church, the Cruz matriarch said, "I would stare at her and she wouldn't look at me straight in the face, only sideways. She was angry with me because I let her go."[9]

For the Cruz family the return of their kidnapped saint in 2000 was nothing short of a miracle. Doña Cruz emphatically claimed that "the image returned home by itself."[10] Without the Cruzes having contacted him, a lawyer showed up unexpectedly at their home and offered to work pro bono for the return of their beloved family saint. In a meeting with the archbishop of the state of Hidalgo that year, Doña Cruz promised him that she wouldn't hold "masses" or other worship services for her Santa Muerte at her home. The high-ranking cleric agreed to the terms of release, so after more than three decades in captivity, the saint of death came home to her family altar. Over the past ten years the Cruz family chapel has become one of the most popular

Santa Muerte shrines in Mexico and the United States, second only to Doña Queta's in Tepito. Every year in mid-August, thousands of Mexicans, and even some foreigners, make the pilgrimage to ask for blessings from one of the oldest images of the Powerful Lady in existence.

STARRING DEATH

Reflecting her growing popularity, Santa Muerte went from starring in small-town dramas to making her national cinematic debut in the 1976 movie *El miedo no anda en burro* (Fear doesn't ride a donkey). A campy, comedic horror flick featuring one of the most beloved characters of Mexican cinema, La India Maria (Maria, the Indian), played by the prolific actress Maria Elena Velasco, the movie includes a surreal scene involving the Bony Lady. As an old man in a wheelchair plays a creepy dirge on an organ, La India Maria, while staring at the image of Santa Muerte above the keyboard, sings a macabre song recalling the role of the Grim Reapress in coming for the dead and taking them to their resting places. Attempting to scare the old man, she sings, "Death takes you when you least expect her. . . . Death, super ugly and bald, grabs you. Pulling them this way and that, carrying them here and there, that's the way she takes the dead with her." This, interestingly, is one of the few recorded instances from the period in question in which the saint of death isn't playing the role of love doctor. Here she is the chilling Grim Reapress who helps India Maria scare the old organist with visions of his own death.

And it is the macabre Saint Death of the black devotional candle who rises to overshadow the red-candled love doctor in all types of media coverage over the past decade. Chapter 3 will explore her dark side in depth. Suffice it to say here that the Godmother's association with the criminal underworld, particularly drug traffickers and kidnappers, began to draw limited media attention in the late 1980s and for the past few years has been featured in TV, radio, and newspaper reports, and appeared in movies and novels in Mexico and, to a lesser

extent, the United States. However, lest the black candle of narcos, hitmen, and many a Mexican cop outshine the brown one of discernment and discovery, we will continue to explore the historical development of the cult of Santa Muerte.

From her first citation in the historical record in 1797 until 2002, Santa Muerte was venerated clandestinely. Altars were kept in private homes, out of public sight, and medallions and scapulars of the skeleton saint were worn hidden underneath the shirts of devotees, unlike today when many proudly display them, along with T-shirts, tattoos, and even tennis shoes as badges of their belief. Given the history of persecution at the hands of the Church, and the unorthodox, if not satanic, implications of devotion to death personified, adherents of the White Girl largely kept their relationship with her to themselves or within their small circles of family and friends. For more than two centuries devotion to Saint Death was an occult affair, both in terms of the veneration of a semisecret supernatural being and of its concealment from the general public. The long period of furtive devotion finally ended when an unassuming quesadilla vendor decided to take her skeleton saint out of the closet and proudly display her belief to her notorious Mexico City neighborhood.

SKELETON OF DEATH OUT OF THE CLOSET

Enriqueta Romero, more than any other devotional leader, has played the starring role in transforming veneration of the saint of death from an occult practice to a very public cult. Sitting on uncomfortable plastic stools on the sidewalk in front of her combined shrine, shop, and home in early July 2009, Doña Queta and I discussed her pioneering role in transforming devotion to the bony saint from the occult to a cult. Wearing the trademark blue-and-white checkered apron of Mexican working-class women, the tough sixtyish mother of seven explained that she has been a devotee of the White Girl since the early 1960s. Her aunt kept a Santa Muerte altar

in the living room, and the adolescent Enriqueta felt called to her spiritual service. I remember feeling somewhat skeptical at the time of her claim of being a devotee since the 1960s. At that point in my research I had come across similar unsubstantiated claims on the Internet but had yet to view the record of her existence all the way back to the colonial period.

My skepticism notwithstanding, the story of metamorphosis from the occult to the public cult of Santa Muerte begins in a Mexico City prison where one of Doña Queta's sons, Marcos, had been incarcerated for a crime that she refused to identify. Like thousands of other convicts in Mexican and American penitentiaries he put together a makeshift altar in his cell and prayed to his supernatural advocate, the Powerful Lady, for an early release from prison. Marcos's prayers were answered in 2001 when he returned home to Tepito, the infamous barrio that tempts its residents with the lure of easy money. Certain that it was the green Santa Muerte of justice and legal problems who had answered his prayers, the young ex-con expressed his gratitude to the saint and his mother, who had also pleaded her son's case with the Pretty Girl and had visited him regularly in prison, with the gift of a life-size statue of their guardian saint.

Towering over companion figurines and statuettes of Saint Death in its new home, the imposing new image forced Doña Queta to leave the door open so she'd have more space in the cramped quarters from which she sold quesadillas to neighbors. The open door gave customers and passersby a good view of the Bony Lady standing behind Doña Queta as she flipped the cheese-filled tortillas on her griddle. Some of these same customers and neighbors, within days of the White Sister's arrival at Doña Queta's in early September, started to ask if they could venerate the skeleton saint. The now-renowned godmother of the cult agreed, and before she knew it, every inch of her tiny kitchen-cum-altar was filled with flowers and burning votive

candles. Smoke from the candles got so thick in the house one night that it nearly overcame the Romero family.

That's when Doña Queta and her husband, Ray, decided to create a sacred space solely for their popular new saint. Having lost a daughter in childhood to the Grim Reapress, Ray felt that the first of November, All Saints' Day (in commemoration of deceased children), would be the perfect date for inaugurating the new shrine. Thus as Halloween turned into All Saints' Day at midnight in late 2001, the "first couple" of the cult gently placed the woman-sized statue in its regal new altar. A small gathering of family, friends, and fellow devotees were there to witness the historic occasion in which the White Sister went public. During the past ten years, in an attempt to get as close as they can to the most famous statue of the saint, hundreds of thousands of devotees have placed their hands on the glass of the encased altar that is attached to the front wall of the Romero home. The last thing the streetwise godmother of the cult does before retiring every night is to lovingly wipe down the glass, which is covered with the prints of hundreds of prayerful hands.

The saint of death's paradoxical role of supernatural savior and protector of human life is thrust into high relief among the pioneers of the first public shrine. In Mexican filmmaker Eva Aridjis's revealing documentary on Santa Muerte, Omar, another of the Romero sons, explains that the greatest favor the skeleton saint has done for him is saving him from death—on at least three occasions. Looking like a classic Tepito gangster, with a shaved scalp, cheap knockoff sunglasses, and tattooed muscular arms protruding from a white "wife-beater" T-shirt, the twentysomething Romero recounts one of his near-death experiences to Aridjis. "The police beat me up and I was dying. My mother was about to bring a priest over. Fluid was getting into my brain because my skull had been split open, and that's when I prayed to her, because I personally can't always be asking her for things all the time."

Figure 1.2 Temple of Death, David Romo's Saint Death church in the Morelos district of Mexico City.

Filled with emotion, his mother goes on to explain how the Powerful Lady protected her from Tepito gangsters on her way to visit her critically injured son at a nearby clinic.

> We had to walk there and when we turned the corner a car appeared with a bunch of kids in it, and we said, "Uh-oh, they're gonna mug us," and we were only a group of women out late at night. We had to cross the street in front of them. But you know what happened? They got out of the car and looked for us, and it's a small block, and they didn't find us! We were standing there, but they couldn't see us, so they got back in their car and took off. And that's where you see how blessed she is because she covered us with her holy shroud so the kids couldn't see us.[11]

But it's not only the black candle of protection that has worked for the cult godmother and her family; so too has the gold one of prosperity. The small room that formerly served as the kitchen-cum-altar is now a shop run by Ray, which does a brisk business in a wide array of Santa Muerte paraphernalia, but most importantly in the votive candles that scores of devotees offer every day to the Powerful Lady behind the glass. The few times I entered to survey the merchandise I could barely make my way through the shelves of aerosol sprays, potions, and incense as devotees jockeyed to find their desired product. 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. And the prosperity that the skeleton saint has bestowed upon her favored daughter is not only financial. As owner of the most renowned Santa Muerte shrine in the world, Doña Queta, who has become a legend in her own right, proudly mentions the prominent Mexicans and foreigners who have visited her homemade shrine in Tepito.

About the only thing the godmother and godfather of the cult have in common is their steadfast devotion to their matron saint, Santa Muerte. Whereas Doña Queta presides over a rather informal, unorganized worship center, David Romo heads his own church and has become the cult's leading spokesperson and defender. Whereas the former quesadilla vendor pioneered in taking the Bony Lady public, Padre David (as he's affectionately known to church members) is at the vanguard of an attempt to institutionalize devotion to the Angel of Death. No account of the meteoric growth of the cult would be complete without considering the pivotal role the combative cleric has played in it.

TEMPLE OF DEATH

While Padre David's temple, the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church, Mex-USA, is just a few miles away from Doña Queta's celebrated shrine, it is worlds apart. During a two-hour interview in July

2009 at his church office, the self-styled archbishop of the cult talked in great detail about the founding and growth of his church, persecution at the hands of Church and state, and the theological foundation of belief in Saint Death. In a country where gringo researchers are sometimes met with suspicion, especially among the well educated, the charismatic church leader was surprisingly candid in the wide-ranging interview. Despite two recent heart attacks, which almost put him into the arms of his Angel of Death, the pugnacious padre chain-smoked during our time together.

Romo's itinerant childhood, including several years spent in Los Angeles, exposed him to diverse religious beliefs. In the City of Angels he made friends with Jehovah's Witnesses and came to admire their steadfastness in the face of persecution and their unmatched missionary zeal. Back in Mexico his family had belonged to "traditionalist" Catholic groups which had left the Roman Catholic Church over objections to the great reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). In the 1980s Padre David became the director of one such community in the industrial city of León. As general director of the Misioneros del Sagrado Corazón y San Felipe de Jesús (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and Saint Philip of Jesus) he founded a home for children who had been orphaned by AIDS. His 1993 fundraising campaign obtained money for the orphanage from the Anglican Church of Mexico. However, the Anglicans abruptly cut off the funding and severed ties with Romo after two of the orphans drowned during a field trip to a lake. Unable to secure funding from other sources after the tragedy, Padre David closed the home in 1994 and placed the orphans in various institutions.

Undeterred by the setback, Romo founded the church that same year with a nucleus of traditionalist Catholics from the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Reflecting his traditionalist views, Romo named his new church the Mexico-USA Tridentine Catholic Church. At the time of its establishment in the mid-1990s, "Archbishop" Romo

wasn't a devotee of Saint Death, but the participation of several disciples of the Powerful Lady in church activities sparked his interest in her devotion. The increasing number of Santa Muertistas attending church services through the rest of the decade led Padre David to study the skeleton saint in order to determine if Christian theology permitted devotion to her. As he pondered the matter in 2000 he filed to register the church, under its original name, as a legally recognized religious association. Three years later the Vicente Fox administration granted the request. The motley crew of traditionalist Catholics and Santa Muertistas were now legal and could exercise all the rights and privileges of an officially recognized religious group. By the time his church received legal recognition in 2003 Father David had concluded his study of the theological validity of devotion to the Angel of Death.

On the noteworthy date of August 15, the feast day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, Archbishop Romo and thousands of devotees celebrated the Bony Lady's incorporation into the church's set of beliefs and practices. The captivating association between the two great Mexican female saints, Santa Muerte and Guadalupe, will be explored in chapter 2. Here, however, what is important is that Father David's very public association of the two female giants of the Mexican (and parts of the American) religious landscape most likely played a major part in the decision on the part of the Fox administration in 2005 to revoke the church's official recognition. The immediate catalyst was an official denunciation in 2004 made by one of Romo's own disgruntled priests accusing the church of violating its own bylaws in welcoming Saint Death into the fold. Padre David claims there was no mention of Santa Muerte in the original registration petition since at the time of his application devotion to her was still under study and had yet to be accepted. However, Mexican law does not call for sanctions, much less revocation of legal status, for religious groups that change or modify their beliefs and rituals.[12]

DEATH THREATS

The angry godfather of the cult points an accusing finger at the Catholic Church as the architect of the revocation of his church's official recognition. In a press conference in September 2004, the president of the Mexican Bishops' Conference, José Guadalupe Martín Rábago, denounced devotion to Santa Muerte as satanic and complained of the excessively liberal government policy of granting legal status to such religious groups. In his home diocese of León, Guanajuato, Bishop Martín Rábago explained his views to the Mexican press.

> We are realizing how groups that are not exactly good for the well being of Mexican society are too easily being granted legal standing as religious associations. Groups with satanic practices exist and they do psychological damage to young people, and I have experience with this because parents and even kids themselves have come to me under the influence of these sects, and they are psychologically disturbed and disoriented. The damage done to them is very severe.[13]

In response to Bishop Martín Rábago's condemnation, Father Romo filed a defamation suit against the powerful Catholic prelate and claims to have been severely pressured, including receiving death threats, to withdraw his case filed with the Office of the Attorney General. The relentless Romo refused to drop the suit, which was summarily dismissed by the Office of the Attorney General.

Upon news of the probable revocation of the church's legal status, Archbishop Romo wasted no time in late March 2005 organizing the faithful in protest. Chanting "We see her, we feel her, the saint is here for sure" (*se ve, se siente, la santa está presente*), some five hundred angry devotees followed Father David in a lively protest march through downtown Mexico City, culminating at the iconic statue of Mexican national sovereignty, the Angel of

Independence. Most of the devotees marched with statuettes of the Powerful Lady, and a few even lugged life-size figures. The godfather of the cult made no bones about his animus toward the Fox administration. "We're not going to allow our rights as citizens to be trampled on. This is a rogue government. They're acting like we're in the Inquisition."[14]

Denied the right to own property and raise funds for his church, Archbishop Romo has soldiered on since being dealt the legal blow. At a press conference on the eve of midterm congressional elections in July 2009, Archbishop Romo exhorted Santa Muertistas to turn out and vote against the conservative, pro–Church National Action Party (PAN) of President Felipe Calderon and of the previous Fox administration: "For the love of Santa Muerte get out and vote this Sunday and give a chance to those politicians who want to serve the people to do it and demonstrate it with deeds." He went on to ask devotees not to vote for "politicians who openly profess to be Roman Catholic and who like to be seen at processions and attending Mass."[15] A few days after the elections the godfather of the cult made it clear in an interview with me that he was thrilled with the stunning defeat of the PAN at the hands of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party), which ruled the country in authoritarian fashion for most of the twentieth century but was not as cozy with the Catholic Church as the PAN.

Following in the footsteps of his fellow PANista, President Calderon escalated the offensive against the skeleton saint. It is his administration that, in March 2009, as part of the war against drug traffickers, sent the army to Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana, and other sites on the border to raze dozens of roadside shrines to the Skinny Lady. Once again, Archbishop Romo has taken the lead in protesting the government offensive against the burgeoning cult. Gathered on Good Friday in the enormous plaza (*zocalo*) in front of the national cathedral, Father Romo told his fellow devotees that they were involved in a "holy war" against the Catholic

Church, which he accused of being behind the demolition of the Saint Death shrines on the border. Standing amid posters declaring, "I'm not a narco; I'm not evil," Romo said, "We can't remain passive in the face of this arbitrary action. We gather the faithful here to start a holy war in defense of our faith. The phrase sounds harsh, but we've already taken certain measures. We have filed suit with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and with Amnesty International." Rejecting the allegations that the cult was the religion of drug traffickers, the fiery father exclaimed that many narcos are actually *Guadalupanos*, devotees of Mexico's patron saint.[16]

Thus the charismatic high priest of the cult of Saint Death has made invaluable contributions to the development of the faith. With the integration of the Bony Lady into church doctrine and worship services in 2003, Padre David established the cult's first formal temple, and seven years later there are no serious rivals. From what I have observed, however, pastoral leadership might not be his strongest skill. Located in the rough-and-tumble Morelos district, the church doesn't seem to have the drawing power of Doña Queta's shrine or several others in the city. As mentioned earlier, his makeover of the saint from skeleton to the stunning flesh-and-bones Angel of Death has failed to take wings—even in his own sanctuary, where she is far outnumbered by images of the Grim Reapress. No doubt as the cult continues to grow more temples will be consecrated. What isn't clear, however, is if Archbishop Romo will continue to be the main architect of further church growth.

More important than his role as local pastoral leader is that of national spokesperson for the faith. His constant battles with both church and state have kept the saint of death and her devotees in the headlines of the Mexican press. Reporters looking for the cult's perspective on matters of national importance seek out David Romo, and not Enriqueta Romero, who refrains from opining publicly on matters of national politics. Indeed, during the same month that he

was calling for jihad against the Catholic Church, the Mexican press reported him to be considering a run for office with the leftist Partido Social Demócrata (Social Democratic Party), a party that lost its legal recognition after the midterm elections of 2009, in which its candidates won only 1 percent of the popular vote. And with the Calderon administration having fingered Santa Muerte as the patron saint of narcos in its endless war on drug traffickers, the godfather of the cult has ample opportunity to keep his Angel of Death in the news.

DEATH CLOSE TO HOME

While Santa Muerte and her followers have yet to make headlines here in the United States, the extent to which her cult has expanded here in the past few years is astonishing. When I started thinking about her growing presence in this country, I assumed that I would have to head to the border or to cities such as Los Angeles and Houston to find the White Sister being venerated by her Mexican and Central American adherents. From my home in central Virginia I figured the closest I might find the skeleton saint would be in the Washington, DC, area, ninety miles to the north. And sure enough, on one of my recent trips to the capital city I found her fairly easily in the hip Adams-Morgan neighborhood.

Sharing vibrant 18th Street with an Ethiopian, Peruvian, and even a Oaxacan restaurant, Botanica Yemaya y Chango carries a wide selection of Saint Death paraphernalia, including a two-feet-tall statue in which the saint's robe is made of a patchwork of miniature hundred-dollar bills. The old Panamanian woman, whom I had mistaken for one of the life-size Santería statues when I first walked in the store, told me that in the past three or four years the Skinny Lady has taken over more and more shelf space at the expense of Yemaya, Chango, and the other *orishas* (spirits) of this Cuban-born religion. The well-heeled young hipsters who wine and dine in Adams-Morgan occasionally stop in the shop to check out the religious exotica, but it is

the Latino, mostly Salvadoran, residents of the neighborhood who purchase the hundred-dollar-bill-draped Santa Muerte and other articles that they pray will bring them, health, wealth, and love.

The easy discovery of the Powerful Lady in DC led me to rethink my dismissal of the possibility of finding her in the former capital of the Confederacy. Perhaps there were enough Salvadoran and Mexican immigrants in Richmond for me at least to find a few votive candles for sale at a local Latino grocery. The more I thought about the prospect of finding her here, the more excited I became. For to discover her here in central Virginia, where the Latino population is under 5 percent, would be really significant. It would mean that the Pretty Girl had moved beyond the barrios of the big cities and the border and into the American heartland. And sure enough, the two Latino grocery stores on the same block as my favorite Vietnamese restaurant, on Richmond's West End, were selling an assortment of votive candles, and even a few figurines at the Salvadoran-run market. Even more impressive, though, was the discovery that the skeleton saint had a semipublic altar in my new hometown. Lupe (short for Guadalupe), the mother of one of my wife's third-grade students and a new devotee of Saint Death, told me to check out Botica El Ángel where she gets all her devotional paraphernalia.

Wearing a flashy gold medallion of Santa Muerte on her chest, Cristina, the energetic owner of the religious esoterica shop on the city's hardscrabble south side, gave me a tour of Botica El Ángel. A Salvadoran immigrant, she hadn't heard of the saint of death in her homeland, but became a believer in 2005 when she started to sell Santa Muerte merchandise at her newly opened shop. While looking for a Saint Death book in English for me, an item I hadn't requested, she enthusiastically stated that the Grim Reapress accounts for approximately 40 percent of her total sales. Santa Muerte candles, incense, and figurines outsell the other Catholic and Santería paraphernalia at the well-stocked little store. After a

lengthy search, Cristina produced an overpriced bilingual devotional manual that she carries for her Jamaican and African American clientele. This was the first and is still the only reference to non-Latino devotees that I've come across. I wondered how many English-speaking believers in the White Girl had left dollar bills in the bony hands of the four-foot statue in the center of the altar at the back of the shop. Politely declining her twenty-two-dollar English-Spanish booklet, I instead opted for a bilingual red jar candle. A former middle school spelling bee champion, I was naturally drawn to the misspelling at the base of the glass candle jar, right beneath Santa Muerte's bony feet. Manufactured in North Hollywood, California, by the General Wax Company, my candle and all the bilingual candles on the shelf read "Holly Death."

Chapter 2

White Candle

Beliefs and Practices

PRACTICAL DEATH

My very first encounter with the Skinny Lady in this country was at a Fiesta supermarket in southwest Houston in early 2005. Before making my way over to the produce section I thought I'd check out the selection of votive candles. Ignoring orders from the local fire marshal to rid my office at the University of Houston of incendiary devices, I was on the lookout for a new Virgin of Guadalupe candle to add to the collection on top of my file cabinet. Her likeness on the jar, I hoped, would help inspire my research on the "Queen of Mexico." However, in a moment that in retrospect seems so significant but whose meaning eluded me at the time, my eyes were drawn to the newcomer on the shelves of votive candles adorned with saints (both official and folk) and magical incantations, such as the red *Ven a mi* (come to me) candle.

Santa Muerte, who I had already crossed paths with in Mexico City, had arrived at my neighborhood supermarket in the form of a white votive candle. Intrigued by the appearance of the Mexican saint of death so close to home, I put her candle in my cart and made my way to the register, forgetting about Guadalupe and the tomatillos over in produce. The transgressive saint joined my defiance of the fire code atop my steel file cabinet, next to her fellow Mexican folk saint Niño Fidencio. My first purchase of Santa Muerte paraphernalia remains next to the Child Fidencio, a renowned early twentieth-century

folk-healer (*curandero*), in their new home in my office at VCU. Although the wax itself was a casualty of my summertime move, I'm confident that the White Sister will reveal her essence through an exploration of the beliefs and practices that rouse her to action.

As strange and esoteric as some of the credos and rituals of her cult may seem, they are at their core highly utilitarian. In other words, their purpose is to compel Saint Death to act on behalf of her devotees. More specifically, adherents engage in ritual acts designed to elicit miraculous intervention on the part of the Powerful Lady. The miracle, or palpable manifestation of supernatural wonder, can be as small as the sale of a few extra quesadillas a day by a street vendor or as big as having a multimillion-dollar shipment of methamphetamines arrive safely in Atlanta, for example. Despite her skeletal appearance, which suggests death and dormancy to the uninitiated, Santa Muerte is a supernatural action figure who heals, provides, and punishes, among other things. She is the hardest-working and most productive folk saint on either side of the border.

Her transformation from object of occult devotion to protagonist of a public cult has involved a concomitant development in her identity. For most of the twentieth century she appears in the field notes of anthropologists and ethnographers as the red Saint Death of love magic. More specifically, she seemed to specialize in binding and delivering philandering men "humbled at the feet" of jealous Mexican wives and girlfriends. But with the eruption of drug-related violence in the 1990s, which has only worsened, the black Santa Muerte of dark deeds stepped into the limelight as she appeared at the altars of notorious narcos. And it is the amoral Grim Reapress of the black devotional candle who continues to grab media attention on both sides of the border and dominate public perception of her. Apart from sensationalist headlines, however, it is clear that the identity of the skeleton saint has become increasingly complex. While her red and black candles represent very important facets of her persona, and

are the themes of two chapters of this book, they are but two colors of her contemporary multihued identity, which is best captured by her seven-colored candle.

DEATHLY ADVERSARY

The astonishing growth of the Santa Muerte cult over the past decade has resulted in millions of new devotees who are neither jilted lovers nor traffickers of narcotics and stimulants. The new flock of faithful is a heterogeneous group with diverse afflictions and aspirations that call for candles of all colors, including the purple candle for health and the gold one for prosperity. To meet the various needs of her diverse devotional base, the Powerful Lady has abandoned her narrow specialization in matters of love and passion for the new role of an omnipotent generalist whose range of operation is probably greater than that of any other spiritual rival, including the Virgin of Guadalupe and Jesus. In looking at her complex new identity on the Mexican and American religious landscapes we will focus on how devotees conceive of her, while the views of nonbelievers will also be taken into account.

Back before the Bald Lady beckoned me to study her, I had thought about including a chapter on her in my future book on the Virgin of Guadalupe. Without having done any serious research on her, I had vaguely imagined the saint of death as a sort of anti-Virgin who specialized in dirty deeds unfit for the immaculate Mother of Christ and patroness of Mexico. My idea was that real understanding of the thesis (Guadalupe) demands examination of its antithesis (Santa Muerte). As appealing as the notion seemed at the time, it withered in the face of empirical evidence. If anything, the Pretty Girl is closer to a virginal figure for many devotees, especially women and girls, than a tequila-swilling, chain-smoking saint of underhanded deeds. In the final analysis the Santa Muerte worshiped by most believers is neither the morally pure virgin nor

the amoral spiritual mercenary who perpetrates all kinds of demonic deeds for the right price. Rather, she is an awesomely powerful female personification of death, the most potent of Mexican folk saints.

Santa Muerte is a Mexican female folk saint who personifies death. An understanding of each of these key elements that constitute her identity will shed light on the nature of her appeal for millions of devotees. By far the most intriguing and unique aspect of the White Girl's identity is her embodiment of death. With the exception of Padre Romo's unpopular Angel of Death, Santa Muerte is uniformly depicted as a human skeleton. Throughout the Western world she would be instantly recognizable as a female version of the Grim Reaper that originated in medieval Europe. Given that a female Grim Reapress, La Parca, already existed in Catholic Spain, it is not so much Santa Muerte's gender or skeletal figure that seems so foreign to modern European and American sensibilities, but rather her role as a being of extraordinary holiness, a saint that is venerated, if not worshiped, by devotees, which distinguishes her not only from modern secular conceptualizations of death but also from Christian theology.

With very few exceptions, western Europeans and Americans in particular have viewed the Grim Reaper as a macabre personification of death who is to be avoided at all cost. Here in the United States, the land of eternal youth, death has no role to play in the American Dream but that of spoiler. To be sure, we Americans are as mortal as everyone else, but in few cultures is there such a concerted cultural effort to marginalize and sanitize death. We Americans tend to "pass away" much more than we die. In short, as a ghoulish symbol of the end of life, the skeletal Grim Reaper is a figure to be locked away in American and European closets.

Mainstream Christian theology goes even further in its rejection of the Grim Reaper. Both Catholics and Protestants on each side of

the border have condemned Santa Muerte as satanic. In Tucson, Reverend Juan Carlos Aguirre told a curious parishioner to destroy her statuette of the Bony Lady because the Catholic Church views it as "satanic idolatry."[1] On the other side of the border, just a few miles away from Doña Queta's historic shrine, Father Sergio Román, a Mexican priest, elaborated on the demonic nature of the cult.

> Scripture tells us, in the Gospels, that the last enemy that Jesus will defeat is death, and thus death as a figure is the enemy of Christ. In other words, Christ has come to defeat death, and he does so with his resurrection. This is the position of Christian theology, not just Catholic but also Protestant, and all Christian religions. And in this sense to venerate or worship death is to worship the enemy of Christ. And the adversary of Christ, also in the Bible, the one considered his main adversary is Satan. So in this way devotion to death has a satanic meaning. In other words, whoever worships death in one way or another is worshiping Satan.[2]

Evangelical Protestant filmmaker Paco del Toro delivers the same message in his 2007 movie *La Santa Muerte*. Del Toro's Saint Death is a demonic deceiver who seduces the afflicted with false miracles.

A FAMILIAR DEATH

In stark contrast, for most devotees the Godmother is neither grim nor satanic. Instead, she is a saint who is as familiar to Mexicans as death itself. And her familiarity is reflected in her most common monikers: Skinny Lady, White Sister, Godmother, Co-godmother, White Girl, and Pretty Girl. As godmother and sister, the saint becomes a supernatural family member, approached with the same type of intimacy Mexicans would typically accord their relatives. Much, of course, has been written about the uniqueness of the

concept of death in Mexican culture. In his illuminating book on the subject, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz even argues that death is totemic of the nation itself; that along with the Virgin of Guadalupe and nineteenth-century president Benito Juárez, the figure of the "playful skeleton" is one of the three great totems of Mexicanness.

Having lived, worked, studied, and traveled in Mexico for almost thirty years, I can personally attest to the intimate and familiar nature of death in popular culture. Long before Santa Muerte's recent public surfacing, images of death personified abounded. Most visibly, La Calavera Catrina (the High Society Skeleton), an upper-class woman depicted as a skeleton in fashionable early-twentieth-century attire, is omnipresent in Mexico. Created in 1913 by the great graphic artist and satirist José Guadalupe Posada, La Catrina has curiously even made her way onto more than a few Santa Muerte altars. And it was no coincidence that the godmother of the cult publicly displayed her life-size statue of the Bony Lady on November 1, the first of two days of the dead on which many Mexicans head to the cemeteries and, in a mix of festivity and solemnity, commune with their departed love ones. Sugar skulls bearing common first names, such as María and José, are sold in the streets, and at home, altars are erected bearing the favorite food and drink of the dead family member.

Such familiarity with death really struck me at Doña Queta's shrine, where elementary school–age children would often accompany their mothers and siblings. With the obvious exception of Halloween, I imagine many American kids would recoil in horror at the sight of a ghoulish skeleton with waist-length jet-black hair. Even on Halloween, many American children aren't immune to the fear caused by ghouls and goblins. In fact, my father came close to losing a long-time friend one Halloween evening in the early 1980s when he and I appeared at the door of family friends in skeleton masks and unintentionally scared the dickens out of his friend's young daughter.

Back at Doña Queta's, the renowned statue of the Grim Reapress is met with nonchalance on the part of visiting children. Perhaps even more striking was the scene at Guillermo's esoterica shop in Morelia where the owner's young children played tag and kicked a soccer ball amid hundreds of images of the skeleton, including a few eye-catching statues sculpted from volcanic cantera stone, which at some six feet tall towered over the playful children.

DEATH Á LA MEXICANA

It is not only the Bony Lady's skeletal figure that makes her familiar to devotees but also her nationality. Offerings at her altars, as well as her nicknames and wardrobe, reveal a saint that is cosmically Mexican. In other words, adherents view her as in some ways a supernatural version of themselves. Tequila, beer, cigarettes, and chocolate are placed at her altars in the belief that the White Girl likes consuming the same food, drink, and smokes that devotees enjoy. And like her adoring followers, she occasionally drinks to excess. In Morelia cult leader Vicente Pérez Ramos claimed that his skeleton saint likes to "get hammered," sometimes drinking her favorite brand of tequila, Rancho Viejo. Mexican folk saint and "patron of narcos" Jesús Malverde also drinks, smokes, and even does lines of cocaine, but I can think of no other female folk saint who shares a joint or glass of beer with her devotees.

In a similar vein, her collection of nicknames not only expresses kinship but also camaraderie. Skinny Lady (la Flaquita), Bony Lady (la Huesuda), White Girl (la Niña Blanca), and Pretty Girl (la Niña Bonita) are all common monikers heard throughout Mexico and many places in the United States. The latter two are terms of endearment that recall the type of language employed by devotees of the Virgin of Guadalupe and other avatars of Mary. In contrast, the former two, Skinny Lady and Bony Lady, capture the jovial familiarity with which many Mexicans, especially the working class, address each other. While Saint Death's traditional garb, the black habit

Figure 2.1 Death á la Mexicana, Santa Muerte chapel, Santa Ana Chapitiro, Michoacán.

of nuns, evokes medieval Europe, recent makeovers of her image have resulted in a more Mexican-looking saint. Although Doña Queta gives the cult's most famous statue a new wardrobe every month, the only significant alteration is in the color of the dress, which is the same style of gown worn by the various avatars of the Virgin Mary in Mexico. Most Mexican of all, however, is another full-size statue of Santa Muerte that I saw wearing the green soccer jersey of the Mexican national team. One can imagine her hearing prayers for revenge and victory against archrival Team USA.

Figure 2.2 The whole world in her hand, shrine at home of Vicente Pérez Ramos, Morelia, Michoacán.

Yet at another level some devotees made it clear to me that the White Sister, as a personification of death, transcends nationality. As the Grim Reapress, she is a universal messenger of death, who, harvest scythe in hand, comes inevitably for all souls—Mexican and gringo alike. In fact, one of the most common full-scale statues of her humorously reminded me that the Bony Lady would sooner or later come for me and all of my fellow Americans. All four of the large sculptures of her on display in front of Esotericos y Parafinas

Guillermo's (Guillermo's Esoterica and Candles) in Morelia had her skeletal feet planted on top of the Earth, and out of all the two hundred or so nations where she could have planted her feet, these Mexican purveyors of paraphernalia chose to have her standing on top of the United States, deep in the heart of Texas. Given that much of the arsenal used by Mexican narcos in their battles against each other and against the government is bought in the Lone Star State, the image of death over Texas is compelling.

IN DEATH I TRUST

But it is not only Santa Muerte's familiarity as a symbol of death that resonates among millions of Mexicans and Central Americans. With her awesome powers derived from death itself, the Powerful Lady is no mere playful skeleton who amuses and satirizes. Rather, 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. Since stock in her only recently went public, many have come to her after unsuccessful investments in other saints. For example, from his jail cell, Ernesto, a twentysomething Mexico City cab driver, prayed to both Saint Jude and the Virgin of Guadalupe for a speedy release from prison. Sensing his prayers were falling on deaf ears, he, like so many of his fellow inmates, decided to make a contract with Saint Death. Convicted for embezzlement, Ernesto promised the Powerful Lady that he would offer her a votive candle every month at Doña Queta's if she had him released from prison within a year. I met Ernesto at the famous Tepito shrine fulfilling his end of the bargain with a lit white candle. He had served a little less than a year behind bars.

If the bony saint finds herself with scores of new adherents who have been disappointed by Saint Jude, Guadalupe, Jesús Malverde, and others, it is because none of them, official or folk, can rival the

power and range of her miracle-working ability. In large part this derives from her position in the celestial hierarchy imagined by most devotees. Ranking higher than other saints, martyrs, and even the Virgin Mary, Santa Muerte is conceived of as an archangel (of death) who really only takes orders from God himself. Readers familiar with Catholic theology will recognize the familiar role of Archangel Michael, God's angel of death who guards and judges souls, weighing their merit with the same set of scales employed by the skeleton saint.

Thus in the folk theology of death's devotees, the Powerful Lady not only replaces Saint Michael but for all intents and purposes supplants God himself with her infinite power to perform miracles. It should be noted that the relegation of God to the margins of religious practice is nothing new. Mexican and Latin American folk Catholicism in general has historically focused on the more accessible saints and the Virgin while viewing God as a rather remote figure. Teodora, a forty-two-year-old house cleaner from Morelia, captured the essence of many devotees' perspectives on God and Saint Death. Explaining her devotion to the White Sister to me, Teodora said, "I believe in God but trust in her."

DEATH AS THE GRIM REAPRESS

If her status as a folk saint who personifies death is exceptional in the Americas, Santa Muerte's gender identity places her in a class by herself. Guatemalan Rey Pascual and Argentine San La Muerte, of course, are her only counterparts from Buenos Aires to Vancouver. But like the traditional Grim Reaper, these two saints of death, who were kept very busy by murderous regimes in their home countries in the 1970s and '80s, are unmistakably male figures. The word "rey" in Rey Pascual means "king," and the "san" in San La Muerte is the masculine abbreviation of "saint." The Guatemalan saint wears a king's crown and the Argentine typically wears the robes of a monk. In contrast, the Mexican Pretty Girl prefers nuns' habits,

white wedding gowns, and queenly robes. She increasingly appears on altars with long jet-black locks, which sometimes have even been permed into loose curls. As a female skeleton saint, Santa Muerte stands alone in the Americas, if not the entire world. The only other saint that rivals her popularity in the United States and Mexico is Guadalupe, Empress of the Americas.

The Queen of Mexico is of relevance in the construction of Saint Death's gender identity. We've already seen how the Spanish brought their female Grim Reapress, La Parca, to the New World. So if the predominant personification of death for the Spanish was female, it really is the masculine identity of Rey Pascual and San La Muerte that demands explanation. Without delving into details, the Argentine and Guatemalan skeleton saints are the product of a fusion of La Parca with real and imagined Spanish saints. You'll recall that in the Guatemalan case, Saint Pascual Bailón, a canonized sixteenth-century Spanish friar, morphed into a skeleton saint. One of the main creation myths of San La Muerte points to his origins as a Jesuit missionary.[3]

Since there is almost a century and half—from the 1800s to 1930s—in the known historical record in which there is no written trace of Santa Muerte, it is impossible to discern the development of her identity during that period. What is known, however, is that the Santa Muerte who emerges some one hundred thirty years after the first mention of her is the same female figure who appears as a love magician in the field notes of anthropologists. Assuming Saint Death continued to operate clandestinely in the same region of central Mexico where the Inquisition came after her, she would have good reason to preserve her female identity during her long period in hiding. It was during this historical era that the mestiza Virgin of Guadalupe, who is believed to have appeared to Juan Diego in 1531 in present-day Mexico City, became the preeminent avatar of Mary, especially in the center of the country where she first appeared. The

matrifocality of Ibero-American folk Catholicism reached new heights with the ascendance of Guadalupe as the leading religious figure on the Mexican landscape. Without an equivalent of the ubiquitous Mexican Virgin, there was less pressure on skeleton saints in South and Central America to preserve whatever female identity they might have originally had. In contrast, the greater degree of female-centered folk Catholicism in Mexico, especially in the central heartland, probably served to reinforce the gender identity of an unofficial saint who, as a survival strategy, had hidden in the realm of the occult.

Every time I think of the tantalizing tandem of Guadalupe and the Skinny Lady I recall how the eyes of the godfather of the cult lit up when I mentioned the two in the same breath during our interview. Several large portraits of the mestiza Virgin adorn both the sanctuary and office walls of Archbishop Romo's Santa Muerte church. Reflecting on the commanding position of the two female saints on the Mexican religious landscape, Padre David grinned and uttered a witty pun, which can be translated as both "Mexico is a country of many mothers" or "Mexico is a mother of a country" ("*Mexico es un pais de mucha madre*"). Therefore, in the context of matrifocal Mexican folk Catholicism, where until recently Guadalupe has reined supreme, Santa Muerte's female identity is a major part of her appeal to devotees, especially women and girls.

In addition to the ties of sisterhood and godmotherhood denoted by nicknames such as White Sister, Godmother, and Co-godmother, the Powerful Lady even serves as a mother figure for some of her spiritual children. Ernestina, a fifty-one-year-old ex-con and resident of Tepito, tearfully referred to the maternal side of the Skinny Lady. "Look at me, I just turned fifty-one the day before yesterday, and I'm still with her, and I'll always be with her. If you could see the miracles that she does for me, in the street, at home, with my kids. I don't have a mother, but I have her. And she's all that I have. And my faith in her

is so great that I know she's going to get my daughter out [of prison]. I know she's going to get her out!"[4]

CONTRACT WITH DEATH

So how do Santa Muertistas such as Ernestina go about getting their matron saint to perform the miracles they desire, such as a speedy release from prison? The answer lies in the type of contractual relationship that permeates all varieties of folk religion, including Pentecostalism, Vodou, and grass-roots Catholicism. The logic of reciprocity underlies the way in which believers approach saints, spirits, the Holy Spirit, and other divine beings. In Christian contexts the request for a miracle begins with a vow or promise. A Pentecostal, for instance, seeking to be healed of a serious illness would promise Jesus that in exchange for a miraculous cure, she would give testimony of her healing in nine different churches. If the miracle is forthcoming, the supplicant is contractually obliged to fulfill her end of the bargain. Failure to do so can have grave consequences. Of course, if Jesus does not perform the requested healing, the believer has no obligation to give testimony.

Thus, devotees request miracles from Saint Death in the same way they would from other saints, both folk and official. What distinguishes contracts with the White Sister is their binding power. If she is considered by many to be the most potent miracle worker on the religious landscape, in similar fashion she has a reputation as a harsh punisher of those who break their contracts with her, though the great majority of my informants rejected the popular notion among nonadherents that Santa Muerte in her role as the Grim Reapress can claim the lives of family members of devotees who break their promises to the skeleton saint.

Paco del Toro's cinematic crusade against the skeleton saint brings this idea to life on the big screen. In the maudlin but interesting movie, a desperate mother, having exhausted all other resources, contracts with the Bony Lady for the cure of her young

daughter's terminal cancer. Daily prayers at an ever-expanding home altar work quickly, and within no time Saint Death has granted the miracle, eradicating the girl's brain tumor. However, the demanding saint rapidly revokes the miracle, allowing the cancer to return, shortly after the daughter stops wearing a Santa Muerte medallion around her neck. In the end, the little girl is granted a miraculous cure, but by Jesus. Most devotees, in contrast, reject the idea that Saint Death metes out punishment as readily as she works miracles.

Known as the Angel of Destiny, eighty-year-old sorcerer and Santa Muerte devotee Luis Mesa claims that the Grim Reapress only comes for people when God tells her to. As a resident of the border city Ciudad Juárez, one of the most violent cities in the world as a result of the drug war, the Angel of Destiny is all too familiar with death. His Santa Muerte, like that of most of my interviewees, is a compassionate and good-hearted saint who does not traffic in vengeance.

AT DEATH'S ALTAR

Whether they seek a settling of scores or a job, Santa Muertistas normally practice certain rituals to compel the saint of death to act on their behalf. The altar and the prayers recited at it constitute the ritual essence of the cult of Saint Death. A look at the contents of both will shed light on the ways in which adherents attempt to stir the saint to action. As the sacred place where devotees offer prayers and material gifts to the White Girl, the altar stands at the center of devotional practice. Consideration of the most common objects found at the altar of Santa Muerte will help clarify the nature of the cult.

As the cult is a very loosely organized religious movement, there is a colorful variety in the size and composition of altars. Some are baroquely elaborate affairs with a dizzying array of devotional objects. Others are nothing more than a statuette of the saint standing on a portable card table with a few devotional candles and

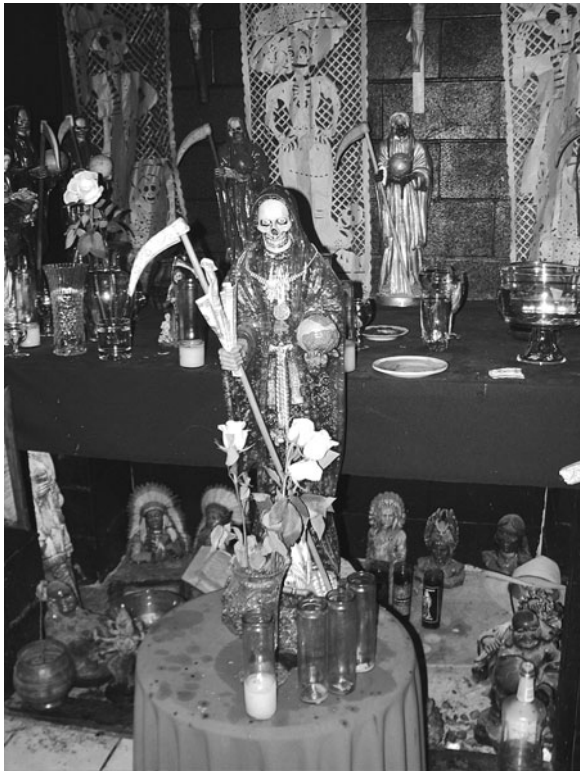

Figure 2.3 Santa Marihuana, altar discovered at a drug bust in Houston.

a glass of water at her feet. Despite their rich diversity, most altars contain several common devotional devices. The altar in figure 2.3, photographed at the scene of a drug bust in Houston, will serve as a ritual guide.

The sacred heart of the altar is the statuette of Saint Death. Here fifteen figurines in a rainbow of colors serve devotional duty at the altar. With the exception of the winged statuette seated on the far left of the ledge, there is a uniformity to the figures, who all wear tunics and hold scythes in their right hand and the Earth in the left. Let's

zoom in on the most prominent Santa Muerte, the one (who's dressed in green) standing on top of the circular table draped with a wax-stained cloth. Recalling that green symbolizes justice and the law, we can understand why the drug-dealing devotees would put this particular statue at the devotional center of the altar. Her green robe says, "Law, stay away," which of course in this case it didn't. Draped over her shoulders and hanging on her chest is a flashy silver necklace that recalls both the Catholic rosaries dangling from many of her statues and the bling worn by many young devotees. The extravagant jewelry simultaneously evokes the folk Catholic identity of the saint and her money-making powers.

Panning over to her right hand, we see the money motif couldn't be more obvious with the oversize dollar bills, which are wrapped around the scythe in her hand. That this altar belonged to drug dealers makes the juxtaposition of cash and a farm tool intriguing. The scythe, of course, figures as one of the White Sister's iconic accoutrements. In her role as the Grim Reapress she uses the ancient farm implement to harvest the souls of the dead. At this narco altar, however, drug-trafficking devotees would have been more interested in reaping a bountiful harvest of greenbacks than of souls. The sharp blade can also serve as a weapon; one can imagine that the owners of this particular altar imagined wielding it against agents of the law and rival dealers.

Dollars and peso bills and coins are a popular and relatively recent arrival at altars. Most striking are the effigies of the Skinny Lady, such as the one for sale at Botanica Yemaya y Chango in DC, made out of dozens of miniature dollar bills. Who needs a gold idol of the skeleton saint when one blanketed in fifty- and hundred-dollar bills can be had for a similar price? The Godmother's role as a money-maker couldn't be clearer. Cash also constitutes one of the main types of offerings deposited at altars. Devotees who believe Saint Death has delivered on a request for money or work will often express their gratitude with coins placed on the altar or bills pinned on her tunic.

Of higher value and greater prestige, offerings of dollars tend to outnumber pesos at altars south of the border. With record levels of unemployment on both sides of the border, the importance of cash at the altar of Saint Death is understandable. Whether they earn it by peddling crystal meth in Houston or driving a cab in Morelia, devotees, struggling in tough times, often regard a steady income as nothing short of miraculous.

Shifting the focus to her left hand, we see another one of her iconic symbols—the Earth. The globe resting in her palm symbolizes her complete dominion over the world. She is the global saint who rules over all human life, regardless of nationality, sex, age, or social class. The imagery of dominion is even more compelling in the statues, such as those at Guillermo's in Morelia, in which her bony feet are planted on top of the globe. She literally has the world humbled at her feet. One can imagine the resonance of such imagery among devotees whose illicit trafficking involves dangerous border crossings and efforts to expand their control over ever-larger chunks of territory.

Perched at the saint's feet is the totemic owl that enriches the symbolic meaning of the statue. Most American observers would view the nocturnal creature as a symbol of wisdom—the "wise old owl." Likewise, Mexicans have the same association. I asked most of my Mexican interviewees about the meaning of the bird at Saint Death's feet, and the great majority made the connection to wisdom, some even looking confused as to why I would ask such an obvious question. A few, however, mentioned a more interesting indigenous meaning of the symbolic owl. Lupe, the Santa Muertista in Richmond who steered me to Cristina's religious-article store, answered my question about the significance of the owl with a popular Mexican proverb: "When the owl screeches, the Indian dies."

The *tecolote* (owl in Mexican Spanish, derived from the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs) symbolized death in Aztec culture. Indeed, Mictlantecuhtli, the lord of the underworld, is often depicted wearing

a headdress decorated with owl feathers. Thus the nocturnal creature perched at the bony feet of the skeleton saint does double symbolic duty. The wise owl of Western lore invites devotees to approach the Powerful Lady for matters of insight and good judgment. The Houston narcos who erected the altar must have sought her sage advice on how to evade DEA agents. In any case, the screeching owl of pre-Columbian Mexico retains its symbolic meaning at the base of Saint Death statues. If the skull and bones of the Bony Lady were not enough to conjure up visions of death, the *tecolote* announces imminent demise—for Indians and narcos alike.

Right below the talons of the owl rests one of the Godmother's favorite offerings—tobacco. At this particular altar it's in the form of a cigar, but cigarettes are just as common. Adherents customarily follow the same ritual that I observed Talía, a teenage goth with a nose ring, performing at Doña Queta's historic shrine. Dressed in black from head to toe, Talía pursed her lips around two Camels and lit them both. After a few heavy drags on both cigarettes she took one and placed it on the ledge in front of the glass-encased shrine. Lost in prayer to her matron saint, Talía took absent-minded puffs of the Camel she had kept for herself while the one offered to Saint Death slowly burned down. Had there been no glass separating her from the famous statue, the young *darketa* (as goths are known in Mexico) probably would have blown her smoke into Santa Muerte's fleshless face.

Disciples of the saint blow tobacco and sometimes marijuana smoke over her image as an act of ritual purification. The use of tobacco in religious rituals, of course, has a long history in the Americas, where indigenous peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere smoked pipes and cigars in spiritual ceremonies. Almost all South and North American folk religious groups and sorcerers used the native plant in their ritual practice. I first experienced it myself in an Andean village in Ecuador in 1986. Using his son as an interpreter, the Quechua-speaking shaman blew copious amounts of smoke in my

face as part of a *limpia,* or spiritual cleansing ritual. To this day I'm still not sure what he meant when he told me to "fix my damaged forehead." My three college buddies, who received equally cryptic advice from the Indian shaman, jokingly reminded me to "fix my head" as we ended our semester abroad in the Andean region of South America. Back in the Mexican capital, Doña Queta, who enjoys lighting up on occasion, knows her Skinny Lady shares her taste for tobacco. The godmother of the cult explained, "She likes it when we do that [blow smoke over her]. She likes the smell of tobacco."[5] That the White Sister shares her devotees' fondness for a good smoke now and then reminds us of her familiar camaraderie as a Mexican personification of death.

Before continuing with the other ritual objects at this narco altar, we should briefly consider a major devotional motif that's missing from the picture. Although none of the effigies at this Houston crime scene has them, the scales of justice are a common symbolic object. The skeleton saint typically holds the scales, perfectly balanced, in her right hand, the hand in which the statues at this altar clutch the scythe. Like the green devotional candle, the scales symbolize justice, the law, and equilibrium. Devotees with legal troubles, such as the owners of the Houston altar, petition Saint Death, the just judge, for favorable rulings in their cases. On a more ethereal plane, with scales in hand she becomes the Angel of Death, usurping the archangel Michael's role in weighing the merit of human souls before God. Our Bayou City drug traffickers preferred the image of the scythe-wielding saint, but the scale-bearing Bony Lady would have been equally at home on their altar.

Returning to the offerings in the photo, let's take a look at the votive candles and flowers resting on the table in front of the main idol. Along with statues of the saint, candles rank as the most important ritual object at the altar. In fact, I have never seen one that doesn't have at least one on it. Leaving aside the color symbolism,

which provides the organizational framework for this book, candles are the most common and cheapest ritual object available to disciples of Saint Death. At every market stall and shop I've visited, purveyors of religious paraphernalia have uniformly pointed to votive candles as the best selling Santa Muerte product. Costing only a dollar or two apiece, they afford believers a relatively cheap way of thanking or petitioning the Pretty Girl.

Santa Muertistas employ votive candles in essentially the traditional Catholic way. In accord with the term "votive," Catholics offer these wax lights as symbols of vows or prayers made to particular saints, persons of the Trinity, or the Virgin. Millions of candles are burning at this moment in churches, shrines, and home altars throughout Mexico, the country with the second largest Catholic population on earth. In further keeping with Catholic tradition, in which candles often bear the likeness of a particular saint, Santa Muerte candle jars always display the image of the White Girl on their glass. The one resting next to my laptop bears a pretty crude image of the Grim Reapress. It's hard to make out what, if anything, she's holding in her right hand, and the contours of her skull are blurry. Nevertheless it's enough of an image to allow devotees to imagine the Pretty Girl as they ask her for a favor or thank her for one already granted. And if devotees prefer reciting a ready-made prayer rather than their own, all candles come with prayers printed on the back side of the glass. My red one, next to the computer, bears the standard prayer for the return of a badly behaved husband or boyfriend. The request is for the wayward man "to kneel before me and obey my every command." Less concerned about affairs of the heart, the owners of the Houston altar chose black and white candles to illuminate their sacred space. Both colors can be used for purposes of protection, and, keeping in mind whose altar this was, it's probably safe to assume that the drug-dealing devotees sought the Powerful Lady's help in guarding them from the law or rival dealers.

Mexicans adore flowers almost as much as they love balloons, and altars devoted to the Bald Lady reflect their passion for roses, carnations, and cempasúchil (known as the "flower of the dead" due to its association with the Days of the Dead). At the monthly rosary service at Doña Queta's in Tepito, one of the main attractions besides the Pretty Girl herself are the hundreds if not thousands of flowers arranged on the sidewalk in front of her home. The kaleidoscope of floral colors catches the eye while the fragrance of the bouquets mixes with the wafting marijuana and tobacco smoke for a full-scale olfactory assault. As both a Pretty Girl and a White Girl (Pretty White Girl), Santa Muerte receives myriad floral offerings on a daily basis.

Returning to the altar in the photograph, we see white roses in a vase on the table and many more on the ledge behind. In accordance with altar protocol, the flowers have been kept fresh in water-filled crystal containers. Failure to freshen them and all other perishable offerings on the altar can offend the saint and even result in acts of retribution. For instance, the demise and eventual death of one of the main characters of Del Toro's film *Santa Muerte* begins with the neglect of his home altar. What really stands out here, however, is not so much the freshness of the floral arrangement but the type and color of the flower. At this crime-scene altar and at thousands of Saint Death sacred spaces unrelated to drug trafficking and violence, white roses are the stars of the floral arrangements. Those familiar with Marian ritual will immediately recognize the *rosa blanca* at the altar of the Pretty Girl as a key symbol of the Virgin, particularly Guadalupe, Empress of the Americas and Queen of Mexico. Once again we see how in their veneration of the skeleton saint devotees draw on Catholic ritual repertoire. Odd as it may seem, in terms of miracle-working power, gender, and popularity, the mestiza Virgin is the closest saint there is to Santa Muerte in the North American religious landscape. If the brown-skinned mestiza Virgin adores white roses, why wouldn't the saintly White Girl?

Water at the altar not only serves to keep the flowers fresh but also is a significant ritual object in its own right. On the back ledge of the Houston altar, several glasses of varying shapes and sizes contain the vital liquid. Its symbolic meanings are manifold. In continuity with Christian ritual, water at the altar of the saint of death cleanses, purifies, and renews. Ritual protocol thus demands that devotees keep it fresh and replenished. And evaporation isn't the reason why Santa Muertistas must frequently refill glasses. Rather, as thirtysomething Andres told me in the waiting room of my sister-in-law's dental office in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, "She gets really thirsty from traveling so much." If the Bony Lady drinks the sacred water offered to her, it is because she is parched—literally. The word "skeleton" comes from the Greek verb *skellein*, to dry up or parch, much like the name of the Spanish Grim Reapress, La Parca. So as a living, breathing saint made out of dry bones, the Skinny Lady suffers a legendary thirst, one that water alone won't quench. Before moving on to other liquid offerings, we should note that water in Spanish American folklore, conversely, also can represent death. In particular, many Mexicans, Argentines, and other Hispanophones interpret water in dreams as a sign of impending death.[6] The water of their dreams isn't a life-sustaining liquid but the stuff of nightmares, floods that drown and tides that rip. However the Houston narcos might have interpreted it, they were certainly ritually correct in keeping all the glasses on their altar filled with the symbolic liquid.

Just like her disciples, the Godmother doesn't only drink water. Though she's eclectic in her taste for alcohol, beer and hard liquor rank as her preferred drinks. And in keeping with her Mexican identity, tequila, the iconic national liquor, is her stiff drink of choice. Returning to the photograph of the altar, we observe an empty-looking liquor bottle on the floor to the immediate left of the three-colored effigy. The owners apparently weren't as diligent in replenishing the Bony Lady's liquor supply as they were with her

water. Almost every devotee I've interviewed has made it clear that a fresh supply of alcohol at the altar is an important part of one's ritual obligations. Since they really believe that the parched skeleton saint downs the drink offered to her, disciples neglect her liquor supply at their own risk. In fact, altars, like the one in Morelia at cult leader Vicente Pérez Ramos's home, should have enough beer and liquor that the Skinny Lady can get drunk if she feels like it. Don Vicente explained that tequila is the saint's preferred drink because it is distilled from the agave plant, which, like the Bony Lady herself, is native to Mexico. When we were finishing the interview, he suggested that I spray some of his Rancho Viejo–brand tequila into the mouth of the life-size statue in front of me while asking her for the "favor of selling a million books." I politely declined but did purchase a figurine of the skeleton saint from him, which he consecrated with Rancho Viejo liberally sprayed from a plastic bottle over both the statuette and me. Don Vicente christened my tequila-doused saint "Ollac," which he claimed to be the name of the Purépecha guardian saint of cemeteries.

Ritual offerings of alcohol at her altars place Santa Muerte squarely within the devotional norms of most Latin American folk saints. Maximón, also known as San Simón, imbibes prodigious amounts of rum in highland Guatemala, while the original narco-saint, Jesús Malverde, shares the Bony Lady's taste for tequila and beer. Since devotees make folks saints in their own images, it is not surprising that these miracle workers enjoy the same spirits as their human followers. In contemplating alcohol at the altars of Saint Death, the absence of wine contrasts with the abundance of beer and liquor. Wine, of course, plays a central part in Catholic ritual and was brought to Mexico and most of the Americas by the wine-loving Iberians. However, with the exceptions of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, the Latin American working classes don't drink much wine. Beer and distilled liquor, such as rum, tequila, and brandy, flow faster

and more freely at the cantinas and bars of the region. In this cultural context, then, a glass of chardonnay or cabernet sauvignon at the altar of Santa Muerte would seem like an overly effete offering for this rather earthy saint. Another curious absence at the Houston narco-altar, and all sacred spaces of the cult, are soft drinks. Mexicans are world-champion soda drinkers, so the lack of bottles of Coke and Jarritos (a Mexican brand that comes in a rainbow of colors) at altars is rather remarkable. And in case you think that the skeleton saint might reject the carbonated drinks as too childish, she also loves the equally sweet offerings of candy and chocolate.

The cornucopia of other religious figures at the Houston altar and at most others belies the popular notion that the perpetually parched saint is a jealous one who demands her own sacred space devoid of other deities. While this particular altar contains a wider range of fellow saints and spirits than most others, it typifies the eclectic inclusivity of most the cult's sacred spaces. The bewildering images and icons become more comprehensible when considered in their respective religious categories. Starting with the most eye-catching of the myriad figures in figure 2.3, we see seven large images of the iconic Mexican skeleton, La Calavera Catrina, hanging on the back wall of the altar. Cut in *papel picado* (a Mexican folk art involving lattice-like paper cutouts), the high-society skeleton belongs to the category of national folklore, and is even a totem of Mexican identity. While not as common as Christian figures at the altars of Santa Muerte, the growing presence of the Catrinas is intriguing. Within the sacred spaces of the cult, the normally secular playful skeletons morph into key members of Saint Death's spiritual entourage.

Though a bit less visually prominent than the playful skeletons at this particular altar, the Christian figures tend to overshadow others on most of the cult's sacred tableaux. Here, as with most altars, Jesus and the Virgin of Guadalupe serve as the most important members

of the Skinny Lady's Christian entourage. Seven crucifixes and a large portrait of the mestiza avatar of Mary on the wall on the upper left corner of the photo lend legitimacy to the sacred space and increase the potency of the miracles worked by the skeleton saint. Moving beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, let's consider the folk saint whose bust sits atop the table at the extreme lower right side of the photo. Until the Bony Lady materialized on the visible religious landscape in 2001, the folk saint Jesús Malverde, from the northern state of Sinaloa, served as the principal patron of drug traffickers, especially those from his home state and the Mexican north in general. Having been eclipsed by his more powerful female counterpart, Santa Muerte, Malverde now typically serves as her spiritual adjunct. His presence at a narcoaltar such as this one is typical.

If Jesús Malverde's Christian credentials are dubious, the remaining figures at the altar are far beyond the pale, without any pretense of belonging to the same realm as Jesus and his disciples. Mostly positioned on the floor below the back ledge and behind the prominent effigy of Santa Muerte are a motley crew of supernatural entities that in Latin America often do double duty at both African-diasporan altars and sites of sorcery and magic. Several figurines of Native Americans in feathered headdress rest on the floor behind the main statue of the Bony Lady. Apaches, Sioux, and Cherokee figure prominently in Latin American magic and the African-derived religions of the region, but, most importantly here, in Cuban Santería. In both traditions practitioners primarily view the Indians as powerful healers. Since tobacco played an important role in many Native American cultures, healing rituals involving Indians typically call for cigars or cigarettes.

While the Indians and their tobacco reinforce Saint Death's indigenous identity, the Hindu and Buddhist deities stationed on the floor in front of the Native Americans contribute to her global dominion.

Gods and goddesses from both of these Asian religions have become fairly common in both African-diasporan faiths and witchcraft in Latin America and the Caribbean. Anthropologist Raquel Romberg found figurines of Ganesh and Buddha, among other deities, for sale at many *botanicas* in Puerto Rico. Likewise, Asian religious figures are easy to find at many religious-article stores on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. The two Buddhas, one at the lower left corner of the photo and the other at the lower right, not only add to the Skinny Lady's internationalist credentials but also augment her ability to bestow devotees with good luck and fortune. Practically all Santa Muertistas desire such benefits but especially those whose line of work involves a dangerous pursuit of quick riches, such as the owners of this narcoaltar.

Just as fitting, if not more, is the statuette of Kali, the Hindu goddess to the immediate right of the Buddha on the left. As both goddess of death and divine mother, Kali bears a striking resemblance to Santa Muerte. Often depicted with black skin and wearing a necklace of skulls, she, like her Mexican counterpart, is associated with time as a destroyer of life. And in perfect harmony with the nature of this particular altar in Houston, she was the patroness of the Thugs, a defunct Indian religious sect composed of robbers and murderers who preferred to strangle their victims. The cult of Kali appeals especially to members of the lower castes, who also view her as the Divine Mother. We can imagine that the narcos who prayed at this shrine were particularly interested in the destructive side of Kali, a deity who could help the Mexican skeleton saint destroy business rivals and agents of the law.

The remaining figures positioned on the floor behind the seven-color Santa Muerte resemble Buddha much more than Kali in their function. Mostly belonging to the realm of folklore and magic, the gnomes, leprechaun in the pot of gold, and Arab also serve as agents of fortune and good luck. The narco devotees who prayed at this

Houston altar must have asked Kali and the Powerful Lady to keep the DEA and HPD (Houston Police Department) away so that they, like the leprechaun, could find their own pot of gold. If leprechauns find treasure at the end of rainbows, gnomes, like the three in the photo, guard buried treasure. It's not too hard to imagine that the drug dealers in question, and all who traffic in stimulants and narcotics here and in Mexico, have a compelling need to protect their product and the proceeds earned from its sale. These three gnomes, however, failed in their mission and were forced to fork over the drugs and cash to HPD. They also failed in their newer role as border-hopping travelers, popularized by the French film *Amélie* and the online travel agency Travelocity. Traffickers, like jet-setting gnomes, must be able to make a quick getaway and travel at a moment's notice. Apparently the Houston Santa Muertistas didn't pack quick enough.

Finally, the last man (or image) standing at the narco altar is the stereotypical-looking Arab. Pot-bellied, goateed, and wearing a keffiyeh, such Arab figures, because of their association with wealthy Arab merchants, don't find gold, like Irish leprechauns or guard it, like European gnomes. Rather, like narcotraffickers, they earn it through the sale of their merchandise. Many large cities in Latin America have sizeable communities of citizens of Lebanese and Syrian descent. In Mexico, billionaire impresario Carlos Slim Helu, of Lebanese descent, ranks among the richest people on earth. In the country where Slim monopolizes the telephone industry, the image of the superrich Arab is particularly compelling. And for major drug traffickers the goal of joining Slim on *Forbes*'s list of the richest people on the planet isn't so far-fetched. The reputed head of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán, with an estimated net worth of one billion dollars, recently came in at number 701 on the list. In their ranking of the planet's most powerful individuals, Forbes ranked Guzmán in the top one hundred. At number forty-one, he is considered to wield

more influence than both the French and Russian heads of state and even Chicago-based media magnate Oprah Winfrey.[7]

As elaborate as it is, the Houston crime-scene altar is missing a few important devotional objects that merit brief discussion due to their omnipresence in the cult's sacred spaces. Living up to one of her nicknames, the Skinny Lady seems to drink more than she eats. However, offerings of food are very common at her altars. In fact, many devotees in Mexican prisoners will only eat their own meals after first offering a plate of food to the skeleton saint. But more common than an entire lunch or dinner plate at her altar are three particular types of food. As noted previously, the saint's distaste for soft drinks is by no means a blanket rejection of sweets. Candy and fruit abound on the tables that hold her sacred objects. In accordance with her Mexican identity, she has a special sweet tooth for chocolate, which is native to Mexico and other parts of Latin America and whose name derives from the Nahuatl word *xocolatl*. I've seen a colorful variety of fruits at her altar, including bananas, papaya, oranges, and apples. The last of these, however, and especially red ones, figure as the most important offering of fruit. Here they don't so much symbolize the forbidden fruit of temptation but rather abundance and prosperity, the main fruit in the horn of plenty. Wheat ears figure as another traditional item in the cornucopia, but at the altar of Saint Death, wheat usually appears in the form of bread. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* (Santa Muerte Bible) instructs devotees to offer the whole-wheat variety, but the ubiquitous *bolillos* (white rolls) predominate at altars in Mexico. Despite the prescriptions of the devotional manual, it seems that the White Girl, like most of her devotees, prefers white bread. In addition to symbolizing a bountiful harvest of riches, offerings of white bread recall the bread of the dead (*pan de muerto*) that plays an integral role in annual Days of the Dead commemorations. Devotees who fail to keep the food offerings at their altar fresh risk the wrath of an extremely powerful saint. Roadside altars, whose regular maintenance isn't so

easy, rank as the worst offenders in terms of spoiled offerings. In contrast, the food offered at Doña Queta's historic altar couldn't be fresher.

The final significant devotional object missing from the altar in the photo but present at many, if not most, public altars are ex-votos. Borrowed wholesale from folk Catholicism, ex-votos are offerings related to vows or promises made to the Bony Lady. They typically consist of such tokens of gratitude as photos of people who received miracles, prayer ribbons, scraps of paper with words of thanksgiving, *milagros* (metallic healing charms usually in the form of body parts), and even voter registration cards and other types of personal identification. After winning a race a grateful devotee in San Luis Potosí pinned his cycling gloves on the statue of Santa Muerte at a religious-article shop in the main market of the city. In Pátzcuaro, an anonymous prayer ribbon pinned to an effigy of the saint at a similar shop reads, "Thank you, White Girl, for granting me the miracle I asked of you. I am a sickly person, but everyday I asked you for more time so that I could see my sons graduate, and you gave it to me. I hope that you keep taking care of them for me so they will be good men and so that I will be able to see them start their own families." Interestingly, the only standard type of ex-voto that hasn't been imported yet from Catholicism are the popular *retablos*—primitive paintings on tin plates that depict specific miracles performed and offer thanks to the saint who worked them. Such graphic expressions of thanksgiving cover sanctuary walls throughout Mexico and parts of the American Southwest. I have seen Santa Muerte *retablos* for sale in La Lagunilla, the giant open-air flea market in Mexico City, but have yet to see them at an altar.

PRAYING TO DEATH

With its array of devotional objects, the altar serves as a sacred space where devotees communicate with the Powerful Lady through prayer. In its myriad forms, prayer is the main medium through which devotees petition, implore, and give thanks to the saint of death. The

general lack of formal cult doctrine and organization means that adherents are free to communicate with Saint Death in whatever manner suits them. If, for example, devotees prefer Pentecostal-style free-form utterances, there are only a handful of cult leaders, most notably David Romo, who could tell them that such type of spontaneous prayer is irreverent. In practice, however, most prayers offered to Santa Muerte are far from impromptu. Rather, they tend to be modified versions of standard Catholic collects, jaculatories, novenas, and rosaries. Given that the great majority of Santa Muertistas were raised in a Catholic environment and continue to identify themselves as Catholics, it's not surprising that they draw heavily on their preexisting ritual repertoire in addressing the main object of their religious devotion. And keeping in mind that devotees regard her as a saint, it is entirely natural for them to pray to the Bony Lady in similar ways that they communicate with Saint Jude and Jesús Malverde, among other holy figures. Since ritual prayer figures as the main medium through which adherents communicate with the skeleton saint, a brief examination of both their structure and content will shed more light on the great appeal of the cult.

In the realm of content, one way of classifying cult prayers is by the relative presence of Santa Muerte in them. At one end of the spectrum stand traditional Catholic prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, and Glory Be, which have been imported verbatim but have had references to the Pretty Girl tacked on at the end. For instance, the last line of the Lord's Prayer, "and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" is followed by "Praise be to you, Most Holy Death, visible and invisible heavenly protectress, because you alleviate human suffering as well as the disgrace we bring upon ourselves through our own action."

In a similar vein, the last phrase of Hail Mary, a prayer for the intercession of the Virgin, is followed by a plea for protection to the skeleton saint. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now

and at the hour of our death. Amen. Praise be to you, Most Holy Death, visible and invisible protectress because, being able to rejoice in the all-powerful presence of the Creator, you descend to help and protect your less evolved sons and daughters." First following God and then the Virgin in two of Catholicism's most common prayers, Santa Muerte appears as a familiar and powerful saint who alleviates affliction and protects her children in the faith. However, she is not the main focus here.

At the other end of the spectrum are numerous prayers in which the Powerful Lady goes beyond being the main focus to the only one. The great majority of them are dedicated to specific purposes, which correlate with the themes represented by the seven different colors of votive candles. Representative of this genre is the Prayer to Avoid Robbery.

> I ask for your protection, Santa Muerte. Keep robbers away from these doors. Cover the intruders with your white robe so they can't steal. Take care of this property so I can get ahead. Guard the rooftop and walls from evil intentions. Don't allow stray spirits to bring their followers here. Guard my home and business from all evil. I toss these coins on the floor to show that you come before all material goods.[8]

With record levels of unemployment and crime, fearful devotees utter such prayers with increasing frequency.

The cult also offers a specific prayer for the millions of Mexicans who make the dangerous trip to "the other side" (as they say in Mexico)—the United States. The Prayer for Protection During Travels reads,

> Most Holy Spirit of Death, I invoke your holy name to ask that you help me in this endeavor. Lead me over mountains, valleys,

> and paths. Don't stop showering me with your good fortune. Make sure that my destination is freed of all evil purposes. Santa Muerte, through your powerful protection, prevent problems from materializing and weighing heavily on my heart. My lady, prevent sickness from touching me and keep away tragedy, pain, and want. I light this candle so that the gleam of your eyes forms an invisible shield around me. Grant me prudence, patience, and, Holy Queen of Darkness, grant me strength, power, and wisdom. Tell the elements not to unleash their fury wherever I go. Make sure I have a happy return trip, because I'm ready to adorn and decorate your home at my holy altar.

The Santa Muerte Bible recommends lighting a gold votive candle on the eve of the journey.

Devotees needing miracles on several fronts have a number of formulaic prayers to choose from. One of the most common, which devotees of Argentine San La Muerte recite an almost word-for-word version of, is the Invocational Prayer.

> Lady of Death, most powerful and strong skeleton spirit, who is indispensable in times of danger, I, certain of your goodness, invoke you. Implore God Almighty to grant me all that I ask for. Make he who did me harm or gave me the evil eye repent for the rest of his life, and go after him right away. I ask you to bring back to me he who cheats on me in love, and if he doesn't listen to your mysterious voice, make him feel the power of your scythe. I appoint you as the best of advocates in both gaming and business, and turn all who come against me into losers. O Lady of Death, my guardian angel, Amen!

This short prayer includes petitions for protection, vengeance, love binding, and the granting of all requested favors. Given that the cult

of San La Muerte has been public for much longer than that of his Mexican cousin, it is very likely that the Invocational Prayer originated among devotees in Argentina.

San La Muerte and Santa Muerte also share, albeit in different form, one of the two epic prayers of the cult. Borrowed from Catholicism, novenas are a series of prayers typically recited during nine consecutive days. Both Catholics and Santa Muertistas tend to reserve novenas for especially powerful petitions. The Saint Death novena perfectly captures the cult's fascinating mix of Catholic form with non-Christian content. Devotees have preserved the original Catholic structure and style of the novena but have radically altered the content. Unlike some of the aforementioned prayers and others in which God, Jesus, and Mary appear alongside the White Girl, the novena is dedicated exclusively to Santa Muerte with no celestial supporting cast whatsoever.

Like the multipurpose seven-color votive candle, the novena addresses the most common concerns of believers, such as protection, love, money, employment, and health. Each of the nine prayers focuses on an area of major concern in devotees' lives. The third day prayer, for example, is called Most Holy Death of Health.

> You, who hold the secrets of life, expel the sickness and pain that have wracked my body and those of my loved ones. Give me a few drops of your powerful elixir and restore my body with vigor, lucidness, and tranquility so that I can keep worshiping you. Use your generous hands to put an end to my suffering. Use your cloak to wipe away the disease that lives in me and send it away forever. Allow the power that exists within me to be unleashed in order to do away with the illness, be it natural or supernatural, which affects men and women. Because I believe in my own energy, which resides in me.

Interestingly, all nine prayers end with this same phrase, which could have been torn from the pages of any of the hundreds of self-help books that occupy considerable shelf space at both American and Mexican bookstores. In order to increase their chances of being heard by the Powerful Lady, devotees often perform the novena for an entire month with one day of rest between the nine-day cycles.

ROSARY OF DEATH

While Santa Muertistas usually recite novenas individually at altars in their homes, the second type of epic prayer serves as the cult's premier collective ritual. Pioneered by the godmother of the cult, Doña Queta, the rosary (*el rosario*) is an adaptation of the Catholic series of prayers dedicated to the Virgin. As is the case in Catholicism, Santa Muertistas also pray the rosary alone in the privacy of their own homes, but it is its collective and public recitation that constitutes one of the defining rituals of the cult. Doña Queta organized the first public rosaries at her shrine in 2002 and since then the practice has proliferated throughout Mexico and increasingly in this country. In Mexico City alone thousands of adherents participate in the dozens of rosaries held each month in the grittier parts of town such as the sprawling Iztapalapa district and Tepito.

As the oldest and best attended, Doña Queta's monthly rosary service provides a fascinating glimpse of the rapidly growing public side of the cult. Held the first day of each month, the iconic rosary service attracts faithful from all corners of the massive metropolitan area. Many devotees arrive at the landmark shrine in the morning, well before the late afternoon service, in order to claim a piece of prime real estate for their Bony Lady statuettes on the sidewalk abutting the renowned altar. Having spent significant time at the altar and the nearby market of counterfeit and contraband goods, I was astonished at the transformation that had taken place when I visited the shrine on August 1, 2009. Devotees and vendors alike had turned the

normally quiet side street, named Alfarería, into a bustling combination of pilgrimage site, carnival, and open-air market. I had been disappointed at having missed the rosary service the previous month but now was excited to be able to participate in the paramount collective ritual of the cult.

Arriving by bus from Morelia that morning, my wife, daughter, and I exited the Tepito subway station midafternoon to find ourselves in the midst of a dizzyingly large crowd of devotees and passersby. At makeshift stalls lining both sides of the street in the three blocks from the metro station to Alfarería Street, vendors hawked every imaginable type of Santa Muerte paraphernalia, including aerosol sprays and silk-screened hoodies. More affordable candles, in all seven colors, and figurines, however, claimed much more space on the folding card tables upon which the merchants of Saint Death displayed their products. We slowly made our way to Doña Queta's, stopping to watch several devotees, who in fulfillment of vows to the White Girl were not approaching the shrine on foot but on their knees, in the same way some Catholics arrive at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and other pilgrimage sites. Inching forward on her knees with help from a family member who softened the unforgiving concrete with pieces of cardboard, twentysomething Claudia told us she was happily fulfilling a vow made to the Powerful Lady, who had saved her newborn daughter from a life-threatening illness.

As we ambled past the last few paraphernalia stands, taking some videos along the way, one of the vendors called us over to her stand and advised us to hide the camera since the place was "crawling with thieves." Well aware of the danger, we ignored the vendor's sage advice and filmed pretty much everything we could. As we came upon the famous street I couldn't believe it was the same tranquil place I had visited so many times. Santa Muertistas and onlookers had crammed themselves wall to wall

on the narrow street and sidewalks. Though people of all ages had come, young men in their teens, twenties, and thirties predominated. Tobacco and marijuana smoke wafted over the summer breeze and mixed with alcoholic fumes from hundred of cans of beer and bottles of liquor to produce an intoxicating air. Adding to the hallucinatory vibe were the thousands of statuettes and even a few full-size statues that stood on the pavement or were nestled like babies in their owners' arms. Effigies of the skeleton saint appeared in red, black, and purple; they were hand carved, machine made, resin, wood, acrylic, or papier-mâché, and one was even dressed in khaki combat fatigues with a loaded bandolier crisscrossing her chest. Every time I turned my head yet another unique image caught my eyes in what was nothing short of a carnival of Saint Deaths.

With such an orgy of imagery it was really hard to remember to keep on the lookout for trouble. My daughter and I seemed to be the only obvious foreigners in the crowd, and, standing five-seven and light-complected, my wife is often mistaken by her fellow Mexicans for a *gringa* or European. Just as we found an ideal spot on the sidewalk in front of a restaurant that had closed for the day, Doña Queta picked up a microphone and in a string of expletives encouraged the crowd of the faithful to quickly vacate the street at the end of the service, lest they fall prey to the "fucking thieves" waiting to rob them. Curiously, in a barrio where residents fear the cops as much if not more than the robbers, Enriqueta pleaded with devotees in the crowd to lobby any relatives they might have on the police force for uniformed officers, who were nowhere in sight, to be present at future services. Because of such security concerns, the godmother of the cult had first changed the time of the rosary from midnight to eight in the evening, and now, in order to beat nightfall, the devotional pioneer, whom some adherents believe to be a witch, had moved it

up to five o'clock. As the mariachi band that had been hired by a devotee to serenade the White Girl finished their last song before the start of the service, Doña Queta handed the mic to her son, who welcomed the crowd and commenced the Santa Muerte rosary with a request to God for permission to invoke the skeleton saint's name.

In a monotone reminiscent of some Catholic priests, Romero led Santa Muertistas through the hour-long rosary, which adhered very closely to the printed version given to me by his mother. Without going into the minutiae of the epic prayer, let's focus on the highlights. As in the novena, the Pretty Girl is the protagonist of the rosary. However, here God, Jesus, and Mary play strong supporting roles in the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, and Glory Be that are repeated throughout the rosary. Devotees, though, had overwhelmingly come to either ask Saint Death for a specific miracle or thank her for one already granted. The collection of thematic prayers included in the rosary reflects this reality. In leading the rosary, Romero can choose from one that focuses on employment, the sick, the dead, prisoners, drug addicts, thwarting enemies, and, of course, protection.

Instead of asking the Virgin for help with such matters, as in the Catholic version, adherents at Doña Queta's look to Santa Muerte. Her almost complete substitution for the Mother of God is reflected in the closing prayer: "With you I go, Most Holy Death. And I leave trusting in your power. I leave you having been helped and knowing that my soul will return safely. Sweet mother, don't draw away, don't take your sight off me. Come with me everywhere and never leave me alone, and since you already protect me like a true mother, have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless me. Amen." In the prayer of The Protecting Scythe, the Bony Lady is less sweetly maternal and more the Powerful Lady wielding a lethal instrument in protection of her spiritual children:

> White Lady, I kneel at your feet to ask you and implore that you make those who try to destroy me feel your strength, power, and omnipresence. Lady, I implore you to be my shield and guard against evil, such that your protecting scythe levels the obstacles that may arise and that closed doors are opened and the paths are revealed. My lady, there is no evil that you can't vanquish, nor impossibility that doesn't wither when faced with your intercession. I surrender myself to you and await your benevolence. Amen.

MASS OF DEATH

As hundreds of devotees recited the rosary in unison, gritty Alfarería Street was turned into an open-air sanctuary. A couple of feet away from me, tears streamed down the cherubic cheeks of a teenage goth dressed in black from head to toe and clutching her Santa Muerte as Bride statuette in both hands. Trouble at home, I wondered? Many other devotees appeared to be feeling similarly intense emotions as they recited the collective prayers. As is the case, however, at most religious events attended by the working classes, including Mass, a significant number of attendees were engaged in other activities, such as chatting with friends and family, changing diapers, and texting and talking on cell phones. Here the sacred and profane mixed freely, refusing to be cordoned off in separate spaces. Heeding Doña Queta's warning to rush home after the service, the three of us made a beeline for the Tepito subway station as devotees recited the concluding prayer. The Grim Reapress's scythe, in the form of an unsolicited tattoo stamped on my daughter's arm, seemed to protect us as we whisked by potential dangers on our way back to the hotel.

While tens, if not hundreds, of such rosary services take place on a monthly basis on both sides of the border, a few Santa Muerte

"masses" are held on a daily basis, most notably at temples in Los Angeles and Mexico City. Saint Death archbishop Romo pioneered the mass partly as a way to differentiate his services from those of his main rival, Doña Queta. Emulating the Catholic Charismatic movement, Father Romo holds thematic masses dedicated to the most important concerns of worshipers. On Thursdays devotees who are sick or demon-possessed can attend two different masses. At noon Romo conducts an exorcism and liberation mass and then at five o'clock leads a healing service. In integrating two of the great attractions of charismatic Christianity into his brand of the Santa Muerte cult, Romo has created an intriguing religious hybrid that has the potential to attract scores of new devotees with its heterodox mix of spirited Christianity and neogothic death worship. An expert at savvy religious marketing, Padre Romo recently developed a new worship service for his core constituency. The church website invites worshipers to "bring a photo of your inmate" to the Friday afternoon "mass for prisoners."[9] This is the church's only service dedicated to a specific group of people, which reflects the high percentage of worshipers who have relatives and loved ones serving time.

DEATH IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

In addition to mass, both Romo's Iglesia Santa Católica Apostólica Tradicional Mex-USA and the Templo Santa Muerte in Los Angeles offer the full range of Catholic-like sacraments and services. "Professors" Sisyphus and Sahara of the Saint Death Temple perform weddings, baptisms, and, unlike Archbishop Romo, monthly rosaries. Claiming to be the godson and goddaughter of the skeleton saint, the two cult leaders also teach a hodgepodge of classes derived from New Age beliefs, magic, and parapsychology. Curiously, none of the nineteen courses listed on their website mentions Santa Muerte. Among the classes, all of which are apparently "completely free [of charge],"

are-"Chackras (Auras), Magic Therapy (plants baths), Past Lives (Regressions and karmatical life), Angels (Saints y Angels. Yes, there is Karma, hell, devil)" and "Numerology (Cabala)."

Both temple leaders emigrated from Mexico, where Profesora Sahara traveled on an unusual spiritual path that brought her to the temple of the Skinny Lady.

> Originally from the State of Oaxaca, at the age of nine she met Jesus, and he told her that he would answer all her petitions only if she left her hometown. At age thirty all her petitions were answered. However after an accident that left her in a coma she re-encounters Jesus. Jesus tells her that the time has come to start her mission, and she decides to take refuge in religion, but doesn't find the path until at age thirty-seven she met Santa Muerte one day. And that's how Profesora Sahara began her spiritual journey.

Professor Sisyphus's biographical sketch, in contrast, makes no references to a Christian past in his home state of Nayarit or his former career as a wrestler. Rather, it emphasizes his apprenticeship with two Mexican shamans, the second of which "taught him how to speak to Most Holy Death." The two godchildren of Saint Death host a more sophisticated website (http://templosantamuerte.com/temple.htm) than that of David Romo. An evening chat room, streaming music, and podcasts of Masses allow for much greater interaction on the part of devotees. Romo's site, in contrast, is often down or excruciatingly slow.

A few miles across town in the heart of the Mexican and Central American immigrant community, near MacArthur Park, the Santuario Universal de Santa Muerte (Saint Death Universal Sanctuary) didn't have a website but appeared to be attracting more devotees than the other temple on Melrose Avenue. Founded in 2003 by

"Professor" Santiago Guadalupe, a long-time Santa Muerte shaman from Mexico's famous witchcraft town, Catemaco, Veracruz, the storefront church, located in a run-down strip mall, welcomed a steady stream of Santa Muertistas during my visit there in December 2009. A lifelike statue of a black hound with sinister-looking red eyes guarded the front entrance of the temple from those who might enter the sacred space with dubious intentions. As I waited for my appointment with Professor Santiago I filmed the sanctuary and inspected the altar. A full-scale effigy of the Bony Lady dressed in a white satin robe cut a queenly figure standing atop a golden throne. Among the usual offerings on the altar were a few unusual ones that caught my eye. With Christmas just a few days away, red-and-white-striped candy canes hung from the saint's skinny arm. Childish cutouts of Santa Claus and his reindeers taped on the sanctuary walls added to the seasonal imagery and reminded me of the flexibility and inclusivity of the cult. And to my great surprise, after having spent considerable time pondering the absence of soft drinks at altars in Mexico, I spied a can of Coke partially obscured by the surrounding offerings of Corona and Tecate beer and José Cuervo tequila. Later that afternoon, Professor Santiago explained that on a scorching day in November a devotee had offered the ice-cold soda to the parched skeleton saint, and that worshipers are free to regale their patroness with whatever they wish. He couldn't explain why I had never seen soft drinks at altars in Mexico, leaving me to further contemplation of the enigma.

Another first unfolded before my eyes as I continued to wait for the professor to appear. Seated on the first pew, I watched as a fortyish-looking devotee crossed himself with a black votive candle, lit it, and placed it at the foot of the altar among dozens of other devotional candles. In all my time spent at Doña Queta's shrine, I had never seen a black candle offered to the Powerful Lady. I was, of course, very curious about the nature of the offering

I had just witnessed but thought it would be better not to approach devotees without the consent of Professor Santiago. Wondering if there might be more black candles than usual here, I moved closer to the altar to discover that this was the case, though not by much. White and red ones far outnumbered the black candles, which numbered about the same as the gold ones that had been presented to the Grim Reapress as petitions for prosperity. Later, during the much-awaited interview, the Santa Muerte shaman said that the crimson candles, aligned neatly on shelves in a storeroom adjacent to his office, rank as the best seller at the church, followed by white.

Perhaps even more intriguing than the burnt offering of black wax, the can of Coke, and the Christmas candy canes were the two types of objects pinned on to the skeleton saint's robe. A perfect symbol of her power of protection and association with crime and punishment, a badge bearing a very close resemblance to those worn by LAPD officers but actually belonging to a private security guard was fastened to her left breast. Professor Santiago confirmed that a security guard had offered it to Saint Death in gratitude for shielding him with her protective scythe from the dangers of his job. Also pinned to her cloak were dozens of petitions and notes of gratitude written mostly on lined notebook paper. This is another import from folk Catholicism in Mexico and the rest of Latin America in which thousands of statues of saints, both canonized and folk ones, are papered with prayers. Most had been folded in a manner that hid their content, but a few hadn't. Tucked at knee-level into the effigy's stark white robe, the most visible note read "Martha Gaines Esq, Zurawski, Jardine y Houston—[claim # redacted]" It turns out that Martha Gaines is a Los Angeles attorney who specializes in workers' compensation cases, so the author of the note obviously had sought to enlist the Powerful Lady's supernatural aid in a case. In all likelihood Gaines had no idea that her

legal services were advertised at the Santuario Universal de Santa Muerte. Higher up on the robe, at waist height, another unfolded petition read, "Have Armando stay away from my daughter forever and help Jaime find work." Reinforcing the omnipresent theme of incarceration, the final legible prayer note, safety-pinned to the White Girl's right arm, echoed thousands of similar pleas made by desperate devotees every day on both sides of the border: "I want my Daddy to get out of jail."

As I was imagining a little girl missing her imprisoned father, Professor Santiago finally emerged from a dark corridor connecting the offices and paraphernalia shop with the sanctuary. With classic indigenous features, long flowing locks, a wispy Che Guevara–like beard, and a penetrating gaze, he looked every bit the part of a Catemaco shaman. He generously gave me almost two hours of his time, in which he revealed a few ritual practices, among other things, that I had not come across in my research in Mexico. Most significant is the ritual that he performs in which male devotees are wedded to Saint Death for a period of six months. Meant to symbolize total devotion to the Pretty Girl ("till death do us part"), the abbreviated marriage requires sexual abstinence and other sacrifices. Thus, at the most important church in Los Angeles, a city that is home to more Mexicans than any other except Mexico City, the Powerful Lady has further developed her female identity, adding the role of wife to the well-established one of mother.

Both a keen sense of history and religious entrepreneurship led Professor Santiago to develop another notable ritual innovation. Worship services dedicated to each of the three historical colors of the skeleton saint are offered on a monthly basis. Worshipers seeking a solution to romantic and emotional problems can attend the red Santa Muerte service, in which the statue at the altar dons a crimson robe. Devotees in search of protection from evil spells and dangerous

Figure 2.4 Holy smoke—a devotee makes an offering of cigar smoke to the most famous image of Santa Muerte, Doña Queta's in Tepito. © Jorge Uzon/Corbis

enemies can pray to a black-robed Grim Reapress at another service. And those wanting to give thanks for a favor granted or wishing to purify their soul can communicate with the White Girl, who was holding court the day I visited the temple. Such ritual innovations are also the product of a savvy religious entrepreneur who knows that in a competitive market of faith, spiritual enterprises must offer attractive products and services. Professor Santiago's three-color worship services are a brilliant example of marginal differentiation of a standardized product. In other words, the Santa Muerte Temple a few miles away and David Romo's church in Mexico City both offer worship services, or the standardized product; Professor Santiago has taken the standard-issue product and colorfully modified it. As I have shown in previous work,[10] such religious production and marketing is a normal part of free-market religious economies in which savvy spiritual entrepreneurs realize that the

fate of their enterprise depends on consumers who can choose among hundreds if not thousands of brands of faith. Along with his novel services and rituals, Professor Santiago joins his competitors in LA and Mexico City in offering baptisms, weddings, rosaries, novenas, exorcisms, cleansings, and individual spiritual counseling.

Chapter 3

Black Candle

Protection and Harm

If any particular chapter of this book stands out as the most significant, it is this one. While I have shown that 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. This is part of the reason that I have gone to great lengths to emphasize her variegated identity. Very few media reports and films show anything but the dark side of the cult. Most American and Mexican nonbelievers, for example, have little idea that the Skinny Lady heals sickness, finds employment, and helps alcoholics and drug addicts in their struggles for sobriety. Subsequent chapters will explore the skeleton saint's lesser-known roles as healer and job broker, among others. Here, however we will consider the decidedly non-Christian and often amoral Santa Muerte who is asked to perform all sorts of dark deeds.

The anthropological field reports of the mid-twentieth century reveal only Saint Death of the crimson candle of love and passion. However, in punishing wayward husbands and boyfriends by binding them and delivering them "humbled" at the feet of aggrieved women, the Powerful Lady showed that she can be a formidable agent of vengeance. It would appear that until the late 1980s her role as avenging angel was limited to affairs of the heart, mostly working on behalf of jealous and jilted wives and girlfriends. If her role of avenger extended beyond going after Mexican men behaving badly into more

dangerous matters, she and her followers did a good job of keeping the black candle hidden from the public eye.

DEATHLY ABDUCTIONS

The skeleton saint would end her centuries-long clandestine existence at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. The Grim Reapress first received widespread national press coverage in 1998 with the arrest of Mochaorejas (Ear Chopper), the notorious Mexican kidnapper whom police allowed to bring a figurine of his matron saint with him to prison. The brutal exploits of Mochaorejas and his gang regularly made the front pages of Mexican tabloids and also received substantial coverage in the mainstream press. The Ear Chopper blazed a trail for the Mexican kidnapping industry, a criminal enterprise that now leads the world in the number of annual abductions, ahead of Brazil and Colombia. And unbeknownst to many Americans, the practice of abducting people for ransom has rapidly moved north across the border, where Phoenix has become the kidnapping capital of the United States, with 358 reported in 2008.

While the Godmother garnered national attention for the first time in 1998, her media debut, albeit on a much smaller scale than the Mochaorejas story, was a decade earlier, in 1989. A Cuban-American narco, Adolfo Constanzo, headed a band of traffickers in the Mexican border city of Matamoros in the 1980s. The search for a missing college student from Texas, Mark Kilroy, led to Constanzo's ranch on the outskirts of town, where a gruesome scene was discovered. Police found human remains, including those of the missing student, in sacrificial cauldrons and buried on the property. Dubbed "*narcosatanicos*" by the Mexican press, Constanza and his gang practiced a deviant form of the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Mayombe mixed with Mexican occult practices. Constanza 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.[1] It's not clear exactly what role she played in the narco cult, but this was her media debut as a sinister Grim Reapress linked to ritual human sacrifice and drug trafficking.

DEALING DRUGS AND DEATH

While all kinds of outlaws have been apprehended on both sides of the border with paraphernalia of the Powerful Lady, it is the drug traffickers who receive the most media attention for their devotion to the saint of death. As the illicit drug industry has become a multibillion-dollar business in Mexico and one of the main sources of revenue in the country, the Skinny Lady has rapidly supplanted Jesús Malverde, except in his home state of Sinaloa, as the matron saint of both narcos and agents of the Mexican law charged with disrupting the trade. Many traffickers of heroin, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines offer black candles to Saint Death in soliciting both protection from and harm for business rivals and drug enforcement agents. As a defensive weapon, the Godmother's steel scythe shields tens of thousands of Mexicans employed by the various cartels from the bullets fired by both rival cartel members and cops and soldiers and also from the knives, machetes, and even vats of acid employed by syndicate assassins. Known as "*el Pozolero*" (stew maker), Tijuana-based cartel hit man Santiago Meza López claims to have dissolved some three hundred of his boss's enemies in cauldrons of the corrosive liquid. Earning thirty-one thousand dollars a year for liquidating victims fingered by his employer, Meza López, adhering to a warped sense of chivalry, refused to dissolve women in the vats, preferring to murder them in more "humane" ways.[2] Knowing that their eminently dangerous trade could very well lead them to such violent deaths, scores of devotees, working at all levels of the ultralucrative industry, implore the saint of death to prolong their life and spare them from a horrific demise. Likewise, narcos ask the White Girl to watch over their precious merchandise, concealing the tons of pills, powder, and

paste from the DEA, Mexican army, and federal police, among others, with her protective black cloak. With a staggering 600 percent profit to be made on the sale of illicit drugs, dealers enlist all sorts of measures, both natural and supernatural, to ensure the safety and integrity of their product.

Before delving further into Santa Muerte's complex roles in both propagating and protecting the Mexican drug trade on one hand and in combating it on the other, it would be useful to consider the contours of an industry that has recently turned Mexico into what some

Figure 3.1 Death's devotee—a young Santa Muertista at Doña Queta's monthly rosary service. © Jorge Uzon/Corbis

call a narcostate and one of the most violent places on earth. Often obscured in discussion and debate of drug policy in the United States is the important fact that the country constitutes the largest market in the world for narcotics and stimulants. For example, the approximately seven million cocaine users in the United States consume 45 percent of the highly addictive stimulant sold on global markets. Given Mexico's direct access to the world's largest black market in drugs, it was just a matter of time before Mexico capitalized on this geographic advantage to become the leading supplier of illegal psychotropic substances to its northern neighbor. Both Mexico and Colombia, as well as many other Latin American nations, have recently witnessed a rapid rise in domestic demand for mind-altering drugs, but the home markets pale in both size and profitability compared to the American one. Many readers will know that Mexican regional hegemony in the drug trade is relatively recent. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, Mexican traffickers were very much the junior partners of their more savvy Colombian counterparts. But a multibillion-dollar war subsidized by Washington against the Colombian cartels of Medellín and Cali and increasing sophistication on the part of Mexican mafias combined to produce a new configuration in which the cartels of Sinaloa, the Gulf, La Familia (Michoacán), Tijuana, and Juárez became masters of their own territory and are now the senior partners of the Colombians, who transship 93 percent of their U.S.-bound cocaine through Mexico.[3]

The combination of hyperprofitability and the illegality of the industry has resulted in a paroxysm of violence that has seized Mexico, especially in the past three years. As Mexican cartels competed with each other to supplant the Colombians, narco bosses dispatched their hired guns with increasing frequency in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period the cartels' guns were mostly aimed at each other, with the occasional hits on local police and "collateral damage" of civilians caught in the crossfire. Presidents Ernesto

Zedillo (1994–2000) and Vicente Fox (2000–2006) presided over the occasional high-profile arrest and seizure of drugs, but neither head of state declared war on the cartels (at least on individual ones) the way that current president Felipe Calderón has.

Assuming office in December 2006 after an election that was every bit as close and controversial as the Gore-Bush contest of 2000, Calderón had raised hopes that job creation would be his primary focus. From Chihuahua to Chiapas, candidate Calderón touted himself as "the employment president" and promised "clean hands . . . so that we may live better."[4] Within the first months of his administration, it became clear that Calderón, despite his campaign slogans, was going to focus on waging a full-scale drug war. The police at all levels and, most importantly, the army, would be mobilized to combat cartels. Some critics have accused his administration of waging not so much an all-out war on narcotrafficking as a partisan campaign that favors certain cartels over others.[5]

Whatever the truth may be, Calderón's drug war has ratcheted up the violence to unprecedented levels, with an estimated thirty-four thousand Mexicans dying in the first four years of his six-year term. With the recent capture and killing of a few high-profile cartel bosses, including Arturo Beltrán Leyva, a.k.a. "La Muerte" who as the head of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel ranked as the third most-wanted criminal, a maelstrom of violence has engulfed the nation. Both intra- and intercartel fighting have sharply increased, as the removal of bosses often unleashes a power struggle within drug gangs as well-armed factions vie for leadership, and, of course, externally, rival cartels attempt to capitalize on the leadership vacuum. Calderón's drug war has also escalated the violence by turning the police and army into the main agents of enforcement and interdiction. Thus far the army has suffered very few casualties, despite some high-profile cases spotlighted in the media. Municipal police, who have a harder time remaining anonymous

than their state and federal counterparts, have borne the brunt of cartel counteroffensives.

While I was conducting research in Michoacán in July 2009, the Familia Cartel launched the most brazen counterattack against government forces to date. In one twenty-four-hour period, twelve municipal police officers were found on the side of the highway linking Morelia to Lázaro Cárdenas, a major port on the Pacific coast. They had been shot at close range, execution style. And as I write, there is news of a massacre in Juárez in which gunmen affiliated with the Juárez Cartel machine-gunned a group of teenagers attending a late-night party and killed sixteen of them. Apparently none of the dead adolescents were involved in the drug trade, but the assassins mistook them for members of the rival Sinaloa Cartel. In short, Calderón's major offensive against the cartels, backed by both Presidents Bush and Obama, has resulted in a bloodbath with no end in sight. Both the Mexican government and the cartels have kept the Grim Reapress extremely busy in her traditional role as reaper of souls.

Mexican media would have us believe that the skeleton saint's role in the drug war is simple and obvious. She is the patron saint of narcos who plays both defense and offense for the cartel members that venerate her. And as one of the premier symbols of narcoculture (*narcocultura*), along with *narcocorrridos* (narcoballads) and certain genres of film, fashion, and vehicles (black Hummers, Escalades, Suburbans, and Ford F-Series pickups), Saint Death has been targeted by the Calderón administration as religious enemy number one. The great irony is that more than a few cops and army grunts are themselves devotees of the Pretty Girl. Her appeal to all sides in the drug war testifies to both the astonishing rapidity of the growth of her cult and the force of her attraction to those whose line of work gives them an acute sense of their own mortality. We all get up each morning not knowing if this will be our last day on earth. However, for Mexican drug dealers and police officers alike, the real possibility

of violent death on a daily basis leads to a heightened awareness of their own demise. Who better to watch over those whose lives are constantly on the line than she who has the power to both preserve and extinguish life?

If the Calderón administration is targeting Santa Muerte herself in the war against the cartels, it is largely due to the impressive numbers of narcos who have been apprehended with Powerful Lady paraphernalia on their persons or captured or killed at safe houses containing her altar. Over the past decade, arrests and killings of low-level drug dealers found with evidence of devotion to the Bony Lady have become routine. What is more extraordinary are the higher-ranking cartel bosses and hit men who have been detained sporting tattoos, pendants, engraved pistols, and other images of Saint Death. First to make the headlines among cartel bosses was Gilberto García Mena of the Gulf Cartel. In April 2001, the Mexican army stormed his mansion in a small town in Tamaulipas and found García Mena hiding in an underground bunker, and Santa Muerte residing in a garden.[6] More recently, in 2006, teen narco assassins Gabriel Cardona and Rosalio Reto appeared on the pages of the website Hollywood Celebs Gossips sporting Santa Muerte tattoos on their backs. Based in Laredo, Texas, the boys murdered numerous people on both sides of the border on behalf of the notorious Zetas Cartel.

The devotion of a certain narco capo to the White Girl was fictionalized in the 2004 novel *La Santa Muerte* by the Mexican environmentalist and former diplomat Homero Aridjis. A real page turner, the book recounts the protagonist's participation in a twenty-four-hour birthday bash thrown by one of the country's leading drug traffickers on his ranch outside of Mexico City in 2000. Movie and TV celebrities, state governors, fellow traffickers from both sides of the border, and even a Catholic bishop help the prominent capo celebrate his fiftieth birthday. This piece of pulp

fiction climaxes with the cartel capo, the governor, the bishop of Sinaloa, a brigadier general, and the head of the judicial police, among other devotees, kneeling in front of a life-size statue of Santa Muerte dressed in black. The murderous governor commences the prayer session to the Powerful Lady of protection and vengeance:

> O Saint Death, protect me and deliver me from my enemies. Ambush them, torture them, sicken them, kill them, grind them up. O Saint Death, you who rule the world, in the name of those who are here prostrate, I ask you for power against my adversaries, that they don't crush me, arrest me, or kill me. I ask you, my Saint Death, not to abandon me at night or during the day and to defend me from betrayal on the part of both enemies and friends. Also I ask you for the violent deaths of those who would do me harm. Take them to the House of Darkness where the dead shiver from the cold. Take them to the House of Bats amid the cries and fluttering of those who been shot and stabbed. Take them to the House of Knives, to the sound of clashing steel. You, who can do everything, Saint Death, grant me this favor. Amen.[7]

Birthday boy Santiago López tells the devotees of death to "seal the pact" with blood, and the brigadier general seconds the motion, explaining that they need to appease Santa Muerte through human sacrifice. An actor dressed as the Grim Reapress rushes into the chapel and lunges at one of the three ritual victims, who has been identified by army intelligence as the disguised head of a rival cartel, and stabs him with a black obsidian knife. Others gathered in the chapel take their stabs at the exposed capo and at two characters with ties to enemies of Santiago López. As the three bleed to death in the ritual sacrifice, journalist Miguel Medina

(Aridjis's pseudonym) is whisked out of the chapel by menacing security forces.

In a recent phone interview, Aridjis emphatically claimed that the novel is based on real events to which he was an eyewitness. I specifically asked if there really were a state governor, Catholic bishop, head of the judicial police, and brigadier general among the devotees of Saint Death at the 2000 narco fiesta, and he answered, "All the people I put in the novel were really there. I just had to change their names."[8] Whatever the degree of fictionalization, Aridjis's skeleton saint is an unequivocally evil spiritual patroness of narcos and other malefactors. Rattlesnakes, tarantulas, and scorpions stand guard at the altar of La Santa Muerte, who, like the Aztec deities, demands the ultimate sacrifice, human blood, from her worshipers.

Back here in the United States, Santa Muertista drug traffickers make the news at least as often as their counterparts in Mexico. In November 2008, a federal grand jury in Tennessee indicted thirty-three people on conspiracy to possess and distribute more than two thousand pounds of marijuana in the eastern part of the state. The DEA's account of the Pretty Girl's involvement in this drug enterprise is worth repeating verbatim.

> During the investigation, DEA agents and Washington County Sheriff's Office investigators discovered that members of the organization were using iconic figures from the Mexican culture as a means to protect themselves from law enforcement agents and to provide them with luck. These figures include "La Santa Muerta" [*sic*], known in Mexican culture and [*sic*] the "Saint of Holy Death," and "Jesus Malverde," who is commonly referred to as the "Patron Saint of Narco Traffickers." Neither figure is recognized by the Catholic Church. The worship of these figures is becoming more widespread across the United States, and this investigation marks the first significant encounter of these figures in the Eastern District of Tennessee.[9]

The misspelling of her name, bad translation, and reference to "the Mexican culture" reveal an astonishing degree of ignorance on the part of the DEA. After all, this is not Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Colombia, but our southern neighbor with whom we share a two-thousand-mile border.

DEA ignorance aside, an even more recent drug bust shows that the White Girl has established residence far beyond the large Mexican and Central American immigrant communities of our big cities. Ogden, Utah, joins Johnsonville, Tennessee, and Richmond, Virginia, as a small city where the saint of death draws devotees. In a raid on the home of a married couple whom Ogden police described as top-ranking narcotraffickers in Utah, agents found thirteen pounds of crystal meth, an M-16, and statuettes of Santa Muerte and Saint Jude, patron of lost causes. In the police photo released to the local media, a twelve-inch, seven-color figurine of the saint, brandishing an unusually large scythe, flanks the left side of three plastic bags of methamphetamines, while her partner in crime, San Judas Tadeo, stands to the right. Completing the staged crime scene are the M-16, a revolver, and a sizeable stack of hundred-dollar bills.[10] When the image is blown up 200 percent, the Powerful Lady seems to be scowling at the photographer, while the patron saint of lost causes looks bewildered among the drugs and weapons next to him on the table.

Chances are that the police photographer who snapped the picture of the two saints and their meth lab in Ogden isn't a member of the cult of Santa Muerte, but many of his counterparts in Mexico are. And it's not so far-fetched to imagine that more than a few agents of the law in this country look to the Bony Lady for protection as they pursue narcos and other dangerous outlaws such as those arrested in Ogden and Johnsonville. In fact, two major Santa Muerte cult leaders in LA claimed to know LAPD officers who worship the skeleton saint. Interim LAPD police chief Michael Downing knew nothing

about the Angel of Death's presence in the City of Angels, much less about any following she might have in his own ranks.[11]

DEATH'S POLICE

South of the border, Saint Death, despite her media image, isn't so much the guardian angel of narcos as she is the patroness of the drug war. In other words, her devotion among the police, soldiers, and prison guards, those on the front lines of the Mexican government's war against the cartels, seems as widespread as it is among the traffickers they are fighting. A giant portrait of the skeleton saint stands at the entrance of the barracks of an elite police commando unit in Mexico City.[12] Even more impressive is the municipal police force of the city of Valle de Chalco, in the State of Mexico. Half of the 380 officers sport embroidered images of their patron saint on their uniforms. Stitched on 190 police shirts, the Bony Lady appears alongside such popular death-related maxims as "Fear not wherever you may go, since you'll die where you're supposed to," "When death appears in our path, she is welcome," and "Any day is a good one to die." Chief of Police Tomás Lagunes Muñoz explained the Pretty Girl's appeal to his men in terms of the inherent risk of the profession. "They say if you have a Santa Muerte on you that you're a devotee and stuff like that, but its meaning is that the police officers are exposed to losing their lives, and that's the place we're all headed—an encounter with death." Valle de Chalco police stated that elements of the federal forces, namely the Policía Judicial (judicial police) and Procuraduría General de la República (attorney general's office) also wear such images of Saint Death.[13]

In Tijuana, many cops believe that the effigy of Santa Muerte in their commander's home saved him from what seemed to be certain death. On the evening of April 16, 2008, five vehicles full of cartel assassins pulled up to Commander Jesús Hurtado's home in the border city that is one of the epicenters of the drug war. Alerted quickly by a neighbor boy, Hurtado and his bodyguard opened fire first, killing

two of the attackers and repelling the rest. That the two men received only superficial gunshot wounds and were able to fend off an attack by at least twenty gangsters was explained by many on the local force as a miracle performed by the three-foot statue of the skeleton saint at the commander's home altar.[14] Santa Muertistas who work as agents of the law describe their devotion to the Skinny Lady almost exclusively in terms of her power of protection. As she dramatically shielded Commander Hurtado from the death squad sent against him, Santa Muerte of the black votive candle provides supernatural protection to the cops and army grunts whose missions are so dangerous that many of them don black ski masks to hide their identities from narco hit men. Although they don't talk about it to the Mexican press, we can imagine that, like their narco enemies, devotees charged with fighting Calderón's drug war also burn black candles for purposes of vengeance. It wouldn't be too far-fetched, for instance, to imagine Commander Hurtado asking the Godmother to inflict injury on the cartel gunmen who came after him.

Where law enforcement agents are burning black candles at both ends is in Mexican prisons. Even more than the army, police, and special forces, prison guards are on the front lines of the drug war. As is the case in the United States, Mexican penitentiaries are packed to the rafters with inmates serving time for drug charges. And, of course, many of them are Santa Muertistas who erect makeshift altars to their patron saint and continue to sell and consume their products within prison walls. Facing a constant threat of violence in the form of riots and gang fights or stemming from personal vendettas, many Mexican prison guards have emulated their incarcerated charges and turned to the Bony Lady for protection from the inmates and, most likely, for harm to some of them as well. My nephew, the guard at the state prison in Morelia, told me that at least 20 percent of his coworkers are devotees of Saint Death. He corroborated the statements made by two prison officials in Mexico City that the skeleton saint has become

the spiritual patroness of the Mexican penal system, hearing prayers and petitions from not only inmates and guards but also social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and families of the prisoners.[15] Recall how cult pioneer Doña Queta initiated public devotion with an effigy given to her by her son upon his release from prison.

Having seen how the Bony Lady appeals to thousands of the soldiers, police officers, and prison guards on the front lines of Calderón's war against the cartels, we arrive at the intriguing contradiction facing many of the front-line troops. The Calderón administration has held up Santa Muerte as the preeminent religious symbol of narcoculture and declared war against the Powerful Lady, even bulldozing dozens of her shrines on the U.S.-Mexico border in March 2009. One can imagine that more than a few soldiers who were ordered to raze the sacred sites were themselves devotees of Saint Death. Given their patron saint's tremendous powers of vengeance, some of those soldiers must have been scared to death.

CULTURE OF DEATH

Explaining just how the White Sister ended up as an enemy of the Mexican state requires some background information on *narcocultura.* On both sides of the border, drug dealers create a distinctive set of behavior patterns, traits, beliefs, and products that in many ways distinguishes them from more mainstream Mexican and American cultures. In the realm of beliefs, devotion to Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and possibly Saint Jude definitely sets narcos apart from strongly Catholic mainstream Mexican culture. My parents-in-law in Morelia belong to this latter culture, so much so that I, their gringo son-in-law, was the one who introduced them to Santa Muerte. Noteworthy products of narcoculture, besides narcotics and stimulants, include fashion, vehicle choice and customization, and, most importantly, music. We'll consider Santa Muerte–influenced clothing and jewelry in the gold-colored chapter on prosperity.

Long before the skeleton saint went public, narcoballads (narcocorridos) recounted the exploits of Mexican drug traffickers, particularly in the north and border region. As far back as the 1950s, the band Los Alegres de Terán were belting out ballads such as their hit "El Contrabando del Paso" (El Paso Contraband), and still decades before the Skinny Lady emerged from Doña Queta's quesadilla kitchen, Los Tigres del Norte (The Tigers of the North) became narcocorrido superstars in the 1970s with tunes such as "La Mafia Muere" (The Mafia Dies) and "Contrabando y Traición" (Contraband and Betrayal). As both the drug trade itself and this genre of polka- and waltz-inspired ballads proliferated at the end of the 1990s, so did the mostly unsuccessful attempts on the part of state governments to censor the corridos. Most northern state governments such as those of Nuevo León, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Baja California signed "voluntary agreements" with radio broadcasters in which the broadcasters pledged to stop playing the popular ballads.[16] Legislators in favor of such censorship allege that the ballads glorify and glamorize narcoculture, making it alluring to Mexican youth.

Given Santa Muerte's strong association with the Mexican drug trade, it's only natural that she herself has become the star of at least a few ballads and even has crossover appeal with fans of salsa, cumbia, and gangster rap. One corrido in particular, "La Santísima Muerte" (Most Holy Death), has become an instant classic. Sung by renowned balladeers Beto Quintanilla and Los Cadetes de Linares, both from the state of Nuevo León, the lyrics are unparalleled.

Many have a ballad—there are ones about narcos, about women,
and others about unlucky illegals.
[. . .]
Today I sing to the patroness—to Santísima Muerte.
[. . .]

> There are millions who pray to her, and the Church is beginning to tremble, even priests are openly praying to her.

Though sung by narco balladeers, this corrido is a paean to Saint Death in which gangsters are just one of the many social groups that worship her and seek her out for dark deeds. Most striking of all is the claim, first presented in fictionalized form by Homero Aridjis, that some Catholic clerics have joined the cult of Santa Muerte. At present there is no evidence to substantiate such a claim, but just the fact that it is being made in certain quarters is striking and intriguing. Also noteworthy in the rest of the song is the skeleton saint's omnipresence and omnipotence. She's "everywhere," even at the altars of Mexico's movers and shakers. And her power, according to the ballad, appears even greater than that of God himself. The original Spanish includes the diminutive "-ito" added to "Dios," for *Diosito,* which can be awkwardly translated as "little God." Through the entire song, the equivalent "Santita Muertesita" is never used for Saint Death. Thus the one who takes life away comes across as more powerful than the one who gives it.

Musical tributes to the Godmother aren't restricted to the genre of ballads. The Mexican hip-hop group Cartel de Santa sings a chilling ode to their patroness, similarly entitled "Santa Muerte." The song is very popular on YouTube and the MySpace pages of numerous Mexican and Central American teenagers and twentysomethings. Like many bands that sing about violence, the Cartel de Santa has itself experienced homicide. Lead vocalist Eduardo "Babo" Dávalos de Luna shot and killed one of his employees in the northern state of Nuevo León in late March 2007. Babo claimed it was an accident, that a bullet he fired into the floor ricocheted and struck his employee.[17] Whatever the truth might be, the lyrics to the song poignantly capture the skeleton saint's appeal to young Mexican men on the margins and the essence of the Bony Lady of the black votive candle.

Special dedication to my Santa Muerte for protecting me and all
my people
[. . .]
For letting me stay alive
[. . .]
For the blessing of a faithful trigger on my piece.

The Cartel de Santa's Santa Muerte is a more personal and intimate saint of death than the omnipresent one of the ballad. Here the Cartel members aren't so much out to show that she is ubiquitous and almighty. Rather, she is the holy mother who, above all, protects her sons (the song oozes hypermasculinity), who are both dangerous and endangered by the perils of their "*vida loca*." But true to the essence of the black candle, the Skinny Lady also blesses acts of vengeance, keeping the trigger finger steady as enemies are lined up in the crosshairs. However, if the Cartel members should themselves end up in the sights of an enemy's gun, they express readiness to heed the call of the Godmother ("I'm ready whenever you tell me") and join her in a "new adventure"—not that these twentysomething hip-hoppers are hoping to cash in their chips anytime soon. Early on in the ode to Saint Death, they express gratitude to her for "letting me stay alive." And in staying alive they can try to fulfill their desire to sell lots of their music. The combination of well-crafted lyrics and a hypnotic beat, punctuated by Mexican-style brass, makes this particular musical tribute to the skeleton saint my personal favorite. Songs of praise to the Bony Lady are found across the Mexican musical landscape and include cumbia and salsa. A salsa tribute, by a relatively obscure band called Los Layra, includes a surreal YouTube video in which the group performs their number in a cavernous temple dedicated to the Bony Lady.

It is in this specific context that the Calderón administration has fingered Santa Muerte as the patron saint of narcoculture. Had the

war against the cartels been launched a decade earlier, Jesús Malverde probably would have been the main target. But the cult of Saint Death has so rapidly eclipsed that of the mustachioed Sinaloan folk saint that in the bulldozing of roadside shrines in 2009, only one of the roughly forty devotional sites razed by the Mexican army belonged to Malverde. The rest, of course, were dedicated to the skeleton saint. That the destruction of her shrines will help win the war against the cartels is of course a chimera. If anything, the desecration of shrines to the country's most venerated folk saint has probably steeled the resolve of many devotees of death and added more than a few new members to the mushrooming cult. Again, presumably at least a few of the soldiers who participated in the offensive against the White Girl and her holy sites were themselves devotees. Given the saint's reputation for vengeance, we can imagine that these grunts have been fervently performing rituals aimed at placating the wrath of the Grim Reapress.

DEATH TO THE PAN

Santa Muerte's status as the religious enemy of the state also derives from her perceived opposition to the ruling National Action Party (PAN) of President Calderón. Most significantly, the PAN is the favored political party of the Catholic Church and has been the most pro-Church of the major parties since its creation by prominent Catholics in 1939. Its social agenda is firmly aligned with that of the Church, opposing abortion, same-sex unions, and contraception. Since the 1980s, the Church has already been in a state of panic over the rapid growth of Pentecostalism and neo-Christian groups, especially among the large indigenous populations of the south and on the border with the United States. If the "invasions of the sects" weren't enough to contend with, now the Church is compelled to compete for Mexican souls with a heretical folk saint that is a medieval-ish by-product of indigenous interpretations of

Catholicism and syncretism with native religious practices and more recently with African-Cuban Santería. In leveling the shrines of Saint Death on the border with Texas and California, the PAN-ista administration did a big favor to the Catholic Church by eliminating in one fell swoop tens of competing sacred sites. And between having a robust Protestant presence and being one of the centers of devotion to the Pretty Girl, the border region is precisely one of the places in Mexico where the Catholic Church faces some of its stiffest competition.

In a similar vein, the Godfather of the cult and self-appointed national spokesperson, Father David Romo, is stridently anti-PAN and anti-Catholic. He believes that a PAN–Catholic Church alliance was behind the revocation of his church's legal status. In our interview he freely expressed his antipathy for both and even publicly exhorted Santa Muertistas not to vote for Catholic, that is, PAN candidates during the congressional and gubernatorial elections in July 2009. In direct opposition to the Catholic Church, Padre Romo began performing same-sex weddings at his Mexico-USA Traditional Catholic Church in February 2010. Mexico City became the largest city in the world to allow same-sex unions in late 2009 when the municipal assembly, dominated by the leftist Partido Democratico Revolucionario (Democratic Revolution Party; PRD), approved a change to city ordinances. Romo declared, "What we bless is the love these people feel; love isn't gendered. God loves his neighbor and all human beings, whatever their sexual preference may be."[18] Both anecdotal evidence and the Santa Muerte priest's new policy on matrimony suggest that the Pretty Girl has a special appeal for Mexican gays and lesbians.

Between his public denunciations of both the PAN and the Catholic Church, Father Romo has created a corresponding media image of his patron saint as anti-Catholic and anti-PAN. And between considering a bid for political office with a fringe party of the left and

enthusiastically endorsing the PRD-sponsored legislation permitting same-sex unions, Romo has publicly positioned his patroness as not only anti-PAN but pro-PRD, the party that has governed Mexico City since 1997. Thus, in a political context in which both the Catholic Church and the PAN perceive Santa Muerte to be a heretical partisan of the left-leaning PRD, Calderón's pogrom against her on the border is also an indirect attack on the PRD and a frontal assault on Padre Romo and his church. It's no wonder that Romo organized and led street protests in Mexico City just weeks after the destruction of the shrines on the border.

Here it must be pointed out that rank-and-file Santa Muertistas don't necessarily share the anti-Catholicism and leftist politics of the Godfather of the cult. In regard to the former, I have encountered precious little animus toward the Catholic Church among Saint Death's devotees. In fact, most tend to view devotion to the Bony Lady as either complementary to their Catholic faith or even a part of it. Recall that only one of my informants claimed that worship of the skeleton saint was her exclusive religion. Indeed, it is precisely the extreme inclusiveness of the cult that so many Santa Muertistas find appealing. Without any data on the political attitudes and voting patterns of devotees, it is impossible to know if Romo's political orientation is representative of most cult members. With millions of devotees spread throughout the Mexican republic, I suspect that surveys would discover political variety not too different from that of the general population.

Since their trouncing in the midterm elections in the summer of 2009, the PAN has suffered a precipitous decline in approval ratings. In less than a year, party identification with the PAN fell from 25 percent in January 2009 to 17 percent in October of that year. Interestingly the PRD also lost ground during the same period, but not as much, dropping from 14 to 10 percent. The big winner, of course, has been the Institutional Revolutionary Party

(PRI), the party that ruled the nation in dictatorial fashion from 1929 to 2000. Their share of the electorate ballooned from 22 percent to 31 percent.[19] Given the conservative social agenda of the PAN, I would surmise that pollsters would find Santa Muertistas to be somewhat underrepresented in Calderón's party. In any case, the Calderón administration has targeted Santa Muerte of the black candle as religious enemy number one in its war against the cartels and in the increasingly stiff competition of the PRI and PRD.

BEWITCHING DEATH

Returning to the plane of individual devotees, the black devotional candle also figures in the important business of witchcraft. Keeping in mind the simultaneous offensive and defensive capacity of the Grim Reapress's scythe, we see that devotees ask the saint both to perform dark deeds against rivals and enemies and to prevent spells and hexes from taking effect on themselves. Despite almost five centuries of Christianity in Mexico, *brujeria*—witchcraft—continues to be widely practiced by significant sectors of the population. Both indigenous and European practices of soothsaying, spell casting, and healing attract millions of Mexicans who believe in their efficacy. The evil eye, supernatural fright (*susto*), salting, cemetery dirt, and ghosts are all common currency among wide sectors of the working class. For example, sixtysomething Auxilio, who lives in the port city of Veracruz and is deathly afraid of the "terrible powers" of the Powerful Lady, inspects the ground just outside her front door every morning to make sure no malefactors have come during the night to put a hex on her house with lines of salt or graveyard dirt. In a similar vein, twenty-four-year-old Fernanda from Ecatepec, home of the giant Santa Muerte statue, actually became a devotee of the White Girl to put an end to the black magic that was being directed at her. After several weeks of mysterious rappings on her windows at night and lines of salt outside her

front door awaiting her in the morning, the divorced young mother was beside herself with fear and unsure how to deal with the situation. A friend suggested that she set up a Saint Death altar at home and pray to her to stop the "spiritual aggression" against her. Fernanda says that her prayers and home altar, which includes black candles and a statuette of the same color, produced almost immediate results. Just two day after she brought the skeleton saint into her home, the salting and the window rapping ceased, and never returned.

The *Santa Muerte Bible* contains just the type of ritual that Fernanda could have performed to send her anonymous enemies packing. The "Ritual for Removing the Negative Energy That Surrounds Us" gives step-by-step directions for not only breaking spells and hexes but returning them to the sender:

> If you are an easy target of envy, harassment, and bad vibes, whether in your family or at work, we suggest that you perform this ritual. The best day to perform it is the first Friday of each month.
>
> Ingredients:
>
> 1 square mirror, as this represents the four elements with which Most Holy Death works
>
> A Santa Muerte prayer card
>
> A brick of charcoal
>
> A dinner plate
>
> A bottle of Santa Muerte oil (it should be clear)
>
> A bottle of road-opener oil
>
> White glue
>
> Procedure:
>
> Glue the Most Holy Death prayer card to the mirror. Now light the charcoal and place it on the plate. Pour a few drops of the

Santa Muerte and road-opener oils over the charcoal, and you will see aromatic smoke rising up. As soon as you see the smoke, wave the mirror through it and pray: O Most Holy Death, I call on you, I implore you that with your power you remove (give the name of the person who is causing you problems). May envy and bad luck be sent away and may all witchcraft, and works of Santería, Voodoo, Palo Mayombe, black magic, and any evil against me be reflected by this mirror. Thank you, my Lady.

Now you can make any other personal petition that you would like. Remember that your faith and spiritual strength should be put into this ritual.

The mirror, now that it's consecrated, should be hung at the entrance of your house or business, so that it stays up front and reflects everyone who comes in (this works to repel any bad energy). Let the charcoal burn two more minutes, as this works to purify your house or business.[20]

Most of the prayers and rituals related to the black candle, such as the one above, focus more on the powers of protection than of harm. However, some devotees ask Santa Muerte to actively neutralize enemies. You will recall that votive candles with *MUERTE CONTRA MIS ENEMIGOS* (death unto my enemies) written below the figure of the Bony Lady are sold in hundreds of shops in both Mexico and the United States. One of the more aggressive prayers that I've come across, in which the Godmother is asked to go on the offensive against enemies, is found on the MySpace page of nineteen-year-old Francisco Gallardo from Ecatepec, who goes by the screen name "Santa 175." A fan of the cartoon *The Simpsons* and "electro-dance," Santa 175's MySpace page is a virtual tribute to the saint whose statue towers over his gray suburb of Mexico City. The untitled prayer on his site reads:

Precious white rose I come to you with my heart in my hand
Did you know, girl, that with love you fill my life with blessings?
With faith I invoke you to come to my aid
So that any animal that would rise up against me
May fall tamed by your power
Keep any enemies who would wish me harm
Out of my life
Don't allow arms to be taken up against me
And that all bad wishes not come true
Because you are with me
And tell me precious protectress
Who can go up against you?
Most holy rose that was created in the beginning
By the hand of the Almighty
I ask you to help me with this problem _____
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
In your infinite mercy show me the path
Most Holy Death, I come to you in this time of torment
So that you may hear my plea and come to my aid
Fill me with power so that everyone trembles when they see me
Make their courage melt away and their fears multiply
Most Holy Death hear the clamor of this heart
Which asks you to extend your merciful hand
And protect me from he who wants to see me in disgrace
Most Holy Death knock my enemies down to my feet
Show them no mercy
Turn their worst fear into their nightmares
Because you protect me and take care of me
Multiply my money Most Holy Maiden
So that my life becomes more enjoyable
Bring me the person I love [name of loved one]
And make them love me more with each passing day

Overpower her with your stare
And bring her to me, most holy white rose
With infinite faith I stand under your cloak, beautiful girl
And under your care I remain
Amen

Pray the Lord's Prayer three times.[21]

Chapter 4

Red Candle

Love and Passion

The concluding lines of the prayer on the MySpace page shift the focus to the votive candle that is almost invisible in the mass media but which ranks as the number-one seller and symbolizes the types of concerns that probably claim more of the Powerful Lady's time than any other. Vicente Pérez Ramos, the Santa Muerte shaman in Morelia, told me that red candles of love and passion constitute an astonishing 80 to 90 percent of his business. Thus, in this chapter of the red candle, we will consider the skeleton saint's roles as love doctor and bounty hunter of wayward men. It is here that her gender identity is most interesting, as in this she mostly attends to the desires and afflictions of female devotees.

LOVED TO DEATH

While the origins of Santa Muerte and the love spells she casts each can be traced back to Spain, it appears that the fusion of the two took place on Mexican soil. In the brown candle chapter we examined a couple of references from the end of the Spanish colonial period, neither of which mentions any connection to love magic. You'll recall that after her appearance in the annals of the Inquisition from the 1790s she vanishes from the historical record for almost a century and a half. According to the anthropologists who come across her in the 1940s, the newly resurfaced Saint Death is a specialist in affairs of the heart. While it is possible that she was involved in love magic during

the colonial era and that devotees were able to hide this from Inquisitors, it is more plausible that she became associated with matters of the heart during her long period in hiding. Though the date of the Pretty Girl's association with love magic is obscure, the location in which she first starts to mend broken hearts and capture, bind, and deliver stray spouses couldn't be clearer. Since Santa Muerte's Spanish forebear, La Parca, didn't practice sorcery of this type, it's obvious that in her New World transformation into Santa Muerte, she expanded her repertoire beyond matters of life and death to include affairs of the heart.

A few years ago, when I was still researching the Virgin of Guadalupe, I had come up with a title for the book project that referred to her as the "queen of Mexican hearts." But now that I know the White Girl much better, I'm wondering if the phrase isn't a closer fit for her, given her specialization in mending and breaking Mexican and Central American hearts. Thus, the salient point is that two unrelated Spanish imports, love magic and La Parca, were syncretized on Mexican, Guatemalan, and Argentine soil. Back in Spain, the practice of love magic often involved the invocation of certain saints, but never the Grim Reapress.[1] Of course, the fascinating difference between the Mexican love doctors on the one hand and the Argentine and Guatemalan ones on the other is gender. Somehow in Argentina and Guatemala, the female figure of La Parca morphed into the male saints of death, San La Muerte and San Pascual. San La Muerte prayers and rituals focused on matters of the heart are easily found on the Internet. Similar to the oldest known Santa Muerte prayer, which is a love-binding spell, the main one to San La Muerte includes the phrase "For he who cheats me in love, I ask that you make him come back to me, and if he ignores your strange voice, Good Spirit of Death, let him feel the force of your scythe."[2]

Less threatening is the "Love Prayer":

O Lord San La Muerte
I implore you that I won't suffer because of love at any stage of my life.
I now ask you to bring [first and last name] to me so that I'm not unhappy.
Don't let anything detain him or delay him from coming to my arms, his heart joined to mine.
Together [first and last name] and I can enjoy love and passion that never ends as long as we're together. I put my deep faith in you to be able to live to the fullest with love and with You, my Lord of Death.[3]

So on opposite ends of Hispanoamerica, Mexicans and Guatemalans in the north and Argentines in the south united the Spanish symbol of death with Iberian love magic and produced powerful new folk saints whose range of activity greatly exceeds that of their Spanish forebear, La Parca, who was limited to matters of mortality. Likewise, in its syncretism with the Mexican, Guatemalan, and Argentine skeleton saints, Iberian love magic increased its potency through its association with three of the most powerful figures of the Latin American supernatural landscape.

Before delving into the ritual practices associated with the crimson candle, let's briefly consider the socioeconomic context that for centuries has engendered a strong and steady demand for such sorcery, especially among women. If witchcraft is a weapon of the weak, a magical attempt on the part of the socioeconomically powerless to manipulate and control circumstances, environments, and other people that they are unable to influence through other means, then the double attraction of love magic to women, especially impoverished and marginalized ones, is easily comprehensible. From the advent of love-related spells and curses centuries ago in the Mediterranean to the present-day Americas, patriarchal societies have

generated strong demand for such love magic on the part of socioeconomically vulnerable women. Besides the emotional impact of losing a husband or paramour, his departure could mean financial ruin or social ostracism for the abandoned woman. Indeed, in my previous studies of Brazilian Pentecostalism I found that many impoverished women had converted to this charismatic branch of Protestantism both because of problems related to spousal abandonment and separation and because they found strong support for such affliction within the churches.[4] Without the worldly power to prevent spousal abandonment or the means to support themselves afterward, countless women throughout time have turned to both witchcraft and religion in order to prevent and cope with the loss of a male breadwinner. Of course, twenty-first-century Mexican and Central American women face less social ostracism after being abandoned and divorced than in the past and have greater educational and employment opportunities, but the combination of enduring sexism and very restricted labor markets continues to create strong demand for love magic. And at the beginning of the new millennium, Saint Death reigns as the supreme queen of mending, binding, and breaking Mexican and Central American hearts.

BOUND TO DEATH

Despite his intent to demonize the Powerful Lady, evangelical Protestant filmmaker Paco del Toro depicts a realistic scenario involving Santa Muerte of the red votive candle. One of the vignettes in *La Santa Muerte* involves middle-class Mauricio having a torrid affair with his wife's best friend. His wife, Elena, a stay-at-home mother of two, receives an anonymous phone call telling her that her husband is cheating on her with her best friend, Raquel. In keeping with Mexican stereotypes, Elena is white and dresses fashionably but conservatively. Best friend Raquel is a *morena* (brown-skinned) temptress whose revealing outfits accentuate her allure. She is also

a single mother with a young son who lives in a modest home on a street where graffiti abounds. After the disturbing phone call, Elena marches over to Raquel's place, where she catches her husband and best friend *in flagrante*. In an emotionally charged scene, Raquel pleads with Mauricio to say goodbye to his wife and stay with her. Her pleas fall on deaf ears, temporarily, as Mauricio returns home to Elena.

Determined not to lose her lover, Elena goes to a religious paraphernalia stall at a local market and asks the vendor, who looks like a long-haired shaman, what works best for *amarres* (binding spells). He picks up a red statuette of the Powerful Lady and says, "Ah, nothing beats this! In less time than it takes a cock to crow, you'll have him back, humbled at your feet." The merchant "prepares" the Santa Muerte figure for action with an aerosol spray and charges 800 pesos ($70) for the two-foot effigy. A somewhat skeptical Raquel threatens to return it if it doesn't work.

Meanwhile, Mauricio has returned home and tearfully apologizes to Elena, pleading with her not to leave him. She forgives him rather quickly, and we see an idyllic scene of the family in which he is playing with his two young daughters as she looks on happily. But the idyll is fleeting, thanks to Raquel's powerful binding ritual. She has made a home altar for the skeleton saint. We watch her light red and white jar candles and then place a Polaroid picture of Mauricio at the base of the red Santa Muerte statue.

Back at Mauricio and Elena's, Mauricio suddenly feels ill, sweating and clutching the back of his neck. The camera cuts to Raquel praying at the altar, "Please make him come back to me, so that he's with me and never leaves. Bring him back, bound to me!" Mauricio goes upstairs, severely agitated. Later that same night, while in bed with Elena, he dreams of making love to Raquel and wakes up in a cold sweat. We see Raquel performing another ritual in which she binds the statue with red ribbon. Mauricio gets out of bed, looking very

disturbed, and tells Elena that he has to get some fresh air, leaving her very worried.

The following afternoon, Elena comes home to find a letter from Mauricio saying apologetically that he's left to be with Raquel. The news leaves Elena looking pale. Meanwhile, Mauricio shows up at Raquel's and apologizes for running out on her, then grabs her in a tight embrace while telling her that he wants to be with her. They passionately kiss in the small kitchen while her young son watches furtively in disapproval. Both the vignette and the film itself end with a scene of Elena consulting with a Santa Muerte shaman. Looking like someone at a Santana concert in the early 1970s, the long-haired mestizo *brujo* (sorcerer) lights red and black candles alongside a fierce-looking black effigy of the Grim Reapress. With a strong Mexico City working-class accent he tells Elena, who is sobbing with her baby on her lap, "Don't worry Ma'am, everything in life has to be paid for. I tell you she never fails. Don't be afraid of her, sweet mama. You'll see how you'll get your husband back and that woman will get a good beating. My White Girl is really good at helping people."

Despite the film's central purpose of exposing the Bony Lady as satanic, the vignette described above captures perfectly classic love-binding magic. The home altar and ritual performed by the jilted lover Raquel couldn't be more realistic. The crimson-colored ritual objects, including a candle, statuette, and ribbon, help Raquel focus on her specific problem—one of the heart. Although she is attempting to break up a marriage, Raquel's prayers to the skeleton saint focus specifically on bringing Mauricio back to her. And through the powerful medium of dreams, the red Santa Muerte disturbs Mauricio's sleep with precisely what led him to have an affair with Raquel in the first place. Asleep in the nuptial bed next to Elena, he replays in his dreams erotic scenes between Raquel and him. Jolted awake by the intensity of the dream, Mauricio is spellbound and unable to resist the siren call of Raquel beckoning him back to her bed.

Unwilling to give up her husband without a fight, Elena, who is unaware of Raquel's newfound devotion to the Powerful Lady, also ends up making a pact with Santa Muerte. Unlike Raquel, who simply asked the Bony Lady to bring back her lover, the shaman working on behalf of Elena lights not only a red candle for Mauricio's return but also a black one so that Raquel "gets a good beating." Since the film ends with Elena's session with the sorcerer, we're left wondering if Santa Muerte heard the jilted wife's prayers and acted on her behalf, which, of course, would be to reverse the spell already cast on Mauricio. Interestingly, Mauricio is completely unaware of the fact that his wife and lover have both contracted with the White Girl to aid their spiritual warfare over him. Sexist stereotypes of female malfactresses working their black magic on innocent men would be a facile explanation for Mauricio's ignorance of the spells cast upon him. However, the film makes it clear that he had started the affair with Raquel before she availed herself of the saint's services. While he loses his free will after being spellbound, he certainly entered into an adulterous relationship on his own accord and thus is hardly an innocent party in this love triangle.

The spiritual battle between Mauricio's wife and lover reflects real-life Mexican drama. For Elena, the loss of Mauricio could be emotionally and financially disastrous. Though the film does not specify Mauricio's profession, it's obvious that he earns enough to support a comfortable middle-class lifestyle in which Elena can be a stay-at-home mom. With Mauricio's departure, Elena would most likely end up in the same situation as Raquel, if not worse, with two children to support in the face of lax enforcement of child support laws. Raquel was already a single mother living precariously without regular child support when she became involved with Mauricio. There is a Mexican tradition known as "*la casa chica*" (the small house), in which adulterous men partially subsidize their paramours, paying their rent or other expenses. As with Raquel and Mauricio,

there is often a substantial gap between the financial resources of the man and his lover. Thus, conforming to such norms, Raquel's affair with Mauricio would result in material benefits, although, in one of the great ironies of the film, it is Elena whom we see in an act of devoted friendship, delivering bags of groceries to Raquel's home. In any case, if the liaison with Mauricio had a positive impact on her household budget, Raquel stands to gain much more by entering into a permanent relationship with him. So in the battle over a financially valuable man, his lover contracts with the skeleton saint to improve her lot while his wife works with a Santa Muerte *brujo* to preserve hers.

This brings us to the intriguing question of whom the Skinny Lady will favor in the competing requests for Mauricio's return. Del Toro, an evangelical Christian, would have us believe that the efforts of both romantic rivals are doomed to failure as long as they are in a pact with Saint Death, an ally of Satan. While the Christian course of action for such a situation is clear, that of the cult of Santa Muerte is not. Paco del Toro and his coreligionists would have all three parties repent of their sins, with spouses Elena and Mauricio reconciling and Raquel renouncing her claim on a married man. In marked contrast, the heterogeneity and flexibility of the cult of Santa Muerte preclude a uniform response to the love triangle. In the film Raquel has the upper hand but only because she made a pact with the Powerful Lady first. Devotees who view the Bony Lady as being in harmony with Christian principles would have their saint favoring the just cause of Elena, the spurned wife attempting to keep her family intact. Those with a less Christian-influenced view of the saint of death would have her favoring the cause of the devotee with the greatest faith in her powers. In the particular case of Elena and Raquel, since both are neophytes and the former only seeks out the saint at the end of the film, any difference in the depth of their faith can only be resolved in time. The intensity of one's devotion to the

White Girl can, in part, be measured by both the quality and quantity of ritual service dedicated to her. Regular altar maintenance, prayers, and the scrupulous keeping of promises made to the saint are important yardsticks by which Santa Muerte can measure the faith of her followers.

DEATH AND ROSES

Beyond the standard love-binding prayer printed on the back of thousands of votive candles of all colors, there are specific rituals that those seeking a miracle of the heart can perform to increase the chances that this most powerful of love doctors will give heed to their pleas. And I'm still amazed that I don't have to look any further than my own social network in Richmond to find someone performing such rituals. Lupe, the thirty-four-year-old mother of one of my wife's third-grade students, came to Richmond with her husband, Miguel, eleven years ago from the north-central state of Zacatecas. Married at age thirteen, she complains bitterly about her husband's domineering ways. For example, he might be gone from their tiny apartment for four or five days and then return to demand a full accounting of Lupe's whereabouts during his unexplained absence.

In January 2010, Miguel was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in Arizona, where he had gone to wait for a relative from Zacatecas who was attempting to cross the border into the United States with the help of "coyotes" (smugglers). Having been deported, Miguel is now back in Zacatecas and has no immediate plans to try to return to his wife and children in Richmond. In the meantime, Lupe has wasted no time in asking Santa Muerte to work her powerful love magic, but not to bring back Miguel to her side. Rather, the ritual she performs, directly out of the *Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, is aimed at finding a new man, preferably a gringo like the boyfriend of her Salvadoran friend, who doesn't mind if she goes out dancing on weekends without him.

Of the four love-related rituals recommended in the *Saint Death Bible,* Lupe chose the one described as "For luck in love" (*Para tener suerte en el amor*) as the most appropriate. Like most Santa Muertistas, Lupe has adapted the ritual to fit her own needs and resources. In brackets in the quotation below, I note the changes she has made to the prescribed ritual.

Ingredients:
1 small, bone-colored Santa Muerte statuette [red]
1 white plate
Petals of 3 red roses
1 bottle of rose oil [patchouli]
1 bottle of cinnamon oil
1 red fabric bag [red T-shirt]
1 10 cm x 10 cm piece of personal clothing [red T-shirt)
1 piece of a binding stick [a twig found on the ground]
Matchsticks
Water
1 strainer
1 bucket

Procedure:
Put your article of clothing in the middle of the plate and immediately place Santa Muerte on top of the clothing and then cover her with rose petals (lay her down if it's easier). Drizzle the rose and cinnamon oil over the petals and then put the binding stick on top.

Cleanse yourself from head to toe with a red votive candle lit with the matchsticks. Pray the Santa Muerte prayer (you can use the Santa Muerte prayer that best suits you). When the candle

burns out, remove Santa Muerte and wrap her up together with your article of clothing in the red fabric.

Put the wrapped plate and binding stick into the red bag. Then put the rose petals to boil. Once it has boiled, let the water cool down and then use it to rinse yourself after bathing. You should always carry this amulet [the bag] with you and shouldn't let strangers or acquaintances touch it. Remember that the baths are from the neck down.

Lupe has performed the ritual twice and is still waiting for the Bony Lady to come through with a *bolillo* (literally, white-bread roll, but Mexican slang for gringo). Lupe's major ritual adaptation is the use of a red statuette of Santa Muerte. Like me, she thought the Bony Lady dressed in a crimson robe might be more appropriate than the bone-colored effigy. Many of the ritual ingredients have well-known associations with matters of the heart. Red roses, rose water, and the crimson votive candle figure among the most obvious symbols of passion. Cinnamon and binding sticks, though less familiar, add strength to the ritual. Binding sticks (*palos de unión*), which are real tree twigs, figure prominently in love spells cast by practitioners of Santería, Vodou, and Hoodoo. Like ritual ribbons, the binding sticks serve to unite, often coercively, two people in love. Cinnamon does double, if not triple, ritual duty due to both its reddish hue and its well-established use in Afro-Caribbean religions as a key ingredient for spells cast for purposes of love, luck, and prosperity. Moreover, as a "hot spice," cinnamon is purported to be an aphrodisiac. A number of websites that deal in spices for medicinal uses sell cinnamon oil as an unguent to be rubbed on the genitals to heighten arousal.

Performance of the ritual itself involves two main elements—fabrication of the amulet bag and an herbal rinse. Most of the prescribed procedure for obtaining "luck in love" involves the preparation and fabrication of the amulet bag. Before being wrapped up

and made into a lucky love charm, the image of the Godmother has been charged using prayer, red rose petals, and aphrodisiacal essences. Enveloped in Lupe's red T-shirt, the miniature Saint Death absorbs her devotee's positive energy, which can be redeployed to attract an unsuspecting Richmonder. As I wonder if Lupe's Santa Muerte amulet will work and make her lucky in love, I recall that she, like many of her fellow devotees on both sides of the border, is not entirely exclusive in her devotion to the saint of death. Interestingly, while the Skinny Lady performs love magic in the privacy of Lupe's bedroom, a three-foot statue of Lupe's namesake, the Virgin of Guadalupe, occupies a strategic location at the center of the back wall of the living room. Upon entering the one-bedroom apartment, one seems to be greeted by the Mexican Virgin, who virtually demands eye contact. So within the sacred space of Lupe's rental unit, Saint Death hides in the intimacy of the bedroom, mostly working as a nocturnal saint, accompanying her in her dreams. In contrast, Guadalupe resides in the most public and communal space of the apartment—the living room, where she greets visitors, watches near-lethal doses of Mexican *telenovelas* (soap operas), and witnesses much family drama.

DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Speaking of family drama, one of the more unusual cases of Santa Muerte love binding that I've encountered is that of my own sister, Michelle. In December 2009, she joined my wife and me on a research trip to Yerberia Juárez in Albuquerque. Intrigued by the rainbow of Saint Death votive candles lining the shelves, Michelle asked me if the colors had any meaning in the cult. More than happy to explain the significance of color, I noticed her eyes light up when I told her that red symbolizes love and passion. I had barely finished saying the word "passion" when my younger sister darted over to the section where the crimson candles were located. After surveying the

well-stocked store and chatting with the clerk, the three of us made our way back to the rental car, where Michelle showed us her new red Santa Muerte candle and said, with a sly smile, "Let's see if it works."

During the ride back to our hotel, Michelle clued us in on how the crimson Bony Lady might be able to help her. For years she had been trying to get out of a dysfunctional romantic relationship without much success. Having recently turned forty, Michelle seemed to feel a new sense of urgency in extricating herself from a relationship that she believed had held her back, both personally and professionally. The new sous-chef at the Denver restaurant where she works had caught her eye, as well as that of a younger colleague. So perhaps the Powerful Lady of the red candle could help her with a triple play in which she terminated her dysfunctional relationship; removed her romantic rival, her younger coworker, from her path; and started a relationship with Connor, the sous-chef. My wife and I joked about how Michelle would be the first *gringa* to ask Santa Muerte to perform love-binding magic.

Wasting no time, Michelle took the jar candle to her hotel room, where she lighted the wick and recited the standard love prayer, printed in Spanish on the back of the jar. A few days later she flew back to Denver, where, to her great surprise, Connor asked her out for the first time—to a New Year's Eve party. In the ensuing months she and Connor began a serious relationship, and her romantic rival met another man on Facebook and moved to Portland, Oregon, to be closer to him. Michelle's old boyfriend did not stalk her, as she had feared he might. The new relationship was going so well that they decided to formalize it, getting married in the summer of 2010. That her wishes came true, and with such rapidity, makes my sister wonder if it really might be the skeleton saint who granted them. Michelle has told Connor about my research on Santa Muerte, but she hasn't told him about the red votive candle she lit and the prayers she recited in Albuquerque.

Chapter 5

Gold Candle

Prosperity and Abundance

ECONOMIES OF DEATH

The gold votive candle outshines all the other new colors and rivals both the traditional white and red in terms of sales and presence at public shrines. And since it is lit equally by male and female devotees, it's possible that petitions for prosperity keep the Skinny Lady even busier than those related to matters of the heart. With Mexico, Central America, and the United States facing the worst economic recession since the 1930s, tens of millions of people find themselves in dire straits due to record levels of unemployment and underemployment. In the United States, where the national unemployment rate currently registers 10 percent, the hardest hit sector has been uneducated men. The construction industry, with its abundance of Mexican and Central American laborers, has been especially affected as new housing starts have plummeted during the past few years. Many laid-off construction workers in this country have wives and girlfriends who used to make significant contributions to the household income by working as nannies and house cleaners. Those jobs, however, are harder to come by, as Saint Death devotee Lupe can testify. A few years ago she had enough houses to clean here in Richmond that she was able to send a small weekly remittance back to family members in Zacatecas. Today she barely scrapes by on a few cleaning gigs a week and is forced to accept financial aid from her

daughter, who works full time as a waitress at a Mexican restaurant in town.

Despite predictions to the contrary, there has been no exodus of unemployed and underemployed Mexicans, such as Lupe, back to their hometowns in Mexico. This, of course, is because Mexico is suffering an even harder economic downturn. Two of the country's leading revenue generators have taken severe hits. As the U.S. State Department just added three more Mexican states, Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas, to its list of travel advisory hot spots, tourism has experienced a precipitous decline. Tourism in 2009 was down almost 7 percent over the previous year, with the H1N1 virus and drug-related violence scaring international visitors, mostly Americans, away.[1] Raw footage of gun battles in the streets of tourist mecca Acapulco broadcast on TV news and the Internet have kept many Americans, Canadians, and Europeans, to a lesser extent, away from Mexico's beautiful beaches and charming colonial towns. Although he hasn't turned to the skeleton saint, yet, for supernatural succor, my brother-in-law has been directly affected by the recent decline of tourism. As a realtor at the beach resort of Ixtapa, his sales of time-share condos to Americans and Canadians have plummeted. With the news in early May 2010 that two men were found murdered in drug-related violence in neighboring Zihautenejo, his foreign clients are unlikely to return in the near future. Like my brother-in-law, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who work in the tourist industry have had their hours cut or even lost their jobs as the horrific drug violence keeps neighboring North Americans and Europeans at home.

Adding to the economic meltdown in Mexico is the decline in the country's second largest source of revenue after oil. The remittances sent from Mexicans working in the United States back to family members in Mexico amount to billions of dollars each year. Entire towns in states such as Michoacán with large numbers of

emigrants to the United States are kept afloat by the weekly money orders wired from thousands of points across the country. For the first time since data has been collected, remittances in 2008 declined almost 4 percent over the previous year to $25.14 billion.[2] The drop-off continued in 2009 with a decrease of nearly 16 percent through November of that year.[3] With near record levels of unemployment in the United States, which are highest among the less educated, many of the approximately twelve million Mexicans who live in this country find themselves in the same situation as Lupe, either unable to wire back any money at all or forced to reduce the amount of their transfers.

Thus this double blow to two of the leading sources of income has resulted in a shrinking Mexican economy and rising levels of unemployment and underemployment. Mexico's gross domestic product plummeted by an astonishing 6.5 percent in 2009.[4] The sudden contraction of the economy, coupled with the decline in remittances from the United States, has swollen the ranks of the impoverished. Almost half of all Mexicans now live in poverty. From 2006 to 2008 the number of poor increased 5 percent, from 42 to 47 percent.[5] Data for 2009 have yet to be published, but it's very likely that one of the worst years on record has resulted in at least half of the population living in poverty.

It's in this context of increased immiseration that millions of Mexicans offer gold candles to the Powerful Lady in the hope of a monetary miracle. Twenty-three-year-old Rigo was one of the most desperate devotees I've talked with. As he completed his purchase of a gold Santa Muerte candle at Guillermo's esoterica shop in Morelia, I introduced myself, explained that I was writing a book on Saint Death, and asked him if I could interview him about his belief in the Bony Lady. Happy to oblige, he explained that he had bought the candle to place on his home altar with the intention of asking the skeleton saint to help him find work. The father of three young

children, Rigo had turned to the White Girl for the first time in the summer of 2008. Unemployed at the time and not always able to feed his kids, he decided to enlist the aid of Santa Muerte on the recommendation of an uncle who had described her as "very miraculous." "Just three days after asking her for work," Rigo said, "I got some construction work." A member of Mexico's army of the underemployed, Rigo credits his new supernatural patroness with providing an increasing number of odd jobs, mostly involving manual labor, that have allowed him during the past year to put more food on the dinner table.

Rigo was particularly eager to tell me about a recent occasion when he found himself in the streets of Morelia without bus fare to make it home. Unwilling to beg for a few pesos, he put the matter in the bony hands of the saint, promising her new incense and apples for her altar if she would arrange for a ride home. Not more than ten minutes went by before the Godmother granted Rigo the miracle that he had requested. A stray 100-peso bill (about nine dollars) lay on the sidewalk in Rigo's path, just waiting for him to snatch it up before somebody else did. The sum was large enough so that Rigo could buy the apples and incense before he caught the bus home.

THE BUSINESS OF DEATH

As Morelia's largest and best-stocked religious paraphernalia store, Guillermo's turned out to be one of the best spots in town to meet devotees of Saint Death. Between interviews, Guillermina, the daughter of shop owner Guillermo and a member of the cult of Santa Muerte, filled me in on many important details of devotion. It was Guillermina, for instance, who told me that many small businesses in Mexico such as hers keep a gold Santa Muerte candle burning so that the saint will increase their sales. Some proprietors go a step further and erect an in-store altar in which golden candles

and effigies of the skeleton saint predominate. Issue number 118 (August 2009) of *Devoción a la SANTA MUERTE* (Devotion to Saint Death) contains a ritual called "For Jump-Starting Your Business." The caption above the photo of a gold votive candle surrounded by other ritual paraphernalia reads,

> We recommend this ritual when profits aren't being made, or worse yet, with each passing day the losses are greater.

Figure 5.1 Death in dollars, Santa Muerte temple, City of Puebla.

Ingredients:
12 of your own coins
1 small yellow cloth sack
1 Victor Stick
1 Saint Death charm
1 bottle of Saint Death cologne
1 glass of water
1 gold Saint Death votive candle
9 spoonfuls of sugar
1 vial of Good Luck Powder, the kind that contains a consecrated stone
1 china plate
1 plastic bag
Matchsticks

Procedure:
Go ahead and make the sign of the cross with all the coins and then place them in the glass of water.

Now put the sugar, Victor Stick, the powder along with the stone, and the charm on the plate. Mix them up well and light the candle with the matches. Recite the prayer printed on the candle and make your petition asking Saint Death to open the doors of your business and that this offering to her may be the start of your success and prosperity.

Place the candle as close as possible to the plate and leave it there for two days. After two days have passed put the contents of the plate in the plastic bag and sprinkle a bit of powder in your place of business or at the entrance and in your cash drawer.

Spray a bit of the cologne in the same places.

Regarding the glass of water, take the coins out of it and put them along with the stick and the charm in the little cloth sack.

> Tie it up tight and always carry it with you. This will serve as special protection. Don't let anyone touch it.

Among the key ritual ingredients some are more familiar than others. The Good Luck powder is a standard ritual item found on the shelves of *botanicas* and *yerberías* throughout Mexico and the United States and is employed in all sorts of magic, witchcraft, and folk healing (*curanderismo*). Money, in the form of both coins and bills, is ubiquitous at Santa Muerte altars, especially but not exclusively those dedicated to the Powerful Lady of prosperity. Among the pricier models of statues of the saint is one in which her robe is made of the likenesses of hundred-dollar bills. In a ritual such as this one designed to "jump-start" a business, the coins are crucial because it is their multiplication that the petitioner seeks. Only two of the nine denominations of peso coins are not fully or partially gold- or copper-colored. And the two nickel-colored coins happen to be those of least value, 10 centavos and 5 centavos (equal to one cent and half a cent). Of course, the photo of the ritual paraphernalia next to the list of ritual ingredients and procedure "For Jump-Starting Your Business" shows twelve 20-peso coins, the maximum denomination with each worth about $1.65. For devotees seeking "success and prosperity," the gold-coin imagery couldn't be stronger or more obvious.

Far less obvious is the Victor Stick, which is borrowed from Santería where it helps believers overcome all sorts of adversity. As offered on lucumiyoruba17 (http://www.lucumiyoruba.com/lucumiyoruba17.html), an online store, the four-inch twig is one of many similar magic sticks, such as the "bone breaker" (*rompe hueso*) that sell for $2, plus shipping. Santería possesses a broad ritual repertoire for those seeking both material and spiritual prosperity, so it makes sense that the much newer public cult of Saint Death would borrow as needed from the Afro-Cuban religion. Both Cuba and Mexico are also rich sources of another one of the key ingredients used in the

Figure 5.2 Nothing for free in death. Sign in background says "You can only take a candy if you leave a coin for the 'Saint.'" Sign in foreground reads "Don't leave without giving me a donation for my party, thanks." Shrine at home of Vicente Pérez Ramos, Morelia, Michoacán.

ritual—sugar. Until recent times, sugar has sweetened the food and drink of the elite. The cultivation and production of sugarcane and its derivatives have supported economies throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, and Brazil. The symbolic relation between sugar and prosperity is particularly strong in Mexico, which ranks second in the world in per capita consumption and sixth in production.[6] Many Mexicans scoff at the American version of Coca Cola because it's sweetened with corn syrup rather than the cane sugar in the Mexican variety. Thus the nine spoonfuls of brown crystals (the most common variety in Mexico) in the "Jump-Starting Your Business" ritual not only symbolize a bountiful harvest of riches but also satisfy Santa Muerte's sweet tooth, a trait that she shares with so many of her

followers. Ironically, overindulgence in sugary foods and drinks leads an increasing number of devotees and Mexicans in general to a premature encounter with the Grim Reapress. Trailing only their trendsetting northern neighbors, Mexicans suffer from among the world's highest rates of adult-onset diabetes and obesity.

Of the hundreds of Santa Muertistas whom I've interviewed and chatted with informally, Yolanda, a thirty-four-year-old resident of Mexico City, stands out as one of the most enthusiastic believers in the White Girl's capacity to multiply talents. While she enumerated a long list of favors that her spiritual patroness had done for her and family members, the miracle of enabling her to open her own hair salon with very little start-up capital was by far the best thing that the skeleton saint had done for her. To ensure continued prosperity, the spunky single mother maintains two altars: one at the salon and the other at home. In addition she visits Doña Queta's famous shrine almost every Sunday and, in a major demonstration of devotion and gratitude, pays a mariachi band $165 every other month to play at the rosary service in Tepito. A self-described Catholic, like the great majority of Santa Muertistas, Yolanda sometimes hides her figurines of the saint in a handbag and takes them to Mass to be blessed by an unsuspecting priest. When I met her at Doña Queta's renowned shrine, Yolanda was offering both white and gold candles to the cult's most famous image of the Skinny Lady.

MERCHANTS OF DEATH

Saint Death has not only brought prosperity to true believers such as Yolanda but also to those who traffic in her merchandise and services, many of whom are not devotees themselves. In economies of scarcity on both sides of the border, the sale of ritual paraphernalia, jewelry, apparel, literature, music, films, and spiritual consultations represents a multimillion-dollar business, which sustains countless households in both the United States and Mexico,

and even China, where much of the mass-produced paraphernalia is manufactured.

Ritual paraphernalia probably accounts for the largest share of Santa Muerte products. Candles, oils and essences, statues, prayer cards, incense, and aerosol sprays figure among the most popular ritual articles sold at *botanicas,* supermarkets, and even online. On the retail side, the sale of such paraphernalia sustains thousands of esoterica shops and market stalls in both countries. Vendor after vendor has told me that during the past five years or so, sales of items related to the cult of the skeleton saint have accounted for at least half of their annual receipts. One such establishment is Guillermo's, which has two stores in Morelia and one stall in the city's San Juan market. Founded in 1994 by *chilango* entrepreneur Guillermo, the business started selling Saint Death figurines and statues in 2000 and quickly expanded to the full line of her ritual products.

Speaking to me at their market stall, Ricardo, Guillermo's son-in-law, revealed an intriguing sales pattern. Whereas the ritual items associated with canonized saints sell mostly a few days before their particular feast day, those pertaining to the cult of Saint Death are purchased throughout the year. It's quite possible that November 1 will become her feast day in the future, but at this point, this date, which commemorates the inauguration of Doña Queta's public shrine, hasn't won out over other feast days celebrated throughout Mexico. In any case, that the Skinny Lady isn't fixed to a particular date on the calendar reinforces her omnipresence; she is a saint for all seasons.

Ricardo went on to explain that it took just a few years for Santa Muerte paraphernalia to become the best-selling product line at Guillermo's. By 2003 her candles, incense, and images, among other items, accounted for about half of total sales at their three locations. Votive candles easily rank as the top-selling type of Santa Muerte products at Guillermo's and at the scores of shops and stalls that I've visited throughout Mexico and the United States. Ricardo estimated

that their locations sell 120,000 Saint Death candles per year for gross sales totaling approximately $210,000. Guillermo's clients buy the white candles of thanksgiving and the red ones of passion more than the other colors.

The supremacy of Santa Muerte votive candles is also evident at the manufacturing end of the business. One of the leading manufacturers of devotional candles in North America, Veladoras Místicas, headquartered on the outskirts of the industrial city of Monterrey, is the main supplier for countless retailers of religious articles and esoterica in both Mexico and the United States. The factory's variety of candles is astounding. The rare Rey Pascual candle comes in two colors, as does the Tapaboca (Shut Up). The Arrasa Coyote (coyote destroyer, as in "coyotes," the human smugglers who bring undocumented Mexicans into the United States), however, only comes in red. Company representatives ignored my inquiries regarding sales of Saint Death candles. Nevertheless, their well-developed website (http://veladorasmisticas.com) reveals the domination of the Bony Lady over all other saints, spirits, and magical figures.

The variety of models of Santa Muerte candles among the eleven categories of glass jar candles manufactured by the company is unmatched. For instance, in the largest category of candles, paraffin wax with silk-screened images printed on the jar, those bearing the likeness of the Grim Reapress far outnumber the others. Of the total of 236 models, thirteen are hers, and they come in all the colors of the cult, including the rare orange and pink. Ranking in a distant second place is Saint Jude, whose cult is also proliferating in Mexico, with six models. The two big surprises are the Virgin of Guadalupe and the narcosaint Jesús Malverde, who only have two models and one model, respectively, which places them in the same position as the 7 Elefantes and Gallina Negra (Black Hen) candles.

Competition is a bit stiffer in the second largest category of jar candles, the commercial, smooth silk-screened ones. Santa Muerte

again claims a plurality, with seven models out of a total of 193 in this, the cheapest category of jar candle, with a box of twenty selling for $23.50. Following right on the bony heels of the skeleton saint are Ajo Macho (Male Garlic) with six, Saint Jude at five, and the Guatemalan folk saint Saint Simón (also known as Maximón) coming in at four. Again, Jesús Malverde and the Virgin of Guadalupe fair unexpectedly poorly with just one model each. The saint of death has also taken a commanding position among the Cadillac of candle styles, the fourteen-day, smooth silk-screened ones, which sell for $43.55 for a box of just six. Three of the twenty-two models available bear the image of the White Girl. No other candle in this category has more than one model.

The other sine qua non of ritual objects, effigies of the saint, rank as the second best seller after candles. Practically every altar, from the most ornate to the most humble, has at least one statue or figurine of the Bony Lady at the center of the sacred space. Some of the more creative Santa Muertistas make their own idols out of an impressive array of materials, including cow bone, papier-mâché, aluminum, and resin. The variety in color, size, and style of *bultos* (as the statues are called in Mexico) is thrown into high relief at the monthly rosary services in Tepito. Of the hundreds of hand-crafted effigies at the August 2009 service, the one that made the most lasting impression on me was the one outfitted in combat fatigues, with a realistic-looking bandolier replete with bullet shells. The Grim Reapress dressed for battle seemed entirely fitting in this rough-and-tumble neighborhood, whose gun battles in the street often make it resemble a war zone.

Almost as unique was the four-feet-high statue of Santa Muerte dressed in a cloak of real one- and two-dollar bills. I came across this particular image in August 2010, at one of the creepier shrines I've visited. Located in the labyrinthine streets of a working-class barrio of Oaxaca, the shrine stood at the back of an empty lot, protected from the elements by only a flimsy laminate roof. After yelling "buenas tardes" several times from the street, meeting with no response and

apparent indifference from a few shoulder-shrugging neighborhood teens whom we later learned were deaf, we had actually turned around and headed back to the minuscule Ford Ka, which my brother-in-law had generously lent us for the Saint Death road trip, when we heard a woman shouting from her doorstep halfway up the street. At the top of her lungs, she explained that the metal chain securing the chain-link door wasn't really padlocked despite appearing to be.

Unsure of what we might find at an unattended altar on an abandoned-looking lot, I nervously unthreaded the heavy rusted chain and quickly pushed open the door. Again my wife proclaimed "buenas tardes," but still there was no response from anywhere on the muddy patch, especially from the tiny hovel in one of the corners of the property, which looked too small to fit a bed. Somewhat unnerved by the thought of visiting what appeared to be a semipublic shrine with no attendant on site, I felt even more unsettled upon approaching the altar and seeing that most of the votive candles were lit and that the Marlboro burning at the feet of the Bony Lady dressed in greenbacks had been offered by some devotee or the caretaker himself just minutes before our arrival. Never before had I visited such a shrine where nobody else was present. We both felt it would be good to survey the site as quick as possible before being surprised by a potentially suspicious or angry attendant. So I took some notes, my wife snapped dozens of photos, and I returned the chain to its previous position before anyone else could arrive. It wasn't the first time during my field research that I wondered if the White Girl might be watching my back.

More common than the artisanal images displayed most colorfully at Doña Queta's monthly rosary service are the mass-produced, store-bought images, which also come in a surprising array of prices, colors, sizes, and materials. They are almost as ubiquitous as the cult's votive candles and are sold by the humblest street vendors, who might have nothing more than a few figurines and incense displayed

on a piece of cloth on the ground on a strategic Mexico City sidewalk, to online merchants of esoterica who advertise their effigies with high-resolution photos of each model.

Statuettes of the skeleton saint have become so popular that they are increasingly sold at businesses that have no direct connection to esoteric or religious products. As I reluctantly accompanied my wife on a shopping trip one mid-July afternoon in Mexico City I was astounded to see hundreds of Santa Muerte figurines and statues occupying premium shelf space at the numerous jewelry-supply stores we wandered into. The Skinny Lady looked out of place amid the bins of semiprecious stones and shelves of nickel-silver wire and earring hooks, but salespeople assured me that lots of customers take her home along with materials to fashion their own jewelry. To my great surprise, the afternoon that I thought I had sacrificed for the cause of jewelry-supply shopping turned out to be an unexpected research opportunity. And the photos snapped by my prolific picture-taking wife of the saint of death surrounded by a sea of wire and stones at these stores rank among my favorites of the thousands she took.

By far the most common material used to manufacture the mass-produced images is polyresin. This synthetic compound offers several advantages over other common materials used for making statues and figurines, such as plaster, wood, and plastic. First, it is extremely durable and virtually unbreakable. Given that a good percentage of effigies are shipped across the Pacific from Chinese factories, polyresin Saint Deaths are more likely to arrive at Mexican shores intact. Further, as a relatively inexpensive material, polyresin makes for more affordable idols. In the economy of scarcity in which most Santa Muertistas operate, affordability of ritual paraphernalia is a major concern. Finally, the versatile compound produces a sheen similar to fiberglass. Color can be added into the compound to produce a statuette that is semitranslucent.[7] Amber and green figure as popular colors in this particular style. Cheaper models, however,

receive a solid coat of paint after the polyresin has solidified in a Santa Muerte mold. The idols come in the same colors as the votive candles, including the increasingly popular seven-color one, which, like the candle, appeals to devotees in need of miracles on multiple fronts.

Followers of the skeleton saint can also choose from a wide range of sizes. The smallest, which tend to be the cheapest, stand no more than two inches high while the largest are life-size, with some even exceeding six feet. Since the life-size statues are prohibitively expensive for most Santa Muertistas, they are most often seen at major public shrines and altars. Most devotees buy the images that stand between two inches and two feet. The popular five-inch figurines sell for $12.50 at Indio Products, an online store (https://www.indioproducts.com/user/login), and like many Santa Muerte effigies, they contain amulets inside the figure's base, right below the saint's bony feet. The red beans, mustard seeds, grains of rice and wheat, and the occasional miniature metallic horseshoe are suspended in the translucent polyresin and serve as amulets of prosperity and abundance that turbocharge the White Girl's already strong association with material blessings.

While effigies and candles constitute the sine qua non of ritual paraphernalia and are almost always present at even the humblest home altars, sales of an impressive array of additional devotional accoutrements contribute to the livelihood of thousands of merchants of esoterica and religious articles. At most stores on both sides of the border and also at market stalls in Mexico, devotees can also purchase Saint Death oils and essences, aerosol sprays, powders, rosaries, incense, prayer cards, and soap. Given the limited budgets of most Santa Muertistas, the cheaper products, such as incense and prayer cards, sell the best. At many shops and market stalls in Mexico I was surprised to see the words "Hecho en Venezuela" (made in Venezuela) printed on the packaging labels of many of these ritual items. Guillermina, working at the family esoterica

store in Morelia, explained that the Venezuela connection was fictitious. Taking advantage of the South American country's reputation for powerful sorcery in the Mexican popular imagination, some manufacturers of Powerful Lady products at factories in Mexico City misrepresent the national origin of their merchandise on the labels. I've spent considerable time in Mexico during the past twenty-five years and am married to a woman from Morelia, yet I continue to be perplexed by the "made in Venezuela" fabrication. Cuba is much closer to Mexico, both in terms of geography and the popular imagination. At many public Santa Muerte altars and among movers and shakers of the cult, the influence of Cuban Santería is obvious. Neither Guillermina nor other purveyors of skeleton saint products could give me a satisfactory answer regarding the choice to misrepresent merchandise as Venezuelan rather than Cuban. False advertising aside, the Venezuelan "mystique" apparently boosts sales of many of these ritual products, which help keep many merchants in business.

DANGLING DEATH

As the cult has gone public in the last decade, so too have many of Saint Death's devotees. Prior to Doña Queta's public debut of the Bony Lady in 2001, the few Santa Muertistas who wore any kind of material symbol of their devotion, such as a pendant, kept it concealed under their shirts. Today, ten years later, hundreds of thousands of believers publicly proclaim their allegiance to the angel of death by sporting her image in a variety of ways. The most common manner by far in which devotees sport symbols of their faith is by wearing a metallic pendant in the shape of the skeleton saint attached to a gold or silver necklace. These days believers often wear the pendant over their shirt in plain view of fellow subway riders, passersby on the street, and family, friends, and colleagues. It's no exaggeration to say that these pendants are ubiquitous in Mexico. In addition to

dangling from the necks of believers, they are seen for sale all over the country at *botanicas*, jewelry shops, street vendor stalls, etc. They are available in various sizes and types of metal, including the cheaper nickel silver and the most expensive 18 karat gold with encrusted rubies, like the one given as a gift to the infamous Wall Street scammer Bernard Madoff.[8]

Less common but easily observed in the streets of big-city Mexico are two other types of Santa Muerte jewelry—bracelets and scapularies. The former come in two basic styles. The more popular ones are just like the trendy wooden saint bracelets that come in a variety of colors and typically bear the images of Guadalupe, Saint Jude, Pope John Paul II, and the Holy Child of Atocha. A typical Saint Death wooden bracelet rests atop my desk. Three different alternating images of her are laminated to eleven rectangular blocks, which have been painted black and are joined together by an elastic cord.

Two of her likenesses are very similar. In both the view is of the upper half of her skeleton, in which she wears a monk's robe with the hood covering all of her skull except for her skeletal face. The most salient feature in both images is the huge scythe. In one depiction the tip of the menacing blade points to her left, while in the other it points to the right. The skeleton saint with blade pointing left wears a dark blue robe and gazes off to her right at a 45 degree angle. Her companion to the left wears a green cloak and stares straight ahead with her hollow eye sockets. Substantially different is the third likeness of the saint. Hers is a phantasmal appearance in which the entire skeleton is cloaked in a grey robe that seems to furl in the wind. She stands erect with a monstrous scythe clutched in her left hand and looks straight ahead out of an eerie lunar-like landscape.

The other type of bracelet is less appealing. A single nickel-silver pendant in the image of the White Girl is surrounded by dozens of

tiny plastic beads that usually alternate among white, yellow, red, and black. Like the wooden bracelets, an elastic band holds the beads and pendant together and enables the bracelet to fit on the thickest of Santa Muertista wrists. Until very recently, bracelets and pendants attached to necklaces were the only types of Saint Death jewelry I had come across.

Curiously, it was on a research trip to Guatemala to meet skeleton saint Rey Pascual in April 2010 that I first saw earrings bearing the likeness of the Mexican saint of death. An enterprising young artisanal-jewelry maker from Panajachel, on beautiful Lake Atitlán, had taken apart the aforementioned wooden bracelets and fashioned the little blocks into earrings. Indeed, this was my very first encounter with the Powerful Lady in the Central American country. It seemed strange that my first sighting of her beyond her homelands of Mexico and the United States was in a medium that I had never seen before in the two North American countries. And after finding her earrings in such an unexpected place, I had wondered why I hadn't seen them before, particularly in Mexico, where practically all girls' ears are pierced when they are newborns. Interestingly, the first Mexican woman I saw wearing earrings bearing the image of the skeleton saint was the Godmother of the cult. When I went to visit her in July 2010, Doña Queta had two silver likenesses of her spiritual patroness clipped to her earlobes. Doña Queta and all devotees who wear such earrings are in a unique position to hear whatever the Skinny Lady might whisper in their ears.

SKIN TO DEATH

Tattoo artists on both sides of the border, but especially in Mexico, have benefited from the ever-increasing number of devotees who have decided to permanently embed an image of the Bony Lady in their skin. My nephew Roberto, the prison guard in Morelia, who now talks about seeking political asylum in Canada because of death

threats he has received since I first interviewed him, told me that four prisoners who are tattoo artists are kept busy in the Michoacán state penitentiary by the growing demand from fellow inmates for images of Saint Death inked onto their chests, backs, and arms. According to Roberto, the only other tattoo that comes close in popularity is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Santa Muertistas typically have the object of their devotion tattooed onto their skin as payment for a promise or vow made to the Powerful Lady. Twenty-four-year-old Fernanda, whom I interviewed literally in the shadow of the "world's largest Santa Muerte statue" in Ecatepec, had asked her new patron saint for another "big favor" after the initial one of ending the sorcery assault on her home. During our interview on the grounds of the giant statue and temple complex, Fernanda suddenly lifted the back of her shirt to reveal an impressive tattoo of the Bony Lady that covered most of her back. She explained that she had promised the saint that she would have her image embedded in her skin if she released her father from prison. And sure enough, a few weeks after she made the vow, her father was let go before serving his full sentence.

In a similar vein, an inmate at one of Mexico City's prisons for women recounted how she had vowed to have the skeleton saint tattooed on her back if she healed her fractured pelvis, the result of a car accident in 1992. The Bony Lady granted her miracle by "fusing her bones back together." In perhaps even more dramatic fashion, Saint Death saved her life when a knife-wielding assassin missed her lungs and heart and plunged the blade instead into her tattooed upper back.[9] It's no coincidence that she and Fernanda both sport tattoos. While tattoos have been growing in popularity among the general public in Mexico, there is still a strong association there between tattooing and the criminal underworld, which of course is much less the case in the United States. Richmond, my new hometown, ranks third in the country in the number of tattoo parlors per capita, and all sorts

of people who have no connection to criminal activities have put a substantial portion of their epidermis under the needles of tattoo artists.[10] I've yet to see a Richmonder with a Santa Muerte tattoo, but the inking of her image on the chests, arms, and backs of tens of thousands of her cult members has undoubtedly enabled many a tattoo artist to prosper while giving the skeleton saint a permanent residence in the skin of many of her flock.

DEATHWEAR

Rounding out the Saint Death merchandise that can be worn is clothing. In a world where every imaginable secular and sacred image finds its way onto a T-shirt, it was just a matter of time before the skeleton saint graced the front of the globe's most common type of shirt. In Mexico these tend to be cheap, cotton/polyester-blend black shirts with a menacing image of the Grim Reapress printed in white. The aesthetics of the design definitely recall concert T-shirts from 1970s heavy metal bands such as AC/DC, Black Sabbath, and Judas Priest. They're easily found in the big municipal markets of Mexican cities and are also sold at larger Santa Muerte prayer services and events.

Here in the United States the tees tend to be 100 percent cotton and have a much greater variety of colors and depictions of the Pretty Girl. Several online stores sell the shirts to devotees and the trendy, ranging in price from around $16 to $40. Zazzle.com, the first business that came up in a recent Google search of "Santa Muerte shirts," offers fifteen different styles, all of which depict the skeleton saint in a kinder, gentler style than the menacing Mexican version, who looks like she's about to take a swing at someone with her scythe. In fact, if the shirts didn't have the words "Santa Muerte" printed on them, the spirited skeleton dancing in a graveyard could easily be mistaken for La Calavera Catrina, the playful skeletal figure of Mexican folklore.

While T-shirts reign supreme in the world of Saint Death apparel, all kinds of articles of clothing can be purchased from American online retailers. Hoodies, with their wide appeal among teens and twentysomethings on both sides of the border, probably rank as a distant second to shirts. Among the more unusual items I've come across are Santa Muerte tennis shoes and thongs. The latter, the "classic Santa Muerte thong," is available in three sizes online at CafePress, which proudly announces that this unique women's underwear is "made in the USA." The image on the thong is the fierce Mexican-style Grim Reapress whose hooded skull is framed by two large scythes. No consideration of the White Girl's lines of apparel would be complete without reference to footwear. Next to the thong, customized high-top Nikes stand out as one of the most original types of Saint Death apparel. A pair of Nike Dunk High Santa Muertes retails for $89 online at ShoesDone, and though they don't sport the likeness of the saint, the white basketball shoes do bear her name and initials etched in gothic type into the leather surface. These high-tops must be among the very few on the market that are adorned with horse hair.

DEATH, READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Despite the supremacy of the spoken word over the written one in the cult of Saint Death, Mexican publishers profit from the sale of devotional literature. Most important is the omnipresent monthly magazine *Devoción a la Santa Muerte* (Devotion to Saint Death), which is sold at corner newsstands throughout the country. In retrospect, my initial call to study the skeleton saint may have actually occurred when I bought the inaugural issue of the colorful magazine at a Mexico City newsstand in July 2005. I was still researching the Virgin of Guadalupe at the time, but as a student of popular religion in general I couldn't resist examining a glossy magazine that had a strange skeleton dressed like one of the many different

Latin American images of the Virgin Mary. Mina Editores, one of the largest magazine publishers in Mexico, produces *Devoción a la Santa Muerte*, as well as *San Judas Tadeo* and *Trolls*, in their "esoteric" line of monthlies, which also includes *Mi Boda* (My Wedding), *Tatuajes* (Tattoos), and *Pickups* in their other categories of magazines.

The publisher prints 25,000 copies of *Devoción* each month and distributes them to newsstands throughout the country, where they each sell for $1.65. Among the different sections of the magazine, the one called "Altar" claims the most pages, twelve of thirty-one. Here devotees proudly display their home altars in high-quality photos and tell readers how they have lovingly developed a sacred space for the Powerful Lady in the intimacy of their own homes. In Issue 118, Verónica García of the San Cosme district of Mexico City shows off unusual dresses that she has knitted for her Santa Muerte statues. The caption beneath a picture of one of the statues dressed in a blue and white knit outfit reads, "The Garcías keep an impeccable altar. They clean it and regularly provide offerings."

Ritual instructions, questions and answers, advice, testimonials of miracles received and "dreams about the White Girl" constitute the other sections in which pretty much every page has a photo of the saint. In the same issue (118) in which the García family reveals their home altar to the cameras, there is a description of a Saint Death rituals designed "to eliminate bad energy from your vehicle." In addition to spraying the car in question with abrecaminos (road opener) aerosol, readers are instructed to pray, "O my great Lady, I ask you from the bottom of my heart and with much faith that you keep me away from danger and that you remove from my path any curse or people who want to do me harm, and don't allow any accidents on my way. May your will be done."

Devotees looking for more detailed ritual instructions and collections of prayers can choose among several books, booklets, and manuals

published in Mexico in Spanish. The most widely available, which is sold both online and at *yerberías* in both the United States and Mexico, is *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* (*The Saint Death Bible*), published by the large Mexican press, Editores Mexicanos Unidos. The promotional blurb on the back cover appeals to personal problem solving: "Find the solution to family problems, enjoy protection from your enemies, avoid being robbed, help your children, grow your business, and much more through prayer and devotion to Saint Death." In the next paragraph Pablo López and Marcia Nielsen, authors of several books on Santería, underscore the utility of the ninety-six-page book. "In this book you will find a compendium of prayers, rituals, novenas, and basic rules for her cult. You will be able to get close to her and ask her anything—from advice to the improvement of your health and finances, and even protection for your business. And you will also learn how to give thanks for favors that have been granted. All this through *The Saint Death Bible*."

Oddly, the image of Santa Muerte on the front cover is not the usual female figure. Rather, the black-robed skeleton holding a scythe made from a human spine in one hand and planet earth in the other looks decidedly androgynous. Most of the booklets and manuals tend to be abbreviated versions of the *Bible* focusing more on prayers and less on rituals. Reflecting her increasing number of English-speaking devotees, *The Magical Powers of the Holy Death* was the first major ritual guide to be published in English in 2008. The major online vendors of esoterica and occult paraphernalia sell the booklet.

The skeleton saint has also earned profits for a few Mexican and American novelists who have portrayed her in works of fiction. Most notably, the Mexican writer, environmentalist, and former diplomat Homero Aridjis introduced many of his compatriots to the Bony Lady in his 2004 novel *La Santa Muerte: Sexteto del amor, las mujeres, los perros y la muerte* (Saint Death: Sextet of Love, Women, Dogs, and

Death). An engaging piece of pulp fiction, the novel portrays the saint as a gruesome Grim Reapress, straight out of a bad horror flick. Aridjis portrays himself as Miguel Medina, a Mexico City crime reporter who receives a mysterious invitation to attend the fiftieth birthday party of a major drug lord. During the twenty-four-hour bacchanalian bash at a ranch outside the city attended by powerful narcos, politicians, actors, and even Catholic bishops, Aridjis secretly witnesses a satanic type of human sacrifice in which one of the partygoers is knifed at the Santa Muerte home altar of the drug lord. In a recent interview, Aridjis claimed that his novel is a fictionalized account of events that he witnessed at a Saint Death birthday bash.[11] In its third edition, the book has generated handsome profits for the Mexican intellectual, who is not a devotee himself and is actually resented by many Santa Muertistas, most significantly devotees associated with Doña Queta who have read the novel and object to his portrayal of the Bony Lady as a satanic sorceress.[12] For Irish crime novelist John Connolly, the profits generated by the Dark Angel have been even greater. His 2005 novel *The Black Angel*, the fifth in a series, helped push his career sales over seven million. On his website Connolly lists Santa Muerte as one of the three main sources of inspiration for his 624-page tome.

VIRTUAL DEATH

More than reading novels, however, devotees, especially younger ones, are more likely to read (and write) about the Powerful Lady on the Internet. Of course the great majority of believers don't have Internet access at home, but Internet cafés are ubiquitous in Mexico, usually charging around a dollar an hour. In late 2010 I found five websites and seven Facebook pages dedicated to the skeleton saint. Several rock bands and dozens of Facebook users have appropriated Santa Muerte, Santísima Muerte, Holy Death, and Saint Death as their usernames, but their pages don't focus on the folk saint herself.

As intriguing as they are, the Facebook sites are less relevant here since they aren't overtly commercial spaces selling Saint Death products and services. Instead, they mostly consist of testimonials, prayers, and links to other Saint Death sites. Teenager Karen Silva's post in September 2010 on a Santa Muerte Facebook page is typical of the genre. "I doubt ima liv very lonq meanwhile Santa Muerte quide mee thru safety in life til itz my time. God take care of my luvd ones plz."[13]

Of the five websites dedicated to the White Girl, Red Santa Muerte (Saint Death Network, http://santamuerte.galeon.com/) is the most developed and came up tenth in a Google search of "Santa Muerte." The site is organized into sections such as "Bookstore," "Altar," "History," "News," and "Novenas." Three other sections, "The Saint Death Shop," "Saint Death Silver I," and "Saint Death Silver II," offer statuettes and jewelry in the image of the skeleton saint. One of the silver pendants for sale in the section "Saint Death Silver II" is allegedly made by artisans from Taxco, Mexico's famous silver town, and sells for $40, plus shipping. It's unclear how much revenue the jewelry and effigies of the saint generate for the owners of the website, but apparently enough to earn top billing in Google searches of "Santa Muerte" and whatever fees Galeon.com charges for hosting the site.

By far the most interesting section of the site is the "forum," a kind of virtual prayer wall in which devotees directly address their skeletal patroness, asking her for miracles or thanking her for ones that have been performed. An anonymous Santa Muertista posted the following petition in the forum on September 14, 2010. "Pretty Girl, I was able to pay today. I thank you for this, but I wasn't able to sell everything. I'm still in debt. If I had sales I wouldn't have to take out loans. You are powerful, so don't allow this to happen. Give me sales please."

Two of the five websites dedicated to the Bony Lady are the homepages of Santa Muerte temples. One is of the Los Angeles

shrine (http://templosantamuerte.com/indexesp.html), on which "Professors" Sisyphus and Sahara offer classes and consultations and, as of early 2011, sell Powerful Lady apparel and paraphernalia in the new sections of "Clothing" and "Products." The site has become considerably more commercial since I first visited it. A sizeable ad for the LA taco stand Tacos El Patio appears on every page, including the live webcam that focuses on the altar within the Angelino temple. Sisyphus and Sahara also attempt to generate revenue through donations. Clicking on the red tab that reads *donar* (donations), which is located at the upper right-hand corner in each section, sends the prospective donor to an online PayPal form that accepts all major credit cards. In contrast, Santa Muerte Godfather, David Romo's website, Unico Santuario Nacional de la Santa Muerte (The Only National Saint Death Sanctuary, http://www.santamuerte.org/santuarios/mexico/3039-unico-santuario-natiocional-de-la-santa-muerte.html) doesn't sell any products or services and doesn't even solicit donations, in contrast with the plethora of donation boxes within the Mexico City temple itself.

The Skinny Lady has also contributed to the prosperity of filmmakers and TV producers who have featured her in their movies and television series. In addition to the Aridjis documentary and Paco del Toro's polemic piece, several recent movies have featured the skeleton saint. *Not Forgotten*, directed by Israeli filmmaker Dror Soref, is the only English-speaking film to date to focus on Santa Muerte. Soref's saint is the satanic Grim Reapress of the black candle who deals in dark rituals and presides over a coven of kidnappers and other shady devotees. Protagonist Jack Bishop (played by Simon Baker) utters the film's most memorable line: "Isn't it funny how people get all religious when things go wrong? A vigil with candles and prayers was a nice idea. But what they didn't know was that there really are some things that you can't ask the Virgin for." Despite the somewhat stereotypical

portrayal of the skeleton saint, the film is engrossing in a pulp-fiction kind of way.

DEATH ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Saint Death has also starred in two TV series aired in the United States in the past few years. One, *Breaking Bad*, has won critical acclaim. It became the first TV show that I watched in its entirety during my adult life. I had tried to watch the serial drama *Twin Peaks* back in the early 1990s but ended up missing a few episodes. I first saw an episode of *Breaking Bad* a couple years ago when visiting a friend in Houston. I was intrigued by the premise of a high school science teacher deciding to "cook" crystal meth to support his family after learning that he has terminal cancer. In the particular episode I saw at my friend's house, Walt, the main character, makes the drug in a makeshift lab in an old RV and partners with a much younger former student of his. Months went by before I caught another episode, and between the captivating story line, superb acting, and setting in New Mexico, where my parents live, I decided to make a concerted effort to watch the rest of it.

To my great surprise and delight, season three kicked off in March 2010 with a startling first scene in which two ominous-looking cartel hit men from Michoacán (I could tell by zooming in on the license plate of their late-model Mercedes) park their luxury car on a dusty dirt road leading to an isolated hamlet and drop to the the ground in their silk suits, joining the tens of villagers who are dragging themselves on all fours toward an adobe hut. Once inside, the Michoacano assassins approach a life-size statue of Saint Death, address her in prayer, and then affix a penciled sketch of Walt, the science teacher turned methamphetamine producer, to her altar. The pair of killers mistakenly believe that Walt killed their cousin, an Albuquerque narco, and ask the skeleton saint to help

them "do justice." It's not clear if the Pretty Girl will reappear in future episodes, but this one in particular has won critical acclaim for producer Vince Gilligan.

The Skinny Lady also has appeared in the less acclaimed crime drama, *Dexter*. Two Venezuelan immigrant brothers commit murder in Miami under the spiritual tutelage of Saint Death. Several fans of Venezuelan and Mexican descent complained on *Dexter*-related blogs about the "mischaracterization" of Santa Muerte as a Venezuelan phenomenon. And they are probably correct in alleging ignorance on the part of the show's producers.[14] However, a recent news report confirms the presence of the Mexican skeleton saint in the South American nation.[15]

DEATHROCK

Finally, in accord with her supernatural skill at multitasking, the Powerful Lady has also generated income for musicians who have sung her praises and even borrowed her name for their own band name or album title. We already considered the Mexican hip-hop group Cartel de Santa and balladeers Beto Quintanilla and Los Cadetes de Linares in chapter 3, on her black votive candle. In addition to these Mexican groups, the LA-based pioneering "deathrock" band Kommunity FK recently released their latest CD, entitled *La Santisima Muerte*. True to the musical genre, *La Santisima Muerte* sounds dark and foreboding. Despite the relevance of their latest release, Kommunity FK didn't play at the Santa Muerte Music & Arts Festival held in Tucson in mid-September 2010.

Organizers billed the uniquely named event as "a two day event celebrating the folklore of the southwest showcasing some of the most important underground musicians and cutting-edge international visionary artists. This is a grassroots event created and inspired by artists and musicians." Blind Divine, Ensphere, and Flam Chen of All Souls Procession figured among the "underground" musicians

that entertained the festival-goers. Thus, from helping the humblest of her devotees find work to sponsoring community festivals, the Bony Lady fulfills one of her most important missions—bestowing blessings of prosperity and abundance upon both those who adore her and those who traffic in her image.

Chapter 6

Purple Candle

Healing

HEALED BY DEATH

In the 1960 Mexican film *Macario*, based on B. Traven's 1950 novella, death appears in the form of a fellow Mexican peasant to a starving *campesino*, Macario. Macario has gone on a hunger strike in his colonial-era village in protest against his own poverty, refusing to eat until he is able to sit down and enjoy an entire roast turkey by himself. Unwilling to let her husband starve to death, Macario's wife steals a big bird and roasts it to perfection for her severely debilitated spouse. The emaciated *campesino* finds a quiet spot outdoors to enjoy his turkey in peace. But three successive visitors won't allow the poor peasant to eat. The devil, disguised as a suave gentleman; God, looking like Father Time; and Death, appearing as a fellow *campesino*, all ask Macario to share his roasted delicacy with them. Figuring that both the devil and God have the wherewithal to get their own birds, Macario sends them packing. However, he accepts Death's request to share the turkey, and in gratitude the hungry Grim Reaper grants Macario the ability to heal the sick with holy water, with the proviso that if Death appears at the headboard of a sickbed, Macario must concede the life in question to Death. In no time, the impoverished woodcutter becomes a famous healer in the town, saving the apparently terminally ill from the clutches of the Grim Reaper. All goes well until Macario attempts to defy death, when he appears at the headboard of the sick son of the viceroy. The film ends with Macario's wife

finding him dead, albeit with a contented look on his face, next to the half-eaten turkey.

Although in *Macario* death takes the form of the Grim Reaper of European lore and not of Santa Muerte, it's revealing that the power he grants the starving woodcutter is that of healing the sick. Of all the rich paradoxes present in the cult of the Bony Lady, perhaps her status as a powerful healer is one of the most intriguing. In stark contrast, death in Western cultures has typically been viewed as a bringer of disease and pestilence. Recall that the image of the Grim Reaper was born during the Black Death, which sent a large percentage of Europeans to early graves.

The idea of death as a healing agent, however, does exist in both Germanic and Mexican folklore. Indeed, B. Traven found inspiration for *Macario* in the German fairy tale "Godfather Death," popularized by the Grimm brothers and also in a Mexican variant of the tale. The Grimm brothers' account casts Death in the role of godfather of a poor boy who becomes a famous physician using a healing ointment contained in a special flask given to him by his godfather. With the exception of the boy's romantic interest in the king's beautiful daughter, the tale is essentially the same as *Macario*. Interestingly, the poor boy's father chooses Death to be his thirteenth child's godfather after rejecting offers from both God and the devil. The boy's father rejects God for favoring the rich while letting the poor starve. And while the devil tempts the poor man with large sums of gold, he is sent packing for being a deceiver of humankind. The impoverished father, however, likes what he hears when he meets Death on the road and asks him who he is. "I am Death, who makes everyone equal." The father of thirteen responds enthusiastically, "You are the right one. You take away the rich as well as the poor, without distinction. You shall be my child's godfather."[1] Santa Muertistas echo the sentiment of the poor man in the Grimm tale when they say that one of the most appealing attributes of their Godmother is that she "doesn't discriminate."

In one of the Mexican variants of the story, "Godmother Death," the Grim Reapress is female (La Parca) and becomes the boy's godmother. As in the other versions, Death bestows healing powers upon her godson, who defies his godmother by attempting to prolong the life of the woman he loves. His punishment is swift and just. His gloomy godmother blows out the two candles that represent his life and that of his lover. In classic romantic tragedy form, the two young lovers perish at the same time.

Thus drawing on both European and Mexican cultural antecedents in which death possesses awesome curing powers and tapping into the well-established tradition of saints (both canonized and folk) who heal through faith, Santa Muerte in just a decade has become one of the greatest healers on the Mexican religious landscape. Judging by the small number of purple votive candles at her altars and shrines, one would surmise that miracles of restored health don't figure as an important part of the cult. Here, however, looks are deceiving. Many devotees seeking healing or giving thanks for restored health offer white or yellow candles instead of the newer and less popular purple ones. The yellow jar candle has a specific association with recovery from substance abuse, while white tends to be employed for all types of health problems. That three different colors of candles are associated with the quest for health reveals the paramount importance of the Powerful Lady's role as a supernatural physician.

BEYOND DEATH

The supreme importance of faith healing in the cult of Saint Death shouldn't surprise readers who are familiar with popular religion in Latin America. In my previous work on Pentecostalism in Brazil, I showed how the dialectic between poverty-related illness and faith healing has catapulted this branch of charismatic Protestantism to the front and center of the Brazilian religious

landscape as well as much of the Latin American.[2] Convert after convert in the Amazonian city of Belém revealed to me how they had converted to the Assemblies of God, Foursquare Gospel Church, or some other denomination in the midst of an acute health crisis, which in the case of women was just as likely to be that of a family member as their own. For impoverished Latin Americans, the Pentecostal Jesus is, above all, the Physician of Physicians, curing his patients of their earthly afflictions. In a similar vein, one of the primary functions of the saints in Latin America, both canonized and folk, is to cure devotees of their ailments. Some Latin American folk saints, such as Niño Fidencio, who lived in the northern Mexican state of Nuevo León in the first decades of the twentieth century, were actually renowned faith healers in their times. Moreover, it wouldn't be far-fetched to argue that the most popular saints in the region are generally those that have a reputation for being powerful healers.

PARTNERS IN DEATH (TILL DEATH DO US PART)

Whereas Santa Muerte has quickly earned a reputation for being a formidable healer, her male counterparts in Guatemala and Argentina were actually conceived as faith healers. Guatemalan folk saint Rey Pascual's foundation myth is a fascinating account of Catholic and Mayan syncretism in which the original Spanish saint, Pascual Bailón, morphs into the skeletal folk saint who is venerated today in Olintepeque and also Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. A canonized saint, Pascual Bailón was a Franciscan friar from Aragón who lived during the second half of the sixteenth century and was known as a mystic and contemplative. He was beatified by the Church in 1618, just a couple decades after his death, and then canonized in 1690. Although he never set foot in the Americas, his apparition in Guatemala in 1650 to a deathly ill Mayan man is credited with ending a virulent epidemic.

Legend has it that the Spanish saint appeared in the form of a tall skeleton in luminescent robes at the deathbed of a prominent Kaqchikel man and presented himself as Saint Pascual, even though it would be forty more years until he was canonized. In the classic quid pro quo relationship that pervades popular religion in Latin America, the skeletal saint offered to end the epidemic in the Kaqchikel region of present-day Ciudad Vieja, Sacatepéquez, if the community adopted him as their patron saint. In proof of his saintly powers, Pascual predicted that in nine days the recipient of the vision would succumb to his high fever and at the same time the epidemic would run its course. As word of the Spanish saint's correct prediction spread, his image, much to the dismay of the Spanish Inquisition, became increasingly popular in the region during the colonial period.[3] Over time Rey Pascual has expanded his repertoire to become the multitasking miracle worker that he is today. However, his first miracle as the new skeletal folk saint in Guatemala was one of healing, and this particular miraculous power remains at the core of King Pascual's present-day mission.

In a similar vein, one of the most common myths pertaining to the origin of the Argentine skeleton saint, San La Muerte, revolves around disease and healing. In the late Spanish colonial period a renowned shaman took care of abandoned lepers in a remote area of the present-day province of Corrientes. Some accounts identify the shaman as a Franciscan friar or Jesuit who remained in the colony after his order's expulsion. His charitable work of bringing water and tending to the needs of the leper colony came to an abrupt halt with the return of the Catholic Church to the region. Upon entering a village one day to tend to the ill, the shaman, at the request of local priests, was arrested and imprisoned with the lepers. As a protest of his unjust punishment, the shaman refused to eat, sit, or lie down. Supported by a long upside-down L-shaped walking stick, the shaman slowly withered away. His standing, robed skeleton was discovered much later.[4]

Centuries later, San La Muerte still spends much of his time attending to the infirm. In August 2010, a devotee left the following petition at one of the online virtual altars.

> Glorious little saint, today I come to you in a bad state. At 5:00 they're going to take NRL to the hospital for his operation tomorrow. Please make everything turn out fine. And if this is the result of harm sent his way, allow me to see it, and use your scythe to get those responsible out of our way, so they disappear from our lives and from the world—all of them, but especially MBL. Amen.

This, of course, is really a twofold supplication involving the purple candle for healing and the black for vengeance. Quite often in all three cults of the skeleton saints, one person's healing is another person's harm.

You will recall that the inchoate public cult of Santa Muerte has yet to establish a unified myth of origin. However, evidence of her importance as a faith healer abounds in the prayers, rituals, and testimonials of devotees. Along with prayers for protection and prosperity, those for health figure most prominently in *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*. Most Santa Muertistas probably make a living doing manual labor, so keeping their bodies healthy is imperative. Physical illness that prevents the individual from working can have disastrous financial consequences. The Saint Death "Prayer for Bodily Health" was surely composed with this in mind.

> Most Holy Death, protectress, owner and Lady of life. Angel whom our Father created in order to help and serve. Today I implore and beseech you to grant me health and life for [name of

person]. May his days on earth be long, may his body recover its vigor and energy. You, who can do everything, save him and restore his health. I implore you, I ask it to you on this day, at this time for the sake of Jesus Christ, victor on the cross, be moved by my plea and bring him back.[5]

DEADLY HABITS

In addition to healing the broken bodies of her devotees, the Powerful Lady helps her flock overcome their abuse of alcohol and other drugs. That the cult of Saint Death offers a special votive candle—the yellow one—and specific prayers for devotees trying to kick the habit gives testament to the importance of her role as a supernatural rehab counselor. Precise figures on the incidence of drug and alcohol abuse among Mexicans and Americans don't exist, but most estimates indicate that between 5 and 10 percent of the United States population are alcoholics. Based on both academic studies and my own personal experience in Mexico and the United States, I can attest to a pattern of binge drinking among a sizeable minority of men. In contrast to the classic European pattern of consuming small quantities frequently, such as a glass or two of wine with dinner, millions of Mexican and American men imbibe vast quantities of hard liquor and beer in drinking bouts that tend to take place on weekends. I myself have joined male friends and relatives in such outings and have been made fun of for calling it quits after a few rounds of tequila or beer. Being in a drunken stupor has never much appealed to me. In accord with my own experience, one study posits that 75 percent of alcohol available in Mexico was consumed by just 25 percent of drinkers,[6] while in a very similar pattern another claims that in the United States 20 percent of drinkers consume 80 percent of the alcohol.

Beyond alcohol, addiction to the very same psychotropics that the Mexican cartels export in great quantities is on the rise.

While the U.S. illicit drug market remains the largest in the world by far, the Mexican domestic one has grown considerably since the 1980s. Hundreds of new rehab centers have opened in the past couple decades that specialize in the abuse of methamphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, and heroin, among others. No longer is the abuse of stimulants and narcotics only an "American problem." A young inmate in one of the Mexico City penitentiaries for women who claimed to have painted over a thousand images of the Bony Lady for fellow prisoners hadn't yet asked her spiritual patroness for help with recovery but explained that she held her hand when she got high in the Bony Lady's cell to protect herself from an overdose.[7] Here again we see the appeal of Saint Death's nonjudgmental attitude. Devotees who aren't ready or willing to give up their habit can ask the Godmother to watch over them as they drug themselves. Substance abusers who are ready to beat their addiction can recite the "prayer for breaking a habit," as can their loved ones:

> Most Holy Death of the light of the moon. You who control the earthly dimension. You who spread joy and remind us that happiness is the goal of life before your arrival. Most Holy Death, do away with liquor, drugs, and other vices and bring tranquility to my home. Help [the name of the person] so that the blindfold comes off his eyes and transformation takes place. Show him clearly the reasons why vice must not take hold of our hearts so that it doesn't extinguish his inner light, and may your moon-colored wings alight on his spirit so that he feels your powerful presence. Most Holy Death, do away with liquor, drugs, and other vices and bring tranquility to my home. I sow seven seeds in the ground and may it be your name that cultivates the decision that leads to new circumstances, which through respect will open the doors of light. Most Holy Death, do away with

> liquor, drugs, and other vices and bring tranquility to my home. Protective and Blessed Death, by the virtue that God granted you, I want you to free me from all curses, dangers, and sickness, and instead give me luck, happiness, and money. I want you to give me friends and free me from my enemies. Also make [name of person] come to me in a humble way, like a lamb that lives up to its promises, to ask me for forgiveness. May he always be loving and submissive for the rest of our lives. Amen. (Pray three Lord's Prayers.).[8]

The prayer is obviously intended for family members and friends seeking the recovery of a loved one. And though written in gender-neutral language, it seems aimed at wives and girlfriends who suffer the consequences of having a substance-abusing mate. The request for Santa Muerte to bring the addict back humbled and submissive recalls the classic love-binding prayer stamped on the red candles, which, of course, is primarily for jilted women. Moreover, Mexican men become substance abusers at higher rates than women, so more often than not it is the wives, girlfriends, and mothers who approach the Lady of the Shadows asking that she return their men to the place of light, free from enslaving addictions.

A former prayer leader at Doña Queta's monthly rosary service, Jesse Ortiz Piña, sounds like a Pentecostal convert in describing how the White Girl helped him kick his habits of frequent partying and beer drinking. Santa Muerte, he says, made him "more responsible at work and home."[9] Indeed, in my previous research on Pentecostalism in Brazil I discovered that a search for sobriety is the primary reason why men convert to this charismatic branch of Protestantism. Forty percent of my male interviewees in the Amazonian city of Belém became Pentecostals as a result of a desire to sober up. In a similar vein, a substantial percentage of female converts came to the Pentecostal Jesus hoping that he could cure their husbands and sons of

their drinking problems.[10] What is salient here is that for some adherents the skeleton saint operates as an evangelical faith healer who offers a radical personal transformation along with the promise of overcoming substance abuse. Addictions to alcohol and the stimulants methamphetamine and cocaine are notoriously difficult to overcome, so it shouldn't be surprising that many abusers find the promise of complete transformation an appealing and often necessary stage on their road to recovery.

Nonetheless, it's intriguing to think that the same saint whose altars are awash in tequila and beer and is not exactly a paragon of sobriety is able to offer the same type of radical healing of substance abuse that is offered by the Pentecostal Jesus and Holy Spirit. Since Pentecostals conceive of Jesus as a teetotaler, it's easier to understand how this moral miracle worker would serve as a better model of sobriety than would a parched skeleton saint. But herein lies one of the great advantages of Santa Muerte in the increasingly competitive religious marketplace of Mexico and even in the greatest faith economy on earth here in the United States. Much more than Jesus, the canonized saints, and the myriad avocations of Mary, Santa Muerte's present identity is highly flexible. For some devotees, such as Jesse Piña, the Pretty Girl is also a moral miracle worker who, like Jesus and the saints, offers and encourages positive personal transformation as part of her healing repertoire.

For others she serves more as an amoral sorceress offering healing without demanding behavior modification and sometimes even in conjunction with causing harm to others. Recall the aforementioned Argentine adherent of San La Muerte asking the skeleton saint to both facilitate a successful operation for her loved one and to "use your scythe to get those responsible out of our way, so they disappear from our lives and from the world—all of them, but especially MBL." As her cult develops in the future it's quite possible that a more fixed identity will be established. However, at this particular historical moment, the

Godmother possesses both distinctly Christian and non-Christian identities depending on how individual devotees perceive her.

CLEANSING DEATH

In asking Saint Death to vanquish their ailments, devotees not only have specific prayers at their disposal but also a number of rituals. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, for example, contains five such ritual recipes for recovering both one's own health and that of loved ones. The "first ritual for health" is representative of the genre:

Ingredients:
1 medium stalk of rue
1 meter of purple ribbon
1 votive candle for health (purple)
1 bottle of Santa Muerte lotion
1 cigar
1 maguey leaf
1 black pen

Procedure:
With the black pen write down all your ailments on the ribbon and then use the ribbon to tie up the rue in a bunch. Apply a bit of the Santa Muerte lotion to the bunch of rue. Light the cigar and blow smoke over the rue.

Next, cleanse your entire body with the rue, starting with your head and working down to your feet, making sure you pass the rue several times over the part of your body that's most ailing. As soon as you finish, wrap the rue in newspaper and throw it away.

Take the sharp tip of the maguey leaf and write your full name along the width of the candle. Now cleanse your whole body with the candle, starting with your head and ending with

> your feet, again making sure to pass over the most affected body part several times. Light your candle and recite the prayer printed on it. It should burn in front of your Santa Muerte or place it on your altar, but always ask her to take care of your health.[11]

This ritual would feel very familiar to many Santa Muertistas, since, with the exception of the Santa Muerte lotion, both the ingredients and the act itself come directly from Mexican folk healing practices, or *curanderismo*. *Curanderismo* syncretically draws on Spanish, indigenous, and, to a lesser extent, African healing practices to offer ailing Mexicans a cheaper and more holistic alternative to Western medicine. Rue is a plant that was brought by the Iberians to the New World, where it continues to serve the same purpose that it did in Spain and Portugal, and even in ancient Greece. Much as garlic was believed to ward off vampires, rue was used in ancient Greece and is used in modern Mexico and much of Latin America to protect against witchcraft and the evil eye, which continues to be a widespread belief among the working classes of Ibero-America. Many Mexicans also brew the bitter herb into a medicinal tea that is thought to cure a wide range of maladies including headaches, dizziness, stiff neck, and inner ear problems.[12] Here in the Saint Death health ritual, rue serves as a kind of cleansing sponge that absorbs sickness as it's passed over the body of the afflicted. After the cleansing ritual, the contaminated rue is tossed in the garbage, where it won't be a potential contagion.

Two other ritual ingredients serve to enhance the cleansing power of the rue. Since purple is the cult's primary color of healing, the ribbon of this hue, which is tied around the rue, reinforces the herb's curing power. Of all the ritual ingredients, the cigar has the most powerful link to healing, despite being a carcinogen. Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas smoked, chewed, and drank tobacco tea for interrelated medicinal and spiritual purposes. Today

the use of cigars and cigarettes in both folk healing practices and African-diasporan religions is ubiquitous. I myself have had tobacco smoke blown over my body on two occasions, once in Ecuador by a Quechua-speaking shaman and more recently by an aggressive Santa Muerte cult leader in Puebla, Mexico, who performed an unsolicited ritual on my wife and me. In any case, for most practitioners of the Saint Death health ritual, the cigar serves as a powerful agent and symbol of healing.

Like tobacco, maguey, also known as the century plant, links Santa Muertistas to their pre-Columbian past. The Aztecs used the plant for various maladies, such as topical wounds and gout.[13] Moreover, the Aztecs and other indigenous groups in central Mexico brewed the juice of the plant into a fermented drink called pulque, which contains substantial quantities of vitamin B and still serves as an important source of nutrition for a significant but diminishing number of impoverished *campesinos* in rural central Mexico.[14] Seeking stronger drink than pulque, Spanish colonists distilled the juices of the maguey and blue agave plant into mescal and tequila, respectively. Of course, in the Santa Muerte healing ritual, the leaf of the plant serves as a writing instrument, not as a medicinal salve. Thus the multipurpose maguey functions as an essential ingredient in this recipe for healing by lending its curative fibers to make an inscription on the votive candle. Like the rue, the purple votive candle also serves as a cleansing agent, absorbing affliction as it traces the body of the petitioner. The contagions collected in the purple candle are then symbolically incinerated as the wax is left to burn at the altar of Doctor Death.

As I reflect on Santa Muerte's role as a faith healer, I'm struck by two important final points. First, the mass media have with very rare exception systematically ignored her status as one of the most important healers in the Mexican religious marketplace. Always playing up the sensational and the sordid in an effort to gain more readers and

viewers, newspapers and TV networks invariably focus on the black Saint Death candle of crime and violence. If I had limited my study of the Pretty Girl to journalistic accounts, I would have ended up writing a monochromatic book presenting only the skeleton saint of the darkest of votive candles. Second, I continue to be intrigued by the fascinating paradox of the saint of death who heals broken bodies and in doing so adds a few more grains of sand to the hourglass of life.

Chapter 7

Green Candle

Law and Justice

JUST DEATH

My original conceptualization of this book didn't include the green candle. Before starting to write, it seemed that the themes of justice and the law would be sufficiently illuminated by the black candle, particularly as it related to the criminal justice system. However, as I completed that chapter and wrote more, I realized that the green jar candle needed its own section. While the black and green overlap at some junctures, the latter's concern with social justice in particular sets it apart from other chapters. "La Santa no discrimina" (the Saint doesn't discriminate) is practically a mantra uttered by devotees asked to explain the Godmother's appeal.

Though not one of the most popular colors of candles of the cult, green, symbolizing justice and legal matters, stands out in the iconography of the skeleton saint. In addition to its original symbolic meaning as the European Grim Reaper's tool for harvesting souls, the scythe that Santa Muerte wields also serves as a powerful instrument of justice. In a society plagued by injustice, the very deed of dispatching souls to their final destination is perceived by devotees as an act of social justice. Billionaire Carlos Slim, along with other superrich Mexicans, will be forced to leave his earthly treasure behind when it is his turn to be delivered to his final destination by Saint Death. Thus, in her role as the Grim Reapress the skeleton saint is an equal-opportunity harvester of souls. The shocking disparities

between rich and poor that permeate Mexican life are obliterated by the leveling swing of Santa Muerte's scythe.

On a less metaphysical plane, her iconography offers the more obvious symbol of justice, the scales. Here, however, the saint isn't so much playing the role of divine judge weighing the souls of mortals to determine their final destination. Rather, she is a supernatural attorney who represents her devoted clients regardless of the crimes they may have committed. Unconcerned with their guilt or innocence, she seeks the best deal possible for her clients in a dysfunctional justice system fraught with corruption and incompetence. For criminals and victims alike, the Mexican legal system is often nightmarish. Victims of crime know there is only the slightest chance that the perpetrator will be apprehended and punished. Only 2 percent of crimes, including murder, result in the conviction of the perpetrator. Fearing police corruption or Kafkaesque situations in which they themselves are falsely accused of criminal activity, victims of crime in Mexico, as a rule of thumb, don't report them. A recent report estimates that just 12 percent of crimes are reported.[1]

Those who are accused of crimes and incarcerated to await trial are essentially presumed guilty. Accusation and arrest are tantamount to conviction, as 85 percent of those charged with crimes are convicted. And as is the case throughout much of the world, those at the bottom of Mexico's steep socioeconomic pyramid fare the worst in the judicial system. Unable to afford competent attorneys, the poor are often represented by lawyers with vast caseloads who are often only marginally familiar with the details of any particular client's case. Within this context many caught up in the vortex of the Mexican legal system, including lawyers, court functionaries, and probably some judges, feel they need supernatural assistance in dealing with the dysfunction that envelops them. Given her reputation for expeditiousness and her strong association with matters of justice, Saint

Death has become one of the most popular spiritual patrons of those seeking to advance their cause in court.

DEATH, ESQ.

The importance of legal matters is reflected in the *Saint Death Bible*, which offers prayers, rituals, and instructions on assembling altars for devotees involved in the judicial system. For example, "the ritual for winning a court case" is specifically designed for those with a case pending in the courts.

Ingredients:
9 Santa Muerte candles or 9 white candles
1 piece of road-opener twig
1 piece of 15-centimeter-size white paper
2 meters of white hemp thread
1 small bottle of Santa Muerte essence (clear)
1 packet of Santa Muerte powder
1 black pen

Procedure:
Sprinkle the Santa Muerte essence over all the candles and then dust them all with the powder. Then take the black pen and piece of paper and write down the number of your court case and the name of your enemy. Next place the road-opener twig on the paper and roll it up and then tie it up tight with the hemp thread and place it next to your Santa Muerte statuette. The next step is to light one candle per day, reciting the Santa Muerte prayer. Every time you light a candle you should make your petitions, asking that the doors to your problem or legal case be opened. When nine days have passed, bury the bound twig in a vase and offer Santa Muerte a dozen white roses, asking her to make your wishes come true.[2]

The above ritual exhibits a fascinating syncretism of Catholicism, European paganism, and Afro-Cuban Santería. Catholicism provides the structural framework of the ritual. Those familiar with the Church's rites and rituals will recognize this one as a variant of the novena, in which prayers are recited during nine days, customarily for particularly difficult causes. Moreover, two of the ritual ingredients are borrowed from Catholicism, the hegemonic form of Christianity in Latin America. Candles, of course, are omnipresent in Catholicism and are particularly associated with prayer. And white roses, symbolizing purity, are one of the main accoutrements at shrines and altars of the Virgin Mary in her myriad manifestations. Finally, the act of writing down a request for a miracle and leaving it at the shrine of a saint or Virgin is standard practice in Mexican and Latin American Catholicism. At larger shrines, hundreds of such petitions, often scrawled in error-riddled Spanish and Portuguese, are affixed to effigies of the saint or pinned on velvet covered boards that have been put up explicitly for this purpose. What differs here, presumably, from Catholic practice is part of the content of the written petition. In theory at least, Catholics are not asking saints and Virgins to cause harm to others. Indeed, Matthew 5:44 instructs Christians to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (New International Version). In contrast, like many other Saint Death rituals, this one involves removing enemies from one's path.

Identifying and targeting rivals, adversaries, and enemies was and is routine practice in European, African, and Latin American witchcraft, and also in the African-diasporan religions, of which Santería predominates in the Mexican context. The African-diasporan faiths have a class of liminal trickster spirits, known as *eshus* in Santería, that are particularly well suited for missions that involve eliminating undesirables from a client's path. One *exú* (the Portuguese spelling) in particular, found in the pantheons of spirits in both Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda actually specializes in putting up roadblocks

for one's adversaries. The name of this *exú* couldn't be more fitting—Exú Tranca Rua (Roadblocker Exú). However, in this Saint Death ritual it's Santería's road-opening powers that are invoked through use of the twig of road opener (*Koanophyllon villosum*, also known as thoroughwort), a plant commonly employed in African-diasporan rituals in the Caribbean and Brazil.

Enveloped in the piece of paper containing the petitioner's court-case number and name of his or her enemy, the road-opener twig works in tandem with another plant product to help the Godmother achieve legal victory for her client. Hemp thread is specified in the ritual as a binding agent because of its use for millennia in medicine and magic, first in Asia, where it's native, and then in Europe and the Americas. Its magical properties, of course, are partly related to the plant's psychoactive properties, which are most commonly accessed in the form of marijuana and hashish. Although Santa Muerte manuals never prescribe the drug itself as a ritual ingredient, you will recall that many young believers offer joints to the Bony Lady at her altars, especially at Doña Queta's. Finally, the biodegradability of hemp thread, along with the paper and road-opener twig, allows it to decompose naturally in the soil of the vase in which it is buried on the last day of the ritual.

Santa Muertistas tend to believe that votive candles are more efficacious if they have been "prepared" before being offered to the White Girl. At *yerberías* and *botanicas* across Mexico, it's standard practice for shop clerks to prepare the wax for the client at no extra cost. Typically, this involves a few squirts of Santa Muerte essence on the candle and/or the engraving of the name of a person whom the client wishes the skeleton saint to help or harm. In this ritual, designed for victory in the courtroom, the candles are prepared with both Saint Death essence and powder, with the inscription being made on paper instead of the wax. The only difference between the Santa Muerte essences and powders and the others

that occupy the shelves of *botanicas* on both sides of the border is the name and packaging.

"Court and Judgement" with "original color powder" is printed on the packet of powder that rests alongside a wooden effigy of the Guatemalan folk saint Maximón as part of my collection of paraphernalia employed in the practice of popular religion in Latin America. As a semisuperstitious professor of religious studies, I bought the powder, which is "manufactured with special ingredients to help you with your legal problems," a couple years ago when I contested a traffic ticket issued to me by a security officer of my new university on my very first day on campus. Armed with photographic evidence of a barely visible "no left turn" sign and in accord with the instructions on the back of the packet—a dusting of the powder on my chest and hands—I confidently approached the traffic-court judge and argued my case. Irritated that campus police had actually bothered to send the ticketing officer to tussle with me, I nevertheless remained cool and calm as I showed the judge how the sign was obstructed by pedestrians and tree branches. The judge then oddly asked the cop if I had been well behaved when pulled over. My fellow university employee tersely agreed that I had been, and with that the judge dismissed the charges against me. The packet of powder is still almost full in case I find myself back in court in the future.

Just as the Pretty Girl has become the patron saint of the entire Mexican penal system and not just the inmates, she appears to be heading in the same direction in the judicial system. That *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* has a page on how to set up an altar at a law office reveals that the skeleton saint has more than a few followers among Mexican lawyers. One of the more memorable devotees I interviewed was Rodrigo, a sharply dressed attorney in his late twenties. He explained that he had become a devotee at age twenty, mostly due to the influence of his mother, a long-time Santa Muertista. Rodrigo had

been a casual devotee until his kidnapping in November 2007. Facing death at the hands of his abductors if his family members didn't pay the ransom, Rodrigo made a desperate vow to Saint Death. If she extricated him either via ransom or escape from the squalid safe house where he was being held, he would erect altars to the Powerful Lady both at his home and his law office. The Lady of the Shadows never provided Rodrigo with a good opportunity to escape from his captors but did enable his family members to pay the ransom for his release.

So grateful to his patroness for saving his life, the young lawyer went beyond fulfilling the pledge to his patroness, becoming a regular at Doña Queta's shrine. The afternoon I met him, in July 2009, Rodrigo caught my eye not only because of his finer threads but also because of the top-shelf tequila he was getting ready to offer to the most famous effigy of Santa Muerte. Most of the tequilas at the historic Tepito shrine, and at the great majority in Mexico, are the cheaper brands, such as Rancho Viejo and Casco Viejo. Rodrigo's premium brand, Don Julio, stood out among the bottom-shelf tequilas, which are diluted with ingredients that are much cheaper than blue agave, the only ingredient used at the best distilleries, such as Don Julio. In addition to the distilled spirit, Rodrigo offered a gold votive candle to his skeletal protectress in order that she would continue to bless him with prosperity and abundance. The articulate young lawyer prayed to Doña Queta's life-size skeleton in free form, as some devotees do. However, for those who prefer to ask Santa Muerte to deliver justice through a prewritten prayer, a poignant one is available on various websites:

> Blessed Saint Death, protectress of the weak and vulnerable, mother of eternal justice, font of wisdom, you who see into the hearts of the wicked and the good, it is you whom I approach to implore you for justice. Most Holy Death, it is you whom I ask for the impartiality of your scales of justice.

> My Lady, look into my heart, listen to my requests, which are made out of necessity. Let your justice be done on earth and let your divine hand guide the decisions of judges and prison wardens.
>
> Great Lady, be implacable with the wicked who backslide, just with the innocent, and benevolent with those who repent wholeheartedly. O White Girl, hear my prayers and protect me from iniquity and indolence. Today, I seek your favor so that my case may be submitted to your specifications, and let me win a complete pardon from the judges here on earth. At the right time you will judge me and take the words I now pronounce as the measure of my punishment or my absolution. In you I trust.[3]

Noteworthy in this prayer for justice is the God-like omnipotence and omnipresence of the Powerful Lady. She protects the weak, can see into human hearts, is an eternal font of wisdom, and is the judge of judges, who in death will usurp the role of God in determining the fate of human souls. More specifically, she approximates the God of the Old Testament who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. The careful reader will have noticed the curious contradiction contained in the prayer. In the first stanza the impartiality of Saint Death–style justice is invoked. However, the rest of the petition implores the saint to be anything but impartial as her "divine hand guides the decisions of judges and prison wardens," which will result in a "complete pardon."

Following this prayer posted on a Santa Muerte website are a number of comments and personal petitions made by devotees with their own matters of law and justice. In February 2010, one anonymous Santa Muertista wrote in Spanish,

> My Skinny Lady has helped me so much, and I give infinite thanks to her for the favors I have received. You showed me the way to come to another country without any problems, and you've put

> good-hearted people in my path. And today, with all my faith placed in you, I beg you, my girl, to do justice and help us so that the person I love is freed. You, who see everything, you know he's innocent. I'm not asking you to hurt whoever accused him unjustly but to let the truth be known so that he doesn't bother us anymore and lets us be happy. I trust in you, my girl, and I know that you will help me so that soon we can be together and love each other until the last day of our lives, when you come calling for us.[4]

In a similar vein, an anonymous woman writing in October 2010, asks the White Girl for her husband's liberty: "My beautiful Skinny Lady, you know how much I love you and how much I trust in you. Today I come to beg for your help again and ask that you be my husband's attorney and defender. Please don't let them give him jail time. Instead, have them deport him, but don't let him be alone at any time. I trust this is how it will be, my girl."[5]

Both of these petitions belong to a genre of requests in which women ask the Powerful Lady to help their husbands or sons who have ended up on the wrong side of the law. Statistics on the prison populations in both Mexico and the United States explain the gendered nature of this type of petition. Ninety-five percent of inmates in Mexican prisons are male, while here in the United States the figure is slightly lower at 91 percent.[6] On both sides of the border, serving time for criminal activity, especially when violence is involved, is essentially male. This also explains why 80 to 90 percent of Santa Muertistas that attend the Friday afternoon "mass for prisoners" at David Romo's Saint Death church in Mexico City are women and girls.

If the association between Santa Muerte and matters of justice and the law is strong, it's probably even stronger for her Argentine counterpart, San La Muerte. Indeed, one of the two major origin myths for the Argentine skeleton saint directly relates to justice. You'll recall that the other creation story relates to healing. This

one, however, involves a king who was legendary in his land for his rigorous execution of justice. As a reward for his exemplary life, in heaven God granted him one of the most important tasks. From a heavenly throne he watched over an infinite number of burning candles, each one representing those still living on earth. The just king protected those whose wicks burned bright and would return to earth to collect the souls of those whose candles had gone out. In this manner he became God's delegate in the just administration of life and death. And this is why one of San La Muerte's monikers is San Justo—Saint Justice.[7]

Conclusion: Seven-Color Candle

Multiple Miracles

Breaking news from Mexico about the arrest of Santa Muerte cult leader David Romo puts me in an odd position. The founder and head priest of the first Saint Death church, in Mexico City, Romo was detained in early January 2011 along with eight other suspects and charged with belonging to a kidnapping ring. The Office of the Attorney General claims that "Father" Romo provided bank accounts for the deposit of ransom monies. In typical Mexican fashion, Romo and his alleged partners in crime were paraded in front of the media, all dressed in white robes, which made them look like patients from the psych ward. As the others remained stonily silent, the godfather of the cult launched into a diatribe about how he had been framed as part of a preelection campaign to fill the prisons with inmates so that certain politicians could sell themselves as tough on crime. It was startling to see the same articulate, well-dressed man who had chatted with me at length in his church office a year and a half earlier looking almost feral in his prison gown and ranting wildly about his accusers.

Romo's arrest and probable lengthy prison sentence put me in the difficult position of needing to underscore the variegated nature of the cult of Saint Death precisely at a major historical moment when the black votive candle of crime and punishment totally outshines the other colors. That the cult's leading spokesperson is charged with a type of criminal activity that has afflicted so many Mexican families and catapulted the country to the top of global

kidnapping charts strongly reinforces the public image of Santa Muerte as a patron saint of criminals. In fact many will view Romo's alleged criminal activity as the rather natural result of officiating at the altar of a "satanic" saint. After all, other notorious narcos and kidnappers had been revealed to be devotees of Saint Death. Others, especially devotees and those who distrust the Mexican judicial system, will suspect that the self-styled archbishop of the cult was indeed framed by law enforcement officials who acted at the behest of the Calderón administration and the Catholic Church, both of which Romo and his followers had vehemently denounced at protests and in public pronouncements over the course of the past five years.

Beyond public perception, which, of course, is strongly influenced by the mass media, one of the main points of this book is that Santa Muerte is a multifaceted popular saint, composed of many different colors. While most journalists prefer to focus only on Saint Death of the black candle, I have tried to examine the polychromatic saint in her full range of colors. Now, more than ever, is the time to reconsider the rainbow of colors that come together to form her powerful seven-color votive candle.

Devotees seeking powers of concentration and insight light a blue candle at the altar of the skeleton saint. This flame illuminates Santa Muerte's unique identity as the only female saint of death in the Americas. Two male counterparts, San La Muerte, from Argentina and Paraguay, and Rey Pascual, from Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico, join the Bony Lady, forming a trio of skeletal personifications of death in the Western Hemisphere. However, the Mexican saint differs from her male associates in two major ways. First and foremost, she is almost always represented as a female figure. In accord with her gender, she wears long brown or black hair and prefers wedding gowns and regal robes. Many devotees, especially women, view her as a maternal figure, akin to the Virgin Mary. Second, whereas both Rey Pascual and San La Muerte are believed to personify dead individuals

(Saint Pascual Bailón in the case of the former), Santa Muerte, lacking an established myth of origin at the early state of the cult's development, is generally believed to personify death itself.

Symbolizing wisdom and discernment, the brown candle shines on the history and origins of the Skinny Lady. Most devotees really don't care about the genesis of the object of their devotion. Their concern is with her miracle-working capabilities. However, many of those who do take an interest in the origins of the saint tend to emphasize her putative Aztec or other indigenous roots. This perspective derives, in part, from the nature of Mexican nationalism, which since the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) has glorified the pre-Columbian indigenous past and downplayed and even vilified Spanish influence on the construction of national identity. Vicente Pérez Ramos, the Saint Death shaman, exemplifies this view, albeit in unique fashion, with his belief that the Pretty Girl was born to Purépecha parents in a village of Michoacán during the Spanish colonial period.

In contrast, I view the origins of the skeleton saint as lying in medieval Europe—more specifically, Spain. During the conquest and colonization of the Western Hemisphere, Spanish friars employed the figure of the Grim Reaper as a tool for the evangelization of the indigenous peoples. La Parca, as she's known in Spain, was and is a female version of the male Grim Reaper. A combination of their own unique interpretation of Christianity as it was propagated by the Iberians and their own beliefs in anthropomorphic deities of death led indigenous groups in central Mexico, highland Guatemala, northeast Argentina, and Paraguay to refashion the Spanish Grim Reapress into a skeletal folk saint.

Branded as heretical by the Catholic Church, devotion to the skeleton saint went underground, and it remained an occult practice until just a decade ago. In the case of Mexico, the Santa Muerte who resurfaced after almost a century and a half of absence from the

historical record is a love sorceress. The skeleton saint documented by Mexican and American anthropologists in the middle of the twentieth century is a monochromatic figure dedicated exclusively to affairs of the heart, represented by the red candle. Thus, during her long period in hiding, she fused with ancient Mediterranean love magic brought over by the Spanish and became an occult specialist in love-binding spells, mostly intended to correct or punish wayward men.

Given the love sorceress's special appeal to marginalized women, it is highly fitting that a working-class woman from one of Mexico City's toughest barrios figures as the pioneer in transforming the saint of death from a little-known practice of the occult into an internationally recognized public cult. Former quesadilla vendor Enriqueta Romero (Doña Queta) initiated this transformation on all Saints Day 2001 by setting out her life-size effigy of the Pretty Girl for public display. Since then, her historic shrine has become the cult's most popular. Just a few miles away, David Romo went beyond Doña Queta's efforts in organizing the cult by founding the first church dedicated to devotion to the Angel of Death.

Borrowing heavily from Roman Catholic liturgy and doctrine, the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church Mex-USA offers "masses," weddings, baptisms, exorcisms, and other services found at most Christian churches in Latin America. In reaction to the revocation of the church's legal status in 2005, the Santa Muerte priest has become the main public defender of the faith. He, and not Doña Queta, has led most protests and made almost all public denunciations of both Church and state for their campaigns against the faith. With Romo presently in jail, it would appear that efforts to institutionalize the faith have suffered at least a temporary setback.

One of the most salient aspects of the cult that I was able to discern, thanks to the brown votive candle, is the presence of the White Sister close to home. Before considering her status in the United States, I assumed that she'd be relatively easy to find on the Mexican

border and in big cities with large Mexican immigrant communities, such as LA, Houston, and Phoenix. And sure enough, she is relatively easy to find at the shrines and *botanicas* in these places. I was shocked, however, to find her with relative ease here in my new hometown of Richmond, Virginia. Knowing that the Latino population of the Virginia capital doesn't exceed 5 percent, I hadn't even bothered to look for her until relatively late in my research. Yet not only can I purchase votive candles and statuettes at three Latino marts within a couple miles of my home, I can even visit a fairly elaborate altar at a *botanica* that specializes in her paraphernalia on the south side of town. The presence of the Bony Lady in a medium-size city with a tiny Latin American immigrant population means that her cult is widespread in this country.

At most *botanicas* on both sides of the border, the white Saint Death candle symbolizing purity, protection, gratitude, and consecration is the top seller. Here its flame has illuminated the beliefs and practices of the new cult. Of paramount importance is the skeleton saint's reputation as a powerful, multitasking miracle worker. Less concerned with the fate of their souls in the afterlife, devotees seek the Powerful Lady's intervention in the worldly matters of health, wealth, and love. That she now can work all sorts of miracles, reflected by the many colors of the cult, and not just those related to matters of the heart, makes her more appealing. Since her cult offers different colored candles for a wide range of purposes, there is no need for devotees to look beyond the vast range of the Bony Lady's powers for supernatural assistance with their problems or afflictions.

In general, one of the main attractions of folk saints is their similarities with devotees. They typically are of the same nationality and social class as those who venerate them. In her tastes and preferences, Santa Muerte couldn't be more Mexican. Devotees see her as one of them, albeit in supernatural form, and thus regale the White Sister with offerings that they themselves like. Thus chocolate, tequila, beer,

and cigarettes figure among common offerings at her altars because Santa Muertistas believe that the saint enjoys the same food, drink, and smokes that they do. Her cultural proximity to her devotees allows for a more intimate relationship with the skeleton saint. Canonized saints, especially European ones, cannot offer the type of intimacy in which they are regarded as "battle-ax[es], like one of us"—the words one Mexican woman used to describe the appeal of Saint Death. Even though she's a "pretty white girl," the skeleton saint is earthy and tough like many of her followers.

In addition to her Mexicanness, the skeleton saint attracts followers on the basis of her omnipotence and speed. She has quickly developed a reputation for being the most *cumplidora*—dependable—of the popular saints in Mexico. Many devotees told me they had come to her after unsuccessful petitions for favors with other saints, such as the popular Saint Jude. Much of reputation for power and efficiency comes from her position in folk theology. Santa Muertistas generally view the saint as second only to God in the celestial hierarchy, and in practice even supplanting him in terms of miracle working and centrality of devotion.

Devotional practice is largely based on Catholic rituals. Home altars, set prayers, novenas, rosaries, and even "masses" generally preserve Catholic form and structure if not content. In this way, the cult offers neophytes the familiarity of Mexican Catholicism along with the novelty of veneration of an emergent folk saint. Altars, both private and public, serve as one of the main tools devotees use to communicate with and honor the Lady of Shadows. Some are as simple as a statuette framed by a few votive candles, while others are elaborate sacred spaces created with considerable investment of time and resources. In a cult that stresses the visual and tactile aspects of devotion, the altar allows believers to address the saint directly, as they look into her hollow eyes and touch her flowing robe. Despite her reputation for jealousy, other supernatural figures, both Christian

and non-Christian, often join Saint Death at her altar. Thus, even though there is a great deal of continuity with Catholicism, especially of the folk variety, the skeleton cult's beliefs and practices are sufficiently divergent from Christianity and novel in their own right to allow for its consideration as a new religious movement.

An important part of the novelty of the cult is the decidedly un- or even anti-Christian Santa Muerte of the black devotional candle. In performing miracles of vengeance, the skeleton saint sharply diverges from Christianity. And this is precisely what distinguishes her cult in the free religious economies of Mexico and the United States. Those looking for a supernatural being who will deliver on petitions considered morally dubious or even sinful in the Christian context need look no further. The nonjudgmental, often amoral Saint Death of the black candle will grant favors that canonized saints will not consider. And so it's not surprising that the Grim Reapress proves to be particularly appealing among those who specialize in activities that cause harm to others and also to others seeking protection from the specialists in death and destruction.

Over the past decade, and most intensely since President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006, the principal cause of death and destruction in Mexico has been the drug war. Calderón the candidate had run on a platform of job creation. However, once he was in office it became clear that his top priority was waging war against the drug cartels, apparently more against some than others. His war has resulted in a paroxysm of violence in which the cartels battle each other for control over markets and government forces conduct large-scale offensives against select syndicates, such as La Familia Michoacana, the strongest group in Calderón's home state of Michoacán. More than thirty-four thousand Mexicans have died in this war without quarter in the four years that Calderón has held office. Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, has become known as "Baghdad on the Border." Its murder rate ranks among the highest in the world.

Santa Muerte plays complex pivotal roles in the war. First, she is the patroness of a considerable number of narcos who ask her to protect and punish. In a business where danger is constant, drug traffickers need protection both for their product and themselves. So thousands of narcos ask the Powerful Lady to make sure their shipments of marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines arrive safely at their final destinations, overwhelmingly cities and towns in the United States. In a similar vein, they ask the Bony Lady to shield them with her scythe from rival traffickers and from agents of the law. Since she is the Grim Reapress, some narcos also undoubtedly ask her to wield the same scythe as an offensive weapon, dispatching enemies to their final destinations. A significant number of high-profile kingpins have been discovered to be Santa Muertistas, creating the impression that she is the premier narco saint, the spiritual patroness of traffickers of psychotropics.

In turn, the Calderón administration has listed the Godmother as religious enemy number one in its war against the cartels. Indeed it was the Mexican army's bulldozing of more than thirty of her shrines on the border that compelled me to write this book. Calderón's National Action Party enjoys close ties to the Catholic Church, which has condemned the cult of the skeleton saint as satanic. Calderón, his party, and the Church view Saint Death as the religious expression of narcoculture, the distinctive aesthetics and styles of drug gangsters and wannabes. So the Pretty Girl joins narcoballads, black Cadillac Escalades, and oversized brass belt buckles embossed with marijuana leaves as an integral part of the glorification of narcos and their lifestyle.

Her most intriguing role, however, is that of the spiritual protectress of some of the government agents charged with prosecuting the war against the cartels. Chances are that a few of the soldiers who razed her shrines on the border are themselves devotees of Saint Death. Devotion to the Lady of the Shadows seems particularly pronounced among municipal police forces, which are often on the front

lines and suffer most of the casualties in the protracted war. Half of the officers on the force in the city of Valle de Chalco, in the State of Mexico, sport an embroidered image of the Skinny Lady on their uniform shirts. Here her role as protectress of those who face death on a daily basis is thrown into high relief. That those who are most threatened with imminent demise should appeal to a saint of death to preserve their life is rich with irony—even more so when those who most threaten their lives are also asking the Powerful Lady for protection. Beyond the irony of the situation, the black candle of protection and vengeance has been burning brighter than ever in the killing fields of Mexico.

Black candles, however, are among the slowest sellers and are the least common at public altars. In marked contrast, the red candle for love and passion ranks as the best seller of all the colors and figures as one of the three most popular at public shrines. Without doubt prayers and petitions involving matters of the heart have kept the Pretty Girl busier than any other type of request since at least the 1940s. You'll recall that from this time until the 1980s Santa Muerte appeared in the field notes of Mexican and American researchers as a supernatural figure specializing exclusively in love magic. It seems that during her long period of hiding, from the end of the colonial period to the mid-twentieth century, she morphed into a folk saint specializing in the same ancient Mediterranean love magic brought to the New World by the Iberians.

Most of the anthropological studies from the middle of the twentieth century specifically mention the skeleton saint acting on behalf of female devotees. And then as now, the most common request was for wayward husbands and boyfriends to be "bound and delivered humbled at the feet" of jealous wives and lovers. Indeed, the oldest known Saint Death prayer is the love-binding one, which is printed on the back of almost all red votive candles and even on those of other colors. The image of a Mexican female saint of death

correcting and punishing real and imagined male transgressors is compelling. Of course, the socioeconomic context of love-binding magic is the age-old gendered imbalance of power, leading women to resort to sorcery and other supernatural resources in compensation for their lack of access to worldly ones in the socioeconomic and political realms.

Contemporary Mexico, of course, is not the ancient Mediterranean. Yet the precariousness of the lives of millions of impoverished women, especially in the context of the worst economic recession in decades, means that many will go to extraordinary lengths to keep or win over a man with a job. Though its purpose was to literally demonize the White Sister, the movie *La Santa Muerte*, directed by evangelical filmmaker Paco del Toro, realistically portrayed the battle over a successful professional man between his wife and lover. Both women turn to the supreme love sorceress, Santa Muerte, in their efforts to spellbind him to them. Abandonment of his family would certainly result in real hardship for his stay-at-home wife and their kids. Likewise, his lover, a working-class single mom, would lose access to the material benefits that are customarily provided by Mexican men maintaining a *casa chica*—a household for a lover. Men also seek out the Pretty Girl for their own affairs of the heart, but less frequently than their wives, mothers, and sisters.

Material matters are of paramount concern to the majority of devotees, who work in economies of scarcity. Both Mexico and the United States are just emerging from the worst recessions they have experienced in decades, in which millions on both sides of the border lost jobs or had work hours significantly reduced. So there is no surprise in the fact that the gold candle, symbolizing prosperity and abundance, is by far the most popular of the newer candle colors and is only slightly less common than the top-ranking red and white ones. Some devotees ask the Powerful Lady to shower them with riches, but most are more modest in their requests, asking for the miracle of

a steady job or that a small business may be successful. So common are her statuettes at family-owned shops throughout Mexico that one has the impression that, more than the narco saint, she has become the patroness of small businesses.

The financial benefits of the skeleton saint are not limited to the cult of believers. Thousands of businesses in both countries profit handsomely from sales of her devotional paraphernalia and fashion-related merchandise. At countless market stalls, *botanicas*, and even jewelry-supply stores, business owners do a brisk business in votive candles, effigies, rosaries, essences, and other common devotional products. One shop owner after another told me that sales of Santa Muerte paraphernalia accounted for half or more of their total sales. Unlike other saints whose accoutrements typically only sell well in the few days prior to their feast days, the Bony Lady's line of merchandise sells well throughout the year. Beyond products specifically intended for veneration, the mass merchandising of her image on apparel, such as T-shirts and hoodies, and on the skin, via tattoos, generates significant income for those who provide such products. Also, her recent appearances in novels, on TV, and in films generate revenue for those who have featured her in their dramas.

Predictably, the skeleton saint plays the role of the saint of the black candle in film and TV. However, away from the view of the cameras, Saint Death is the protagonist in myriad accounts of faith healing. While the purple candle for healing ranks as one of the slowest sellers, it is but one of three different-colored jar candles employed for the purposes of recovering or maintaining health. At first glance, it would seem counterintuitive that people would approach a saint of death when they are seeking to prolong their lives. After all, the predominant association of death in the Western world is with disease and pestilence. Recall that the image of the Grim Reaper arose during the Black Death, which sent so many Europeans to early graves.

However, there are European and especially Latin American cultural countercurrents in which death manifests itself as an agent of healing. German-language fairy tales and Mexican folk yarns both offer stories of death granting chosen individuals the power to heal the sick. Healing is so central to the missions of the skeleton saints that two of the three are believed to have been conceived in the midst of disease. According to legend, the Guatemalan folk saint Rey Pascual, the oldest of the three saints, appeared to a deathly ill Mayan man in the midst of a virulent plague, which he offered to end in exchange for devotion to him. In a similar vein, one of the two main creation myths of the Argentine cult depicts San La Muerte as a Catholic friar who cared for lepers during the colonial era.

The cult of Santa Muerte, of course, has yet to develop a unified creation myth for her, but she apparently doesn't need one to figure as one of the most potent supernatural healers on the Mexican religious landscape. Her potency and popularity derive from a couple factors. First, at the core of popular religion throughout Latin America and indeed much of the world is a concern with faith healing. Impoverished believers without access to modern health care turn to saints, spirits, Jesus, and other supernatural beings to cure the afflictions that can't be healed at hospitals and health clinics. If Pentecostalism and charismatic Catholicism are thriving throughout Latin America, it's in large measure because of their promise to heal the afflicted of their wounds, which are often poverty related.

For devotees who view her more as a Christian figure, the Skinny Lady offers personal transformation along with a good dose of healing. The yellow Santa Muerte candle, symbolizing the curing of drug addiction, lights the way for alcoholics and drug abusers who are trying to kick the habit by making positive changes in their lives. But some devotees are simply interested in recovering their health or that of a loved one and aren't interested in making major changes in their lives. The Powerful Lady is just as willing to cure this type of devotee

as long as they fulfill their ritual obligations to her, especially delivering on whatever promise was made to solicit her healing powers.

Myriad promises are also made to the skeleton saint of law and justice, symbolized by the green candle. In a society plagued by the concentration of wealth in the hands of relatively few, the Grim Reapress's scythe becomes a great leveling instrument, which in swinging with equal force at all Mexicans, regardless of social class, obliterates the glaring differences between the Carlos Slims of the country and the millions of anonymous citizens who struggle simply to make ends meet. The appeal of Saint Death, the ultimate social leveler, cannot be underestimated.

On a more worldly level, Santa Muerte of the green candle serves as the supernatural patroness of the entire Mexican judicial system. For most of her rank-and-file devotees with legal problems, the Powerful Lady acts more as an attorney representing the interests of clients. And like most lawyers, the skeleton saint isn't really concerned with the guilt or innocence of her clients but rather with their ability to pay, in this case, of course, in the form of ritual payment. This is not to say, however, that the Godmother never acts as judge. Judges judge, and one of the salient features ascribed to the saint is her nonjudgmental attitude. Her primary concern is to get the best deal she can for her clients, be it a suspended sentence or deportation instead of jail time. In similar fashion, she serves as a supernatural advocate for the lawyers, judges, and jailers who venerate her. The Kafkaesque nature of the Mexican judicial system means that even relatively powerful magistrates and attorneys can find themselves in need of supernatural aid from time to time.

Beyond green and the other single-color candles, all the main colors of the cult come together in the seven-color candle. Many devotees seek miracles on several fronts, especially in the socioeconomic context of extreme violence and financial hardship, and Santa Muerte of the seven powers (as the candle is also known) is the ultimate

supernatural multitasker, who can act simultaneously on several different petitions. The demand for miracles on multiple fronts is reflected in the strong sales of this newest candle of the cult. It vies with the gold one for the top spot among the nontraditional colors (the traditional being red, white, and black). The polychrome candle also reflects the growing influence of Santería on the cult, as it is an adaptation of the popular *siete potencias* (seven powers) devotional candle employed by adherents of the African-Caribbean religion. Doña Queta has an entire room in her house filled with ritual paraphernalia originating in Santería. Interestingly, this is a private space, off limits to ordinary devotees and visitors.

And in my own private space, where I've written most of the book, I've been inspired by the seven-color candle that rests atop my desk. I have researched and written the book during a time of much death in Mexico. Amid weekly reports of massacres, mass graves, decapitated bodies, and kidnappings, all related to the interminable hemispheric drug wars, it was tempting at times to focus too much on the black candle. The rainbow-colored one standing guard just a few feet away from my laptop, the same one with which the Bony Lady beckoned me to study her, helped me keep my eye on the larger picture, that of her cult of many colors. Between the arrest of one of the godparents of the cult on kidnapping charges and the recent desecration of dozens of shrines on the U.S.-Mexico border, the future of this new religious movement might seem bleak. However, the Powerful Lady's capacity to work miracles on multiple fronts, and not just one particular one, means that a growing number of Mexicans and Central Americans will become devoted to death.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Susan Ferris, "Saint Death Calls to the Living in Mexico City," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 9, 2004; David Romo, interview with author, July 5, 2009.
2. *La Revista Peninsular*, "Detienen al peligroso secuestrador Daniel Arizmendi," August 18, 1998.
3. Juan Manuel Navarro, "Sepultan hoy a líder del templo de la Santa Muerte," *El Universal*, August 1, 2008, http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/526952.html.
4. Mark Stevenson, "Mexican Official: 34,612 Drug-War Deaths in 4 Yrs," Associated Press, January 12, 2011, http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=12600899.

Chapter 1

1. Perdigón Castañeda, *Santa Muerte*, 21.
2. Feldman, *War against Epidemics*, 23–26.
3. Perdigón Castañeda, *Santa Muerte*, 33.
4. Ibid.
5. Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 78.
6. Olavarrieta Marenco, *Magia en los Tuxtlas*.
7. Navarrete, *San Pascualito Rey*.
8. Bernal, *Mitos y magos mexicanos*, 27.
9. Perdigón Castañeda, *Santa Muerte*, 127.
10. Ibid., 128.

11. Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
12. Carlos Garma, "El culto a la Santa Muerte," *El Universal*, April 11, 2009, http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/editoriales/43629.html.
13. *Terra*, "Registra Segob sectas satánicas," April 10, 2007, http://www.terra.com.mx/articulo.aspx?articuloid=141940&paginaid=1.
14. Associated Press, "Mexico Weighs Recognition of Saint Death Sect," February 17, 2005, http://www.religionnewsblog.com/10335/mexico-weighs-recognition-of-saint-death-sect.
15. *La Mujer de Purpura* (blog), "Culto a Santa Muerte pide no votar por candidatos católicos," July 2, 2009, http://www.lamujerdepurpura.com/2009/07/culto-santa-muerte-pide-no-votar-por.html.
16. Marie-Theresa Hernández, "The Church of the Santa Muerte Fights Back," *Dream Act—Texas* (blog), March 30, 2009, http://www.dreamacttexas.blogspot.com/2009/03/church-of-santa-muerte-fights-back.html.

Chapter 2

1. Chris Hawley, "Catholic Church Upset by Mexico's St. Death," *Arizona Republic*, October 18, 2004, available online at http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9024.
2. Quoted in Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
3. Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 77.
4. Quoted in Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
5. *Terra*, "Culto a la muerte en México atrae a policías y ladrones," May 14, 2004, http://noticias.terra.com/articulo/html/act176123.
6. Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 275.
7. CNN.com, "Reputed Mexican Drug Lord on *Forbes* Most-Powerful List," November 13, 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/11/13/forbes.mexico.guzman/index.html.
8. *Mundo Esotérico*, March 31, 2010, http://magiarecetashechizos.blogspot.com/2010/03/oracion-la-santa-muerte-para-evitar.html.
9. La Santa Muerte Online Community, "Unico Santuario Nacional de la Santa Muerte," September 16, 2010, http://www.santamuerte.org/santuarios/mexico/3039-unico-santuario-natiocional-de-la-santa-muerte.html.
10. Chesnut, *Competitive Spirits*.

Chapter 3

1. Thompson, "Santísima Muerte"; Associated Press, "Mass Grave Found in Mexico," April 11, 1989, available online at http://www.skepticfiles.org/weird/matamoro.htm.

2. Graham Keeley, "Mexican 'Stew Maker' Dissolved 300 Drug War Victims in Acid," *Times* (London), January 26, 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article5586822.ece.
3. Kevin L. Perkins and Anthony P. Placido, testimony, U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, May 5, 2010, http://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/drug-trafficking-violence-in-mexico-implications-for-the-united-states.
4. Villarreal, "Mexican Elections."
5. Caputo, "Fall of Mexico."
6. González Rodríguez, *Huesos en el desierto*, 72.
7. Homero Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*, 128.
8. Homero Aridjis, interview with author, January 16, 2011.
9. Drug Enforcement Agency, "Members of a Major Marijuana Drug Trafficking Organization Arraigned in Federal Court Today," news release, January 29, 2009, http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/states/newsrel/2009/atlanta012909b.html.
10. Ben Winslow, Courtney Orton, and Whit Johnson, "11 Arrested in 3 Separate Drug Busts," *KSL.com*, May 29, 2009, http://www.ksl.com/index.php?nid=148&sid=6645690.
11. Michael Downing, personal interview, December 23, 2009.
12. Holman, *Santísima Muerte*, 24.
13. "Acompaña a policías la Santa Muerte," *SIPSE.com*, November 3, 2009, http://www.sipse.com/noticias/18088-acompana-policias-santa-muerte.html.
14. Juan Veledíaz, "Pasea la santa muerte por calles de Tijuana," *El Universal*, May 29, 2008, http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/159822.html.
15. Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
16. Chris Summers and Dominic Bailey, "Mexico's Forbidden Songs," *BBC News Online*, October 3, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3552370.stm.
17. Natalia Sandoval, "Cartel de Santa tiene a un asesino dentro del grupo," *192* (blog), April 2, 2007, http://192.cl/general/cartel-de-santa-tiene-a-un-asesino-dentro-del-grupo.
18. *La Crónica de Hoy*, "Celebra Iglesia de la Santa Muerte su primer boda gay," March 3, 2010, http://www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?id_nota=491822.
19. D. B. Wilson, "Poll: Approval Ratings for President, PAN Fall to Lowest Levels since Taking Office," *Under the Volcano: Notes on Mexican Politics* (blog), November 16, 2009, http://mexicopolitics.wordpress.com/2009/11/16/poll-approval-ratings-for-president-pan-fall-to-lowest-levels-since-taking-office/.
20. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, 41–42.
21. Francisco Gallardo, http://www.myspace.com/santa 175.

Chapter 4

1. Thompson, "Santísima Muerte."
2. Culto San La Muerte website, http://cultosanlamuerte.com.ar/oraciones.htm.

3. Ibid.
4. Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil*.

Chapter 5

1. Officialwire.com, "Mexico's Arrival Numbers Continue to Decline," February 2, 2010, available online at http://www.eturbonews.com/14176/mexicos-arrival-numbers-continue-decline.
2. Laurence Iliff, "Remittances to Mexico Fall 36%," *Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125968197266271325.html.
3. *Latin American Herald Tribune*, "Remittances to Mexico Fell 14% in November," January 4, 2010, http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=349774&CategoryId=14091.
4. *CIA World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html.
5. City-Data.com, http://www.city-data.com/forum/mexico/710548-47-4-poverty-population-mexico.html.
6. Daniel Workman, "Top Ten Sugar Exporters: Brazil, EU, Australia & Thailand Best Countries for Sugar Importers," Suite 101.com, June 22, 2007, http://www.suite 101.com/content/top-ten-sugar-exporters-a24351#ixzz1GazsBTpH.
7. wiseGEEK, "What Is Polyresin?" http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-polyresin.htm.
8. *DealBook* (*New York Times* blog), "For Madoff Auction, Even Jewels Lack Luster," November 15, 2009, http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/for-madoff-auction-even-jewels-lack-luster.
9. Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
10. *Today* website, "The Top 10 Most Tattooed Cities in America," http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/38722211.
11. Homero Aridjis, interview with author, January 16, 2011.
12. Enriqueta Romero, interview with author, July 3, 2009.
13. Facebook, "Santa Muerte," http://www.facebook.com/pages/Santa-Muerte/106094129421441.
14. Dexter Wiki, "Discussion: Santa Muerte from Venezuela?" http://dexterwiki.sho.com/thread/4288255/SANTA+MUERTE+from+VENEZUELA%3F.
15. Luis Manuel García, "Culto a la Santa Muerte: Un fenomeno devocional en ascenso," *Diario La Voz*, July 3, 2010, http://www.diariolavoz.net/seccion.asp?pid=18&sid=1050&notid=323230.

Chapter 6

1. Grimm and Grimm, "Godfather Death."
2. Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil*.

3. Feldman, *War against Epidemics*, 23–26.
4. Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 77.
5. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, 27–28.
6. Bennett et al., "Alcoholic Beverage Consumption."
7. Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
8. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, 28–29.
9. Quoted in Eva Aridjis, *La Santa Muerte*.
10. Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil*, 58.
11. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*, 53–54.
12. Cosmetic Laser Universe website, http://www.cosmeticlaseruniverse.com/Herbal-Medicines-and-Cosmetic-Laser-Treatments-188.html.
13. "Maguey—A Plant for Many Purposes," http://www.plu.edu/~owenam/maguey-plant/home.html.
14. Steinkraus, *Handbook of Indigenous Fermented Foods*, 394.

Chapter 7

1. David Luhnow, "Presumption of Guilt," *Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704322004574475492261338318.html.
2. *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* , 74–75.
3. *La Santa Muerte Milagrosa* (blog), "Oracion de la justicia," October 2, 2009, http://www.lasantamuertemilagrosa.blogspot.com/2009/10/oraciones-la-santisima-muerte.html.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, http://www.cdhdf.org.mx/index.php?id=dfemayo7DeniaN; National Criminal Justice Reference Service, "Women and Girls in the Criminal Justice System," http://www.ncjrs.gov/spotlight/wgcjs/summary.html.
7. Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 77–78.

This page intentionally left blank

REFERENCES

Aguirre Beltrán, Gonzalo. *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958.

Aridjis, Eva, dir. *La Santa Muerte*. Navarre, 2008.

Aridjis, Homero. *La Santa Muerte: Sexteto del amor, las mujeres, los perros y la muerte*. Mexico City: Conaculta, 2004.

Bennett, Linda A., Carlos Campillo, C. R. Chandrashekar, and Oye Gureje. "Alcoholic Beverage Consumption in India, Mexico, and Nigeria: A Cross-Cultural Comparison." *Alcohol Health and Research World* 22, no. 4 (1998): 243–52. Available online, http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh22–4/243.pdf.

Bernal, María de la Luz. *Mitos y magos mexicanos*. 2nd ed. Colonia Juárez, Mexico: Grupo Editorial Gaceta, 1982.

Caputo, Philip. "The Fall of Mexico." *Atlantic*, December 2009, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/12/the-fall-of-mexico/7760/.

Chesnut, R. Andrew. *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

———. *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Cortes, Fernando, dir. *El miedo no anda en burro*. Diana Films, 1976.

Del Toro, Paco, dir. *La Santa Muerte*. Armagedon Producciones, 2007.

Feldman, Lawrence H. *The War against Epidemics in Colonial Guatemala, 1519–1821*. Raleigh, NC: Boson Books, 1999.

González Rodríguez, Sergio. *Huesos en el desierto*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2002.

Graziano, Frank. *Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. "Godfather Death." Tale 44 in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), available online, http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm044.html.

Holman, E. Bryant. *The Santísima Muerte: A Mexican Folk Saint*. Self-published, 2007.

Kelly, Isabel. *Folk Practices in North Mexico: Birth Customs, Folk Medicine, and Spiritualism in the Laguna Zone*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965.

La Biblia de la Santa Muerte. Mexico City: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 2008.

Lewis, Oscar. *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Random House, 1961.

Lomnitz, Claudio. *Death and the Idea of Mexico*. New York: Zone Books, 2008.

Martínez Gil, Fernando. *Muerte y sociedad en la España de los Austrias*. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1993.

Navarrete, Carlos. *San Pascualito Rey y el culto a la muerte en Chiapas*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, 1982.

Olavarrieta Marenco, Marcela. *Magia en los Tuxtlas, Veracruz*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1977.

Perdigón Castañeda, J. Katia. *La Santa Muerte: Protectora de los hombres*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2008.

Soref, Dror, dir. *Not Forgotten*. Skyline Pictures, 2009.

Steinkraus, Keith H., ed. *Handbook of Indigenous Fermented Foods*. 2nd ed. New York: Dekker, 1996.

Thompson, John. "Santísima Muerte: On the Origin and Development of a Mexican Occult Image." *Journal of the Southwest* 40 (Winter 1998), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb6474/is_4_40/ai_n28721107/?tag=content;col1.

Toor, Frances. *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways*. New York: Crown, 1947.

Villarreal, Mario. "Mexican Elections: The Candidates." American Enterprise Institute, http://www.aei.org/docLib/20060503_VillarrealMexicanElections.pdf.

INDEX