



# LA SANTA MUERTE AS A SITE OF ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE LICIT AND ILLCIT; A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE IN BORDER STUDIES

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### Abstract

The Mexican folk saint *La Santa Muerte* is one of the most popular saints in both Mexico and the United States today. She has devotees from different social, political and economic backgrounds. *Santa Muerte* is thus a religious phenomenon that transcends borders. As a religious perspective in border studies is unfortunately still fairly unexplored, it is meaningful to have a look at this topic. Therefore, this thesis aims to offer a first attempt of a religious perspective in the interdisciplinary field of border studies using an in-depth case study. This case study aims to demonstrate the importance and relevance of such a perspective in border studies. The case study used to research this is a thorough analysis of *Santa Muerte* as a site of encounter between: 1) the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas in Mexico, 2) the orthodox Catholic Church and the heterodox Santa Muertistas, and 3) the legal and illegal Santa Muertistas and law enforcement agencies in the U.S.-Mexico border region and the United States in general. This analysis will be placed in the body of work on border studies. It is argued that *Santa Muerte* is a religious phenomenon that transcends borders in multiple ways. On top of that, this thesis will demonstrate that *Santa Muerte* carries the U.S.-Mexico borderland with her when she crosses the U.S.-Mexico border through the Mexican drug cartels and immigrants. In turn, this thesis emphasizes the need of cooperation between Mexico and the United States regarding border enforcement.

Key words: *La Santa Muerte*, religion, border studies, sites of encounter, licit, illicit, Mexico, the United States, syncretism, secularism, orthodox, heterodox, borderlands, the U.S.-Mexico border, migration, transnationalism, and border enforcement.

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## Foreword and Acknowledgements

As a Dutch girl born and raised in a small and rural town in the southern part of the Netherlands, an interest in the Mexican folk saint *La Santa Muerte* and its significance to North American Studies and specifically border studies did not come naturally. This interest in religion and the link with the relationship between Mexico and the United States started to grow while taking the course Conflict, Aid, and Development of the Center for International Conflict Analysis and Management at Radboud University. In this course, several societal, political and economic global conflicts were discussed and analyzed. This included conflicts in Latin America and between Latin American- and North American countries.

Additionally, in 2013 I had the chance to spend a semester at Loyola University, New Orleans. During this semester I took two courses regarding international relations, global relations and ethnic conflicts. In this period, my interest in the relationship between Mexico and the United States intensified. Also the fact that, as an exchange student at Loyola University, I became close friends with several Mexicans who shared their life experiences with me, sparked my interest in this region even more.

In the summer of 2014 my study abroad coordinator at Loyola University, Kristy Wagner, came to visit me in the Netherlands. During a casual lunch we started talking about my interests and, consequently, about potential Master of Arts thesis subjects, as this was the time to start thinking about promising topics. She was the one who introduced me to *La Santa Muerte* and the research surrounding her meaning and influence in both Mexico and the United States. For that, I am forever grateful.

Ever since that period I have been conducting research on this subject under the tutelage of my thesis supervisor Dr. M.G. Valenta. Her insights on religion and honest feedback on this thesis proved to be very valuable to me. With her help, I have been able to develop both my research- and writing skills. Therefore, I want to thank her.

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Furthermore, I would like to thank Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut. Being a highly acclaimed scholar in the field of *La Santa Muerte*, not only was he able to provide me with useful sources that serve as the basis for this research, but also helped me to finish the last chapter of

this thesis. Also his enthusiasm regarding my thesis worked contagious. For these reasons, I sincerely want to thank him.

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Josien Janssen

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## Introduction

Two massive concrete skeletons, wrapped in cloaks and carrying sickles, stand guard on the side of the highway leading into Nuevo Laredo from the south. Behind them are several chapels filled with pictures of menacing skeletons and candles, beer cans, cigarettes, and other offerings to the “*La Santa Muerte*,” or the cult of Saint Death. (Freeman 4)

The purpose of these *La Santa Muerte* statues near a U.S.-Mexico border city is twofold; not only do they support the Mexican people trying to cross this border, but they also warn drug traffickers trying to succeed in criminal ventures (Chesnut 9; Freeman 4). Besides these, *La Santa Muerte* serves other purposes. Now the following questions emerge: Who is *La Santa Muerte*, and what purposes does she exactly serve?

*La Santa Muerte*, or in short *Santa Muerte*, is known in Mexico and the United States as *La Santisima*, the “White Girl,” the “Skinny Lady” or the “Bony Lady” (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 145; Burnett, par. 8; Chesnut 5; Whittington 3), and signifies a mythical personification of death; hence the name *La Santa Muerte*. That her meaning comes to the fore in her name is clear when looking at *la muerte*, which translates into death in Spanish. Furthermore, the denotation of *la* in the word signifies it is a feminine noun (Chesnut 6). In addition, *santa* is the feminine version of the Spanish translation of saint or holy; *santo* (Chesnut 7). Accordingly, she is often depicted as a robed skeleton, who is carrying a sickle or scythe, and a globe or scale (Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings,” par. 7; Holman 32).

In the past two decades, *Santa Muerte* has turned into a popular folk saint in Mexico and the United States, because of her unique mastery of life and death (Chesnut 59). “Her reputation as the most powerful and fastest-acting saint is above all what attracts results-oriented devotees to her altar,” *Santa Muerte* scholar Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut explains in his well-received analytical book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint* (59). In this context, folk saints could be defined as “powerful individuals that are revered for their spiritual gifts but are not typically saints that have been canonized by the Catholic Church” (qtd. in Rubi III).

As *Santa Muerte* is not recognized by the Catholic Church, some devotees feel that they can ask her for certain deeds that they would normally not ask a consecrated saint (Whittington 6). In the article “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos” American scholars and applied theorists on American national security topics Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell



and Robert J. Bunker explain this. In this article they state that worshipping *Santa Muerte* is especially appealing for those who are trying to succeed in criminal ventures. These people have started to use *Santa Muerte* both as a justification for the violence they employ to succeed in these ventures, and to protect them from being caught (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 145-147). Therefore, Bunker, Campbell and Bunker argue that *Santa Muerte* signifies justice for those who have the feeling they cannot find that somewhere else, as consecrated saints most likely will not support them and protect them in illegal endeavours, hence the name “Saint Death”; “the saint for sinners and the saint of last resort” (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 165, 168; Muñoz 2; Whittington 1). Thus, it can be argued that *Santa Muerte* is considered to be a folk saint who does not distinguish between good and evil, which strongly diverges from other Mexican saints. Not only is she a saint for the vulnerable, weak and poor, but also for the most powerful and violent people in Mexico.

Thereupon, a few scholars, such as Mexico, Latin America and International Relations specialist George W. Grayson and Robert J. Bunker, have tied *Santa Muerte* to the excessive violence employed by Mexican drug cartels in their research. These scholars argue that the Mexican drug cartels have started to use *Santa Muerte* as a justification for the violence employed to protect their wealth and secure their power in both Mexico and the United States (Bunker and Sullivan 749; Grayson 5). These cartel members believe *Santa Muerte* can be jealous and vengeful when not conducting the right rituals or sacrifices to please her (Whittington 1). Therefore, in order to honor her and receive her help, Mexican drug cartels have started to use more extreme forms of violence, such as decapitations, in her name (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 172).

In the past fifteen years, this phenomenon has attracted increasing attention in (popular) media<sup>1</sup>. Due to this large media coverage, the academic world, specifically social scientists, historians and anthropologists, has started to show a growing interest in *Santa Muerte*. However, both the media and most academics overwhelmingly and repeatedly focus only on *Santa Muerte*’s illicit devotees, due to their ignorance of *Santa Muerte*’s multifaceted character. On the contrary, very few scholars have focused on this versatile saint in their research so far<sup>2</sup>. Of those few, only Chesnut, the most established scholar on *Santa Muerte*,

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of how *Santa Muerte* is being popularized:

- *La Santa Muerte: Unearthing the Magic & Mysticism of Death* by Tomás Prower. This book sets out the practical magic of *Santa Muerte* by giving instructions on spells and prayers (Prower).

- *La Santa Muerte/Holy Death* by Homero Aridjis. This book contains six fiction stories on death, one of which is focused on *Santa Muerte* (Aridjis).

<sup>2</sup> *Santa Muerte* has generated lots of interest in the past two decades. Consequently, much has been written about her. However, it has to be noted that the vast majority of these materials on *Santa Muerte* lacks academic

has been able to provide an in-depth and extensive portrait of this folk saint. For example, he states in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*, that “Most Americans and Mexican nonbelievers [...] have little idea that the Skinny Lady heals sickness, finds employment and helps alcoholics and addicts in their struggles for sobriety” (96).

Another acclaimed *Santa Muerte* scholar, anthropologist Dr. José Carlos G. Aguiar of Leiden University, in contrast to Chesnut, has only focused on the illicit aspect of *Santa Muerte*’s character in his research, which is in line with other research he has conducted on illicit practices in Latin America. Thus, the majority of the little research that has been done on *Santa Muerte* focuses on her link to Mexican drug cartels, whereas very little research has paid attention to her licit devotees.

On the contrary, *Santa Muerte* has devotees from different social, political and economic backgrounds, most of whom are not part of a Mexican drug cartel, and therefore do not believe in the violent sacrifices performed by illicit devotees in order to receive *Santa Muerte*’s help. Thus, not only the illicit (illegal), but also the licit (legal)<sup>3</sup> turn to *Santa Muerte* for help (Hunt and Wickham 16). Therefore, it cannot only be argued that all-encompassing research on *Santa Muerte*’s multifaceted character is not distributed equally, but also that there is a striking divide between scholars on *Santa Muerte*’s meaning. This divide not only comes to the fore in research on *Santa Muerte*, but also in the debate between *Santa Muerte* devotees regarding her meaning and significance.

Since 2001, devotion to *Santa Muerte* has skyrocketed (Chesnut 4, 8). Today, *Santa Muerte* can be found, among other countries, throughout Mexico and the United States, in which *Santa Muerte* is the fastest growing religious movement (*Santa Muerte: The Skeleton Saint*). In these countries, different groups of people and institutions meet, clash and debate with each other over the meaning and significance of this folk saint. Thus, it can be argued that *Santa Muerte* has become a religious phenomenon that transcends borders, as she is not only serving a highly mobile population, but is herself also highly mobile as she crosses the U.S.-Mexico border.

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research and sources. Furthermore, these materials only focus on her amoral character and the link to Mexican drug cartels. As these materials are thus very selective, incomplete and unreliable, they will not be included in this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, the concepts licit and illicit are used as umbrella terms, which transgress normative or legal boundaries that religious, legal and international institutions establish. The emphasis tends to be on legal and illegal institutions and practices.

This field of study is largely ignored by *Santa Muerte* scholars. Furthermore, little in-depth research has been conducted on religion in border studies in general. For these reasons, this thesis seeks to explore the dynamic relations between religion and border studies in terms of the licit and illicit devotees of *Santa Muerte*. Specifically, this thesis is going to focus on a concept inherent in both religious- and border studies, namely “sites of encounter” by sociology scholar Peggy Levitt (Levitt 2). Accordingly, this thesis aims to address the following questions: Can *Santa Muerte* be considered a site of encounter between the licit and illicit? If so, in what ways can she be considered a site of encounter? And how can this case study on *Santa Muerte* demonstrate the useful contribution of a religious perspective in border studies by expounding their relationship?

## Methodology

One of the challenges that *Santa Muerte* presents us is a methodological one, as she is on the intersection of two multi- and interdisciplinary fields of study; religion and border studies. The body of this thesis will be segmented into four chapters, in order to clearly subdivide these two fields of study and provide separate in-depth analyses and answers to the research questions.

As the theoretical framework used to address the research questions will be grounded in the fields of both religious- and border studies, the first chapter will set out these two fields of study. This chapter will start by outlining the origins and history of the concept of religion, which will then lead to a final conceptualization of the notion of religion used throughout this thesis. After that, the field of border studies will be addressed. Specifically, the period in which border studies scholars from different disciplines started to cry for an interdisciplinary approach on border studies, the Renaissance period, will be explained. Then, the concept “sites of encounter” by Levitt will be elucidated to bridge the gap between religious- and border studies. Conclusively, the relationship between both fields of study will be discussed, after which it is explained how this entangled theoretical framework can be incorporated in the research on *Santa Muerte*.

Chapter two will begin to address the research questions. This chapter will focus on the fact that *Santa Muerte* can indeed be considered a site of encounter. In this chapter the debate between two groups of Santa Muertistas over her meaning and significance will be discussed: the licit devotees and the illicit worshippers.

The third chapter will set out another view on how *Santa Muerte* can be considered a site of encounter. In this chapter it is argued she is a site of encounter between the orthodox Catholic religion, according to the officially established Catholic Church, and the mostly heterodox and thus considered illicit religions and practices of which *Santa Muerte* is syncretized.

Chapter four will focus on yet a different way in which *Santa Muerte* can be considered a site of encounter. This chapter will focus on *Santa Muerte* as a saint that is present and has influence in both the U.S.-Mexico border region and the United States in general. This chapter will elaborate on the mostly different, but also similar perspectives on *Santa Muerte* on both sides of this border. Chapter four will therefore place *Santa Muerte* in a transnational context and finalizes the research conducted in this thesis by actually crossing a physical border.

This thesis will end by providing a sound conclusion on the key findings of this research. Furthermore, several suggestions for further research will be provided.

# Chapter I

## Theoretical Framework

In order to successfully elucidate the research questions posed in the introduction, both the field of religion and the field of border studies need to be addressed. Accordingly, this chapter will set out both fields of study, after which it will address the relationship between the two and explain how this entangled framework of two fields of study can be incorporated in the case study on *Santa Muerte*.

In order to explain the field of religion in a short and clear manner, the following part will rely heavily on the article “Religion, Religions, Religious” by religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith, as this relatively short article not only distills the most important facts about the categorization process and coming to a definition of the broad and intricate concept of religion<sup>4</sup>, but also introduces and explains the notion of religion used in this thesis.

### i. The Concept of Religion: Origins and History

Religion is a concept that has been used in many ways through time, and has thus been applied to several fields of study. Therefore, the way in which scholars have interpreted this concept and how they have used religion in their own research depends on the context in which this notion is embedded, religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith argues in his article “Religion, Religions, Religious” (269). Accordingly, it is important to untangle this intricate concept early on, in order to explain which notion of religion is used in the continuation of this thesis and why. For these reasons, this chapter starts by broadly outlining the origins and history of this concept, after which the notion of religion used in this thesis will be presented.

The concept of religion is ancient. However, until the sixteenth-century the term religion was not used the way we use it today. Therefore, the history of the concept of religion prior to the sixteenth-century is to a certain extent irrelevant in explaining the contemporary usage of this concept, and will therefore not be discussed extensively. For that reason, the focus will mostly be on the sixteenth-century onwards; a period in which an extensive expansion took place in the usage and understanding of religion (Smith 269).

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<sup>4</sup> Suggestions for more elaborate articles and books on the notion of religion:

- *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* by Frederick Ferré (Ferré).
- *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* by Thomas A. Tweed (Tweed).
- “Introduction: Theorizing and Studying Religion” by James Proctor (Proctor).
- “Theorizing Religion in a Globalizing World” by Christian Karner and Alan Alridge (Kamer and Alridge).

In the Roman as well as the Christian Latin language, the words *religio*, *religiosus* and *religiose* were terms that only referred to ritualistic duties, ceremonies and performances (Smith 269-270). Consequently, religion was always linked to those practices. Over the centuries, however, this understanding of religion was drastically altered. This can be seen in two important eighteenth-century works on the English language, which defined religion differently than before. In the *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), written by the English lexicographer Samuel Johnson, religion was defined as “virtue, as founded upon reverence of God, and expectations of future rewards and punishments” (Smith 271). Also the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771) focused on God when defining religion, and stated that religion was “To know God, and to render him a reasonable service” (Smith 271). Thus, in this period a shift took place in the meaning of religion. Earlier, religion primarily referred to rituals and ceremonies, whereas the more contemporary notion of religion stressed the belief in God as a primary feature. Religion therefore became considered to be a “state of mind” (Smith 271).

However, books already existed prior to the eighteenth-century that provided the reader with different perspectives on this notion; an important one being the *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (1614) by scholar Edward Brerewood. This book focused on the plurality of religions, and thus challenged the definition of religion as believing in one specific God. Consequently, questions were raised on the credibility of that definition (Smith 271). Was it even possible to come up with one generic definition of religion?, religious studies scholars were wondering.

This debate was fought out in numerous books that were published about this topic in that time. For example, *Purchas His Pilgrimage; or, Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered* (1613) by the English cleric Samuel Purchas focuses on the question of a generic definition of religion, and states that “The true Religion can be but one, and that which God himselfe teacheth” (qtd. in Smith 272). Scholar Matthew Tindal follows this train of thought in his work *Christianity As Old as the Creation; or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730), in which he states that religion should be found and justified on the basis of human reasoning, and that God has provided men with the means to find that logic (Smith 272-273). This was termed “natural religion” (Smith 273), and, according to Smith, “signaled the beginning of the process of transposing ‘religion’ from a supernatural to a natural history, from a theological to an anthropological category” (Smith 273).

Philosopher David Hume questions Tindal's reasoning about natural religion in the essay "The Natural History of Religion," published in his *Four Dissertations* (1757). Herein, he argues that when believing is something that only comes to the fore through human reasoning and is therefore invisible, religion can never be universal, as people across the globe reason differently through the various experiences they come across in life. Consequently, people interpret religion individually (Smith 273-274). It is in the latter part of the eighteenth-century then, that the definition of religion starts to become more nuanced and is identified as either "rationality, morality, or feeling" (Smith 274).

In the nineteenth-century, religious studies scholars shifted their focus back to the plurality of religions. In this period, more information became available on the variety of religions that existed in the world, due to the fact that scholars started mastering foreign languages and were therefore able to successfully research these religions and document their findings in encyclopedias and handbooks (Smith 275). Scholars started classifying these religions, but had a hard time doing so and agreeing on a specific classification.

For example, theological scholar Andrew Martin Fairbairn categorized religion into two categories in his *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion and History* (1876): "spontaneous or natural religions" and "instituted religions" (Smith 278). He then subcategorized the natural religions into two subgroups, namely the "Primitive Naturalisms" and the "Transformed Naturalisms" (Smith 277). However, in that same year, theologian Cornelius Petrus Tiele classified these natural religions in a different way. In his work *Outline of the History of Religion to the Spread of Universal Religions* (1876), he categorized the natural religions into three "families" (Smith 278), which all characterize different features of a natural religion. This contradicts Fairbairn's categorization of placing natural religions in two time frames.

Consequently, the following questions emerged: What was the best way to classify religions? And could these different religions be considered sub-religions of one universal religion? (Smith 276-278). In the twentieth-century, psychologist James H. Leuba offered an answer to these questions when his book *A Psychological Study of Religion* was published in 1912. In this book he defines religion in more than fifty ways, to demonstrate that "religion is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define" (Smith 281).

As demonstrated, over the centuries scholars have had a hard time categorizing and agreeing upon the concept of religion. In the end, Leuba provided these scholars with the notion that religion is a versatile and changeable concept. Religion is a constructed category,

which provides scholars with the opportunity to decide what to make of this notion and how to use it. Therefore, one can argue that no generic definition of religion exists. This thesis aims to demonstrate, among other things, that the same can be said about *Santa Muerte*. In order to do so, the following part will build on Leuba's notion of religion, and will explain the way in which this notion is used in the case study on *Santa Muerte*.

## ii. Conceptualizing Religion

Peggy Levitt, sociologist and Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College, confirms Leuba's observation in her article "Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption," and argues that religion is a

contingent clustering of diverse elements that come together within to-be-determined spaces riddled by power and interests. The resulting assemblages, made up of actors, objects, technology, and ideas, travel at different rates and rhythms, across the different levels and scopes of the social fields in which they are embedded. (2)

Accordingly, Levitt builds on Leuba's train of thought and argues that religion is not a definite set of beliefs, but is a concept that is always in motion (Levitt 2).

Levitt argues in her article "Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption" that religious studies scholars have missed several aspects of religion, such as "informal, folk, and materials aspects" (3-4), when conceptualizing this term. She argues that these scholars "imposed an order and cohesiveness on a wide range of beliefs and practices that, in fact, only came together in unique ways at specific moments" (Levitt 4). Thus, according to Levitt, religious studies scholars have failed to take into account how, when and where these congregations of religious ideas and practices are taking place, when discussing and applying this concept in different contexts (Levitt 2). Therefore, she asks herself the question: "How can we explain what happens at these 'sites of encounter' where what is circulating and what is in place come together?" (Levitt 2).

In order to answer this question, Levitt proposes to look closely at borders and borderlands; the places in which she thinks religion gets assembled (Levitt 3). She argues that several studies have been conducted on this topic, but in her opinion have failed to take into account what exactly is happening at these places where religious ideas and practices bump into each other. She therefore argues that:



The scholarship on religion needs better tools with which to capture how people, ideas, and objects circulate through transnational social fields. Many studies of religion assume a stasis and one-way movement that is inaccurate. The assemblages produced by religion on the move do not arise from a single “world culture,” nor do they circulate unidirectionally through a single, stable geography. Human and material elements come together in specific historical and political contexts. What results is a new mix, which shifts and recombines form and content before it travels once again. (Levitt 13-14)

In “Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption,” Levitt therefore argues that she sees religion as “assemblages” of the “contingent encounter between religious actors, practices, and objects [...] that come together in loose or tightly coupled ways” (4), drawing on assemblage theory. She explains that the core of such an assemblage can be unambiguous, but can also be indefinite; this depends on how the religion is organized, how it travels, where it travels to, and in which context it is placed (Levitt 4).

Assemblage theory was disclosed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze in the latter part of the twentieth-century (DeLanda 3). He defined assemblages as “wholes characterized by relations of exteriority” (DeLanda 10). In the book *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, author Manuel DeLanda sets out Deleuze’s assemblage theory. He explains that a constituent of such an assemblage can disassemble itself and can alternatively attach itself to another assemblage, which consequently interacts differently than the previous assemblage (DeLanda 10-11). He furthermore makes clear that all the components of such an assemblage are heterogeneous and cannot explain the relations between the various constituents, as the interaction between the different components always differs. As assemblage theory is extremely complicated and explaining this theory in-depth is irrelevant in furtherance of this research and will go beyond the scope of this thesis, assemblage theory will not be discussed any further.

Levitt’s analysis of religion as an assemblage bears reference to *Santa Muerte*; different groups of people and institutions in various places have dissimilar ideas of her meaning and significance. Each individual or group worshipping *Santa Muerte* has adapted and changed several aspects of this religion in order to fulfill one’s needs, which results in different perspectives on her meaning and significance (Bunker, Campbell and Bunker 165; Chesnut 52). Their contrasting views on *Santa Muerte* thus show that the concept religion is not generic, but that it is an assemblage of different religious ideas and practices that is always in motion. Moreover, as Levitt’s analysis of religion is linked to borders and border

crossings, the notion of religion as an assemblage is applicable to both border studies and religion, and can thus successfully be used in the case study on *Santa Muerte*. Therefore, her analysis of religion serves as the basis of the theoretical framework on which the research conducted in this thesis will be built.

Having presented the historical context and composition of religion, and after having defined the concept of religion employed in this thesis, we can move on to complete the theoretical framework upon the research set out in this thesis will rely. As Levitt's analysis of religion is linked to borders and border crossings, the following part of this chapter will focus on the field of study in which these concepts are inherent, namely border studies. Accordingly, the following part will broadly outline the history of border studies and mention key aspects of this field of study.

### iii. Origins of Border Studies

"Borders, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands are human creations that are grounded in various ethical traditions" (Brunet-Jailly 634), editor of the international scholarly publishing *Journal of Borderlands Studies* and Associate Professor at the University of Victoria Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly argues in his article "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective" (634). These traditions can be traced back to Roman times, in which the Roman Empire was organized hierarchically by boundaries, to separate, among others, settlements from cities. This tradition was also present in the Middle Ages, in which the feudal system was focused on controlling separate territories and the borderlands surrounding those territories (Brunet-Jailly 635).

As this line continued through time, an evolution in defining and clarifying meanings of these concepts, such as borders, boundaries, territories, frontiers and borderlands, took place, varying from location to location where these concepts were present (Brunet-Jailly 635). In the seventeenth-century, historians and geographers starting focusing on these variety of meanings, and indirectly "contributed to the formation of the modern political order, which required international recognition, by other states, of the boundaries of sovereign and territorially demarcated states" (Brunet-Jailly 635).

An example that can be given is the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, in which the boundaries for the territories of several European countries were officially established. This treaty was the first international agreement that established boundaries, and marked the

beginning of concepts like the “nation-state”<sup>5</sup> and “nationalism”<sup>6</sup> (Brunet-Jailly 635; Moore 5; “Nation-State,” par. 1).

In the following centuries, sovereignty, “the exclusive right of exercise of legitimate violence within the limits of a territory” (Brunet-Jailly 635), slowly became acknowledged by the then superpowers of the world; the United Kingdom, France and the United States. Consequently, in order to uphold these territories, artificial boundaries were created to define these states.

The methodical studies of both natural and artificial boundaries came into existence in the first half of the twentieth-century (Brunet-Jailly 635). In this period, miscellaneous views on boundaries were developed, of which two are important to be highlighted. Soldier Sir Thomas Holdich understood boundaries as defensive mechanisms, which could avoid or limit conflicts between states. Coming from a military background, he considered boundaries as barriers, which secured the state they enclosed (Brigham 203). A contrasting view on this is the notion of human geographer L.W. Lyde, who regarded boundaries as a positive mechanism in fostering peace relations between states, as the borderlands are shared by different groups of people who thus come into contact with each other and consequently have to work together. However, Lyde acknowledged that boundaries can also function as barriers in times of war, but stressed that it is not their primary purpose (Brigham 204).

These varying views on boundaries led to a debate on the different purposes of boundaries (Brunet-Jailly 636). Boundaries were not only considered to be barriers, but served various functions. Geologist Albert Perry Brigham, for example, writes in his article “Principles in the Determination of Boundaries,” that boundaries should first provide “economic equilibrium” (218), by dividing the natural resources in the world. Furthermore, he argues that boundaries also exist in outer parts of the world, without communities present. He gives the example of rivers and mountains as natural barriers (Brigham 217). Also geographer Samuel Whittermore Boggs disagrees with the fact that boundaries serve just one function, and states in his book *International Boundaries, A Study of Boundary Functions and Problems* that the functions of boundaries vary, depending on the time and place in which they exist (Brunet-Jailly 636).

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<sup>5</sup> The definition of “nation state”: “One where the great majority are conscious of a common identity and share the same culture” (“Nation-State,” par. 1).

<sup>6</sup> The definition of “nationalism”: “A normative argument that confers moral value on national membership, and on the past and future existence of the nation, and identifies the nation with a particular homeland or part of the globe” (Moore 5).

In the twenty-first century, the variety of boundary functions was again extended and emphasized in research when multiculturalism emerged as a pivotal topic in political- and cultural studies in the United States in the 1980s. Multiculturalism is a concept that refers to “ethnic and cultural diversity” within a society (Inglis, par. 1), and was introduced in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. As this concept was segmented along culturally disparate lines, resulting in discordant understandings of multiculturalism, the question emerged among scholars how to deal with such an intricate topic (Niday and Allender 60-61; Roza).

As a response to this debate, the field of border studies emerged in the 1990s. Primarily, this field of study was going to examine the cultural exchange of different cultures within the United States, and the effects this process had on society (Niday and Allender 60-61). In addition, this academic field was going to focus on a crucial concept within border studies; the U.S.-Mexico border. This border serves a crucial role in the process of multiculturalism as a zone of border crossings and cultural exchange. In 1987, Chicana cultural theory scholar Gloria Anzaldúa first coined the term “border crossings” in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and refers to “moving across diverse borders such as race, gender or geography” (Anzaldúa 77; Niday and Allender 60). This concept could be used by border studies scholars from different disciplines, when the field of border studies started to extend its focus to other countries and concepts. In order to explain this, the current state of border studies is going to be addressed next.

#### iv. Renaissance in Border Theory

In the past fifteen years a Renaissance in border studies has taken place, political geographer David Newman argues in his article “Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies: An Overview.” In this article he states the following: “From a descriptive analysis of the course and location of the lines separating states in the international system, to the study of the dynamics of the bordering process as it impacts society and space, borders have taken on a multi-dimensional meaning” (Newman 34). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the economic, political and societal consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, and the resulting transformation of the hegemonic position of the United States hinted towards a “transformation of the state system and the broader global socio-spatial order” (Diener and Hagen 1199; Ed. Wastl-Walter 11).

Today, the advancement of globalization<sup>7</sup> influences this process; borders often merge and become more international and diversified (Ed. Wastl-Walter 12). Therefore, Alexander C. Diener, Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Kansas, and Joshua Hagen, Professor of Geography at Marshall University, argue in their article “Theorizing Borders in a ‘Borderless World’”: “Borders are no longer seen as passive things to be described, mapped, and categorized but rather as active forces and processes impacting a wide array of domestic and international concerns” (1199). As these border processes influence different aspects of life and thus various fields of study, scholars from different academic fields who deal with borders in their research have called for a transdisciplinary perspective on border studies (Ed. Wastl-Walter 18).

As a result, the debate arose if there should be one overarching border theory, which would unite these different perspectives on borders (Ed. Wastl-Walter 12). However, this proves to be undesirable and unachievable to some scholars, geography scholar Doris Wastl-Walter argues in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*. Herein she states that “individual state borders are deeply characterized by contextual features and societal power relations and their meanings change in the course of time along with broader, typically state-related societal relations and conditions” (Ed. Wastl-Walter 27-28). This means that it is almost impossible to come up with one general theory in border studies that can be applicable to the different fields of research that exist on borders worldwide today (Ed. Wastl-Walter 27).

However, even though an acknowledged all-encompassing theoretical framework of border studies does not yet exist, and may never exist, a fusing of border studies from different fields, such as the social sciences, political sciences, geography and regional studies, diplomatic studies, history, economy and anthropology, has already been taking place since the late 1980s; the period in which the concept of multiculturalism was introduced in the United States (Diener and Hagen 1201; Ed. Wastl-Walter 3, 18). In this period scholars came to the realization that the main concept in border studies, namely borders, could have different meanings and could be applied to different fields of study. As a result, the field of border studies started to become interdisciplinary.

Foremost, these scholars regarded borders as “spaces of relation in which all kinds of unlike things can knock up against each other in all kinds of ways” (Ed. Wastl-Walter 20),

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<sup>7</sup> The definition of “globalization”: “Growing global interconnectedness. [...] It represents a significant shift in the spatial form of social relations so that the interaction between apparently local and global processes becomes increasingly important (Ed. Held 15).

instead of being fixed research objects in disconnected fields (Ed. Wastl-Walter 20, 27-28).

Some borders will “remain barriers, while others will transform into permeable sites of interaction or bridge-borders”; sites of encounter (Diener and Hagen 1201; Levitt 8).

Anthropologist Dr. José Carlos G. Aguiar of Leiden University clearly summarizes this in his article “Stretching the Border: Smuggling Practices and the Control of Illegality in South America”: “border theory assesses the differential ratio between two different entities – a nation, a territory to explore, a cultural identity” (5).

Scholar Jevgenia Viktorova of the Institute of International and Social Studies at Edinburg University focuses on this reciprocal aspect of borders in her research, and argues that “borders invite transgression, as well as communication and mediation. They are essentially ‘unfinalizable’ because they remain subject to change based on contingent events” (Diener and Hagen 1204). Thus, Viktorova considers borders to be processes. This is similar to the notion of religion, which is considered to be a process instead of a generic concept.

The question that emerges then is where and how these borders are subject to change. Viktorova explains this in the article “Theorizing Borders in a ‘Borderless World’: Globalization, Territory and Identity.” She explains the answer should be found in the borderlands; the lands surrounding a border (Diener and Hagen 1206; Martínez 27). These borderlands are regarded areas in which different cultures and identities are directly and indirectly related to “dynamics of daily practice affected by the very presence of a common border” (Diener and Hagen 1206). Newman follows Viktorova’s train of thought and argues in his article “The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in our ‘Borderless’ World,” that what happens in these borderlands, the “bordering process” (144), affects the lives of the people living in these borderlands, the “borderlanders” (Martínez 15), “on a daily basis, from the global to the national, and most significantly, at the local and micro scales of sociospatial activity” (144).

In the current state of border studies, borders are thus understood as “formal and informal institutions of spatial and social practice, as well as physical and symbolic markers of difference” (Diener and Hagen 1198). Due to the interconnected and heterogeneous milieu in the borderlands, it can be argued then that borders can be seen as sites of contestation over meaning and control over the different cultures and identities present in one region (Diener and Hagen 1208). This means that it is more important to understand the bordering process rather than the border by and of itself, as, according to Newman, “there is no single border situation” (Newman “Contemporary Research Agendas” 34).

Following this train of thought, Brunet-Jailly advises scholars in his article “Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective,” that “states, markets and culture provide important explanatory lenses” to study these different border situations (634). Diener and Hagen also recommend this in their article “Theorizing Borders in a ‘Borderless World’: Globalization, Territory and Identity”:

Those excluded retain a measure of agency and reproduce the border in their own image. The meaning of the border and its daily function are mutable and must therefore be studied relative to the group imagining it, including international organizations, state officials, aid volunteers, border control agents, tourists, migrants, refugees, or smugglers. (1208)

This is interesting to keep in mind when thinking of *Santa Muerte* as a site of encounter. Her devotees cannot only be found in Mexico, but also across the U.S.-Mexico border in the United States, making these places sites of encounter in which different groups of people and institutions come into contact with each other, and in the process clash and debate over the meaning and significance of this Mexican folk saint. This means that *Santa Muerte* scholars need to take into account that the social, economic, political and cultural background of the *Santa Muerte* devotees and the region in which they live influences the ways in which they perceive *Santa Muerte*. In turn, these factors affect the outcome of the confrontation between these groups of people and institutions.

The literature presented above gives a broad overview of the debate which led to a transformation of the traditional view on boundaries as barriers, towards a changing perspective on boundary functions. This is similar to what happened with the debate over the classifying and defining of the notion of religion, which in the end resulted in the notion that religion is a changeable and constructed concept.

Furthermore, as demonstrated, the field of border studies is becoming more interdisciplinary. However, for some reason, the contribution of religion to this field of study has not specifically been studied in-depth using a case study. Accordingly, the case study on *Santa Muerte* researched in this thesis serves as an adequate example to explain the importance of a religious perspective in border studies. However, in order to explain this, the following questions need to be answered first: If, and if so, in what ways does religion deal with border studies? What is the relationship between religious- and border studies? And how can this entangled framework be incorporated in the case study on *Santa Muerte*?

## v. Border Studies within Religious Studies

That religion is scarcely included in border studies does not instantly mean that religion does not deal with border studies. The way in which religion deals with border studies can help us understand and explain the relationship between both fields of study. Therefore, the following part will briefly<sup>8</sup> explain the way in which borders can be perceived within religion<sup>9</sup>. In order to do so, the article “‘Ours is the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict” by Jeffrey R. Seul, lecturer on the practice of peace at Harvard Divinity School, is being used, as this article concisely and in clear fashion explains this.

In this article Seul focuses on the influence of religion on identity formation, and the ways in which religion plays a role in intergroup comparison and conflict. According to Seul, people desire “psychological stability” in life (Seul 554), no matter the time, place and situation they are in (Seul 554). A secure identity<sup>10</sup> can help with that, he argues, and can be achieved and maintained by “a sense of connection or belonging, self-esteem and [...] self-actualization” (Seul 554). He argues that this can be achieved when, for example, becoming a member of a certain group (Seul 555).

According to Seul, a group is a “self-defining collection of individuals” (Seul 556), who have a “shared conception of its enduring characteristics and basic values, its strengths and weaknesses, its hopes and fears, its reputation and conditions of existence, its institutions and traditions, its past history, current purposes, and future prospects” (Seul 556). This shared understanding of a group’s identity is influenced by social and political forces, which compel the group to adapt to current events, Seul states in his article. Therefore, he argues that a group’s identity is dynamic and changeable, as it adapts to ongoing changes (Seul 556).

A group’s identity is also influenced by the ways in which it is, both positively and negatively, evaluated by other groups, Seul argues in his article (Seul 556). As people and groups of people naturally desire a secure and positive identity, intergroup observation and comparison is a natural phenomenon to establish and maintain such an identity, he states (Seul 557). Consequently, intergroup comparison can lead to a clash; different groups of

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<sup>8</sup> Due to constraints of space and time, and because of the fact that this thesis primarily focuses on a religious perspective in border studies, the way in which religion deals with border studies is not discussed extensively.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Harrison elaborates on this topic in his book *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*. In this book he sets out the history of the emergence of different religions, and the conflicts that consequently arose (Harrison).

<sup>10</sup> The definition of “identity”: “The relatively stable elements of an individual’s sense of self [...] The contents consists of one’s values, motives, emotions, feelings, attitudes, thoughts, goals, aspirations, and the like, on the one hand, and one’s group memberships, social influence, social interaction patterns, and roles, on the other” (Seul 554 -555).



people might realize and be disturbed by the incompatible identity of the other group(s) (Seul 557).

According to Seul, religion plays a huge role in this intergroup conflict:

Religious meaning systems define the contours of the broadest possible range of relationships – to self; to others near and distant, friendly and unfriendly; to the non-human world; to the universe; and to God, or that which one considers ultimately real or true. No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity. Consequently, religion often is at the core of individual and group identity. (Seul 558)

Thus, it can be argued that, due to intergroup comparison, incompatible views on religion can come to the fore. Consequently, a clash between different groups of people can take place (Seul 557, 563).

As religion is strongly entangled with an individual's and group's identity, the group can perceive a threat when their view of religion clashes with that of another group; their group's identity is in danger. Seul defines this clash as "identity competition" (Seul 563). Consequently, a group can feel their identity is being disparaged, which means a negative and thus unstable identity. Thereupon, the group tries to secure and maintain a stable and positive identity by regaining and reinforcing their group's identity in a coherent manner (Seul 563).

According to Seul, this is especially the case for marginalized groups in need of material and social matters (Seul 563). These groups are more "likely to emphasize those elements within its tradition which group members perceive to be most capable of promoting group cohesion and of mobilizing group members toward the improvement of the group's condition" (Seul 563), and will therefore probably fight hard to reinforce their group's identities.

Thus, it can be argued that within religion borders are being established by different groups of people. Each group defines religion in their own way and disparages and limits the way(s) in which other groups are allowed to perceive religion. As is going to be demonstrated, this is also the case with *Santa Muerte*; different groups of people and institutions meet, clash and debate with each other over the meaning and significance of this folk saint in so-called sites of encounter. In order to explain this, the relationship between religion and border studies needs to be explained first. The following part will elucidate this relationship.

## vi. Sites of Encounter; Proof of a Dynamic Relationship

Levitt is the one who links both fields of study together in her article “Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption.” As Levitt’s analysis of religious mobility set out in this article engages with border crossing, and as she asks a similar set of questions as the ones asked in this thesis, she gets the perspective on the topic that is researched in this thesis. For that reason, her concept sites of encounter, in which she links her notion of religion to border studies, is a suitable theory to use in this thesis and will therefore be discussed in order to bridge the gap between religious- and border studies, and to explain the relationship between these two fields of study.

In 2010, the book *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* was published, which shows similarities with Levitt’s research on religion. This book asks a similar set of questions as in her article “Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption,” and focuses on the interactions between religious and non-religious “discourses, practices and institutions” (Levitt 4). According to its editors Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, these interactions can be explained by using a metaphor; the metaphor of an encounter. This metaphor can be used in religious studies to refer to “a meeting place of religious difference [...] that encourages an understanding of meeting across lines of difference” (Eds. Bender and Klassen 15).

This is exactly what is happening in Mexico and the United States today. In these countries, tension plays out between different groups of people and institutions who grapple with each other over the meaning and significance of *Santa Muerte*. This happens in places where these groups of people and institutions, and their various, often contrasting, perceptions of this folk saint come into contact with each other; so-called sites of encounter (Levitt 2).

Levitt argues in her article “Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption,” that these sites of encounter are the geographies<sup>11</sup> through which religious assemblages encounter and are influenced by “people, ideas, and practices along the way” (8). According to Levitt, these religious assemblages should therefore be regarded as “potential sites of clustering and convergence which, once constituted, circulate and recirculate, uploading and downloading as they travel” (Levitt 5). Moreover, these sites of encounter in which religion gets assembled are also influenced by the “people, ideas, and practices” that travel through these geographies (Levitt 5). Consequently, the composition of these sites of encounter changes. They are “nested within multiple scales of governance, each

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<sup>11</sup> The definition of “geography”: “The study of places and the relationships between people and their environments” (“What is Geography”).

with its own logic and repertoires of institutional and discursive resources” (Levitt 5). Therefore, it can be argued that, similar to the notion of religion, the concept sites of encounter is a fluid concept.

As Levitt’s concept sites of encounter draws heavily on the metaphor of a religious encounter defined by Bender and Klassen, and as she links this concept to the border studies concepts geographies and mobility, one can argue that the concept sites of encounter defined by Levitt entangles both religious- and border studies, and thus demonstrates a relationship between both fields of study. The question that emerges then is how the concepts religion and sites of encounter influence and shape each other.

As also came to the fore in the history of both the notion of religion and border studies, the concepts religion and sites of encounter are not generic, but can both be considered processes, which influence each other through their vigorous relationship. The constantly varying religious assemblages that come together within these heterogeneous sites of encounter continually change the dynamics within these ever changing sites. Moreover, the heterogeneous milieu in which a religion gets assembled affects the assemblage. These factors thus create a strong and influential link between the two. But how can this entangled framework be incorporated in the case study on *Santa Muerte*?

In order to analyze and explain what exactly is happening at these sites of encounter, Levitt calls for a transnational vision on religion to identify which actors, ideas and practices are the ones that bear and assemble a specific (vision on) religion. She argues that such a transnational perspective on religion:

calls our attention to the real and imagined, past and present geographies through which religion travels and the pathways and networks that guide the elements circulating within them. Finally, it produces a clearer picture of how and why religious assemblages are created at these sites of encounter. (Levitt 5)

The case study on the highly mobile *Santa Muerte* as an encounter between the licit and illicit researched in this thesis aims to provide an in-depth study on exactly that, and therefore shows how this entangled framework between religious- and border studies can be incorporated in this thesis.

Now the theoretical framework is set out, we can move on to discuss the following questions: Can *Santa Muerte* indeed be considered a site of encounter between the licit and

illicit? And if so, in what ways can she be considered a site of encounter? The following chapter aims to offer a first answer to these research questions.

## Chapter II

### Disharmony Among the Santa Muertistas

*Santa Muerte* has generated much popularity in Mexico in the past two decades as a fast-acting and multifaceted saint (Chesnut 4; Michalik, par. 15). However, as this religious movement is informal and not yet sufficiently organized, it is difficult to state an exact number of devotees<sup>12</sup> (Chesnut 8). The same goes for the composition of the devotees. What kind of people believe in *Santa Muerte*? And what does this information tell us about *Santa Muerte* as a site of encounter?

*Santa Muerte* is an unconsecrated saint, which means some adherents have the feeling they can ask her help for not only licit, but also illicit matters. According to Dr. Andrew Chesnut, Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University and author of the highly praised book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*, “*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” (8). Consequently, *Santa Muerte* has both licit and illicit devotees.

Both these groups of Santa Muertistas, as Chesnut calls her devotees, have in some ways a different perspective on *Santa Muerte*’s meaning and significance. He argues that that is because of the fact that “the new flock of faithful is a heterogeneous group with diverse afflictions and aspirations” (Chesnut 52). This chapter therefore aims to explain the debate over religious differences between the licit and illicit devotees of *Santa Muerte*. In turn, this chapter aims to demonstrate that this debate in itself can be studied as a site of encounter, in which the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas in Mexico meet, clash, and debate with each other over the meaning and significance of this folk saint.

#### i. Syncretism

Most of *Santa Muerte*’s devotees are only concerned with her powers, and less interested in the history of her existence, Chesnut argues in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint* (27). However, as Santa Muertistas all take and believe in different parts of her multifaceted identity, resulting in a debate between the licit and illicit

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<sup>12</sup> Chesnut estimates there are between ten and twelve million *Santa Muerte* devotees in the United States, Mexico and Central America (Paulas, par. 3).

Santa Muertistas over *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance, it is important to understand her assorted past before explaining this discussion.

The origins of *Santa Muerte* can be traced back to several religions, rituals, myths and practices. Therefore, she can be seen as a product of the continuing process of syncretism, which is "the process of mingling different philosophies, religions or traditions of belief and practice, resulting in hybrid forms" (Muñoz 4). This is in line with other Latin American religions (Ed. Das 61). However, *Santa Muerte* strongly diverges from other Latin American religions in the way that she embodies larger social, political and historical forces that shaped Mexico<sup>13</sup>, which shine through in her meaning. For example, she gives room to the growing and increasingly powerful Mexican drug cartels. In order to explain this, several religions, rituals, myths and practices of which she is syncretized are going to be discussed.

The idea of being devoted to evil, in this case death, to be protected from it comes from an ancient belief called animism, which is "the belief in spiritual beings (including the attribution of life to inanimate objects and of 'souls' to animals)" (qtd. in Harvey 9; Muñoz 5). Arturo Muñoz, a former CIA senior officer and current lecturer on several U.S. national security and intelligence topics, gives an example of this in his article "Santa Muerte Syncretism." In this article he explains how Emberá Indians to this day pray to a snake's spirit after a snake has bitten one of their people, as they believe only then the snake's poison will not take effect (Muñoz 5). Therefore, Muñoz argues that on a deeper level *Santa Muerte* is "an atavistic return to an indigenous belief system ostensibly suppressed centuries ago by forced conversion to Catholicism" (Muñoz 5).

*Santa Muerte* can also be associated with Mictecacihuatl, also known as the "Keeper of Bones" (Muñoz 5), who is the Aztec goddess of death, and who in the Aztec world believed to rule the underworld "Mictlan" alongside her husband Mictlantecuhтли (Chesnut 28; Muñoz 5). She was often depicted as either a complete skeleton or a human body with a skull as head, which sometimes devoured humans. This is in a way similar to *Santa Muerte*, whose illicit devotees believe one should perform grotesque rituals, such as beheading ones enemies, to please this saint. In this context, *Santa Muerte* can thus be considered a folk saint who feeds on humans.

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<sup>13</sup> Due to constraints of space and time, the history of Mexico and the social and political changes that occurred in this country will not be discussed. However, the interested reader can read the following books about this topic:

- *A Concise History of Mexico* by Brian R. Hamnett (Hamnett).
- *Fire & Blood: A History of Mexico* by T.R. Fehrenbach (Fehrenbach).
- *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State* by George W. Grayson (Grayson).
- *The Oxford History of Mexico* by Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (Eds. Meyer and Beezley).

Armando Rubi III, author of the Master's thesis "Santa Muerte: a Transnational Spiritual Movement of the Marginalized" for the University of Miami, argues that with the persecution of indigenous religions, the Spanish Inquisition, which had as a main purpose to defend the "Spanish religion and Spanish-Catholic culture against individuals who held heretical views and people who showed lack of respect for religious principles" (Greenleaf 315), drove devotion to *Santa Muerte* underground and "into syncretism with Catholicism" (6). Therefore, *Santa Muerte*'s Aztec identity cannot be seen in her portrayal today (Rubi III 6). In his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint* Chesnut takes this argument a step further and argues that some scholars consider *Santa Muerte*'s current appearance to only be a façade hiding this Aztec identity (28).

A myth surrounding the existence of *Santa Muerte* comes from a story told by Vicente Pérez Ramos, a prominent cult leader in Morelia, Mexico. He claims that *Santa Muerte* is a descendant of a major indigenous group in the state of Michoacán; the Purépecha (Chesnut 28). According to this myth, a girl who had the size of an adult woman was born to a Purépecha couple from Santa Ana Chapitiro, Michoacán in the sixteenth-century (Chesnut 28). Afraid that rich Spanish people would steal this girl, the family locked her up. One night, however, she escaped and began to wander through the region. Villagers who came across her were afraid, as they thought she was a ghost. This rumour spread and eventually reached the Inquisition. Thereupon, they arrested her, convicted her of witchcraft, and consequently, burned her alive (Chesnut 29). Notwithstanding, her skeleton remained intact, after which friar Juan Pablo, present at the execution, stated: "Don't be afraid, you have nothing to fear. One the contrary, give thanks to God that he allowed you to see our Most Holy Death (Santísima Muerte)" (qtd. in Chesnut 30). Thus, according to this myth, *Santa Muerte* is a descendant of the Purépecha.

Another belief that is assumed to be a religion of which *Santa Muerte* is syncretized is the Grim Reaper holding a scythe, which could be used to harvest human souls in fourteenth-century Europe; the period that medieval Europe was afflicted by the plague and famines (Bunker "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings" 1; Chesnut 30; Muñoz 6). It is in this period that death first became personified as a skeleton by artists and priests (Chesnut 30; Michalik, par. 7). *Santa Muerte* is also depicted as a female Grim Reaper holding a sickle or scythe. Furthermore, one can argue she indirectly also collects human souls as her illicit devotees believe they have to perform violent rituals in *Santa Muerte*'s name in return for her protection.

Moreover, *Santa Muerte* is often considered a syncretized version of the Virgin of Guadalupe, in which a skeleton is replacing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as an Indian woman, while still wearing the same gown and being surrounded by the same traditional symbols (Bunker “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings” 1; Muñoz 5). As Mexican cartel members have the feeling they cannot turn to the licit Virgin of Guadalupe for help, they turn to her darker counterpart; *Santa Muerte*.

Furthermore, it is believed that *Santa Muerte* derives from the Latin American folk saint *San Pascualito*. In the sixteenth-century, the Spanish saint Pascual Bailón was syncretized with several Mayan religions, of which *San Pascualito* was the product (Chesnut 30, 31). The story goes that when Latin America was being terrorized by a deadly plague in 1650, he appeared in a vision of a Mayan man who described *San Pascualito* as a crowned skeleton (Chesnut 31). People believed this saint was the one who ended this plague (Chesnut 31). Similar to the Aztec Mictecacihuatl, atavism and the story of Vincente Pérez Ramos, the Inquisition drove devotion to *San Pascualito* underground (Chesnut 31).

Some scholars even claim that elements of the Afro-Caribbean religions Santería and Palo Mayombe can be perceived in the *Santa Muerte* religion (Rubi III 9). In Santería it is believed that Yewá, goddess of the underworld, offers the dead to the goddess of storms, Oyá. It can be argued that *Santa Muerte* as the saint of death bears resemblance to Yewá. In Palo Mayombe a similar comparison can be drawn, as Mama Wanga, “ruler of cemeteries” (Freese, par. 12), bears resemblance to *Santa Muerte* (Freese, par. 12). Moreover, both Santería and Palo Mayombe include worshipping and offerings of, among other things, animals, humans and artifacts (Gill, Rainwater, and Adams 1458). This is exactly what Santa Muertistas do. Noteworthy, only illicit Santa Muertistas practice the ritual of human sacrifice. This is going to be discussed in part three of this chapter.

Thus, as demonstrated, *Santa Muerte* embodies larger social, political and historical forces that shaped Mexico, which shine through in her meaning. This ties in with Levitt’s notion of religion, in this case *Santa Muerte*, as an assemblage; a concept that is always in motion. In this fashion, it can be argued that it is impossible to interpret *Santa Muerte*’s meaning and significance in one way, as those larger social, historical and political forces in Mexico that *Santa Muerte* embodies will continue to influence the lives of the Mexican people and thus their perception of this folk saint. This is exactly the problem Santa Muertistas in Mexico face today.



## ii. Beliefs, Rituals and Practices

Licit and illicit Santa Muertistas have one thing in common: they “engage in ritual acts designed to elicit miraculous intervention on the part” of *Santa Muerte*, Chesnut argues in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint* (51). What the miracle is they are asking for depends on the devotee. Furthermore, Chesnut argues in his book that *Santa Muerte* lacks a “formal cult doctrine and organization” (Chesnut 80), meaning that devotees themselves can choose in what way(s) to communicate with this folk saint. Nevertheless, all her devotees have certain beliefs and practices in common that are important to be highlighted for the continuation of this thesis, as they not only illustrate her multifaceted character, but also exemplify folk Catholic rituals and practices, which are going to be discussed in-depth in chapter three of this thesis.

Foremost, Santa Muertistas believe *Santa Muerte* considers herself to be the same as any other Mexican saint (Holman 7). Accordingly, this assumption shines through in *Santa Muerte* rituals and practices. For example, *Santa Muerte* is considered to be an “archangel (of death) who [...] only takes orders from God himself” (Chesnut 60). She is believed to come to Earth to take dying souls and bring them to another place away from Earth (Holman 1). Consequently, the vow one makes to request something from *Santa Muerte* is binding; it is a “contract with death” (Chesnut 63). Therefore, devotees believe she is a cruel punisher to those who break their vow made to her. For these reasons, devotees strictly perform certain rituals to please their beloved saint when requesting a miracle (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 166).

An altar which displays a statue of *Santa Muerte* is regarded the most important means through which devotees communicate with her (Chesnut 79). Santa Muertistas consistently place tobacco, alcohol (preferably tequila and/or beer), soft drinks, white bread and chocolate on the altars at which they pray to *Santa Muerte*. Chesnut explains this phenomenon in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*, in which he states that “La Santa Muerte is a saint who is familiar to Mexicans as death itself. [...] As godmother and sister, the saint becomes a supernatural family member, approached with the same type of intimacy Mexicans would typically accord their relatives” (54). Therefore, devotees believe they can please *Santa Muerte* with the products they take pleasure in themselves (Chesnut 55).

Furthermore, other offerings can always be found on a *Santa Muerte* altar. Santa Muertistas believe they can request a miracle by lighting a candle. What kind of miracle they are requesting depends on what color candle they light up when praying (Chesnut 187; *La*

*Santa Muerte*). In the *Santa Muerte* religion seven candle colors exist, which all represent another subject: blue for wisdom, insight and concentration, green for justice and law, white for purification, red for love and passion, gold for prosperity and success, purple for healing, and black for total protection and harm (Chesnut 3, 68, 96, 121, 134, 163, 177). These candle colors show that *Santa Muerte* is a “complex multitasker” who focuses on all facets of a person’s life (Lomax 2).

Additionally, ritual protocol demands the jar of the candle used in the candle lighting ritual to display *Santa Muerte* on the glass (Chesnut 70). Therefore, a *Santa Muerte* altar will always display numerous candles with an image of this folk saint shown on the glass of the jar. Furthermore, before lighting the candle a devotee rubs the candle over his or her body to personalize the request asked for (*La Santa Muerte*).

Moreover, different kinds of flowers can be found on the altar, as Mexicans love flowers themselves and want to share that love with their considered supernatural family member. However, the flowers on the altar have to be kept fresh by replacing them when needed. Failure in doing so can cause repercussions from the saint (Chesnut 71). Additionally, fresh water will always be available on the altar, as devotees believe fresh water symbolizes cleanliness, purity and renewal (Chesnut 70-72). Furthermore, this water is also for *Santa Muerte* to drink. Devotees believe *Santa Muerte* is a globetrotter who constantly travels from devotee to devotee. As *Santa Muertistas* believe she gets thirsty from this, they make sure she has enough water to drink when arriving at their altars (Chesnut 72).

Besides above mentioned offerings, the *Santa Muerte* statue on the altar will mostly be accompanied by several other supernatural figurines, which are derived from several religions *Santa Muerte* is syncretized off. For example, devotees use Indian figurines, derived from Cuban Santería, in their rituals, as they consider Indians to be healers (Chesnut 75). As *Santa Muerte* herself is considered to be a powerful healer, other supernatural healers are placed next to her statue to reinforce that power (Chesnut 75, 165). Furthermore, the tobacco offered to *Santa Muerte* is also believed to be useful in the healing ceremonies performed by these Indian figurines. Thus, both the Indian figurines and the tobacco reinforce *Santa Muerte*’s “indigenous identity” and emphasize her syncretized character (Chesnut 75).

Also Buddhist and Hindu entities can be found on or near the altar of *Santa Muerte*. According to Chesnut, “both of these Asian religions have become fairly common in both African-diasporan faiths and witchcraft in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Chesnut 75-76), and thus contribute to *Santa Muerte* her global authority as the saint of death (Chesnut 75-76). Additionally, these Buddhist and Hindu entities symbolize good luck and fortune

(Chesnut 76). Moreover, a leprechaun and an Arab statue can also often be found on a *Santa Muerte* altar (Chesnut 76-77). Both, similar to the Buddha and the Hindu entities, represent success and financial benefits; things most Santa Muertistas desire (Chesnut 76).

Thus, as discussed, all Santa Muertistas have some rituals and practices in common when praying to their beloved saint. Furthermore, all devotees agree on the fact that *Santa Muerte* can be vengeful when not conducting the right rituals in the appropriate way and thus do everything in their power to please her. However, in what way(s) they do this can fairly differ between the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas. As social and political forces continue to change *Santa Muerte*'s syncretized character and the way(s) in which Santa Muertistas perceive her, they only take and use those elements of *Santa Muerte* they see fit to their lives. This can lead to a clash in interpretations of *Santa Muerte*'s meaning, specifically her character. In order to explain this, the reasoning and actions of the illicit Santa Muertistas first need to be discussed.

### iii. Illicit Santa Muertistas

In Mexico, the first time *Santa Muerte* was linked to the violence employed by illicit Santa Muertistas, the Mexican drug cartels, was in 1989. In this year, Mexican police found remains of sixteen ritually sacrificed people on the U.S.-Mexico borderland ranch of drug lord Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo (Chesnut 99; Lomax 3). The human remains were accompanied by a *Santa Muerte* statue. According to the Mexican press, Constanzo and his men had fused Cuban Santería with other traditions (Lomax 3). Subsequently, they stated that Constanzo had believed that the torturing and killing of innocent people would protect his illicit business from law enforcement (Lomax 3). However, at that time, it was not clear yet what the link was between *Santa Muerte* and the ritualistic killings (Chesnut 98).

Yet, since then this topic has generated much interest due to an increasing number of such violent killings<sup>14</sup> in Mexico and the United States. In the article "Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos" Bunker, Campbell and Bunker state that approximately 5500 people have died because of the drug trade in Mexico in 2008 alone (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 146). They have used statistical evidence to estimate that nearly six hundred of these killed that year were "torture-killings" (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 147). Torture-killings can take several forms, such as burning people to death, throwing people into acid vats, beheading people or dismembering other body parts while they are still conscious (Bunker, Campbell,

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<sup>14</sup> Some available reports on the number of beheadings in Mexico have been included in Appendix I to demonstrate the increasing number and nature of such violent acts (i + ii).

and Bunker 148). The number of these kinds of killings has been exceeding ever since (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 146; Chesnut 101).

Mexico, Latin America and International Relations specialist George W. Grayson describes this contemporary phenomenon in his book *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State*:

Today, unremitting violence plagues Mexico – sensationalized by decapitations, torture, castrations, kidnappings, plunging victims in vats of acid, and burning them alive carried out by drug-cartel hit men and run-of-the-mill thugs. These heinous acts are driven by money, revenge, ransom, extortion, access to drugs, turf battles, propaganda, and the cartels' determination to spark fear in rivals, the police, the military, and the population. (5)

Due to the increasing number and violent nature of these kinds of killings, some, however still little, research has been conducted on the reasoning behind such violent killings. The few scholars focusing on this topic, namely Chesnut, Bunker, Campbell and Bunker, argue that *Santa Muerte*<sup>15</sup> plays a pivotal role in this (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 146; Chesnut 101).

Before delving into this, however, it first needs to be explained why people join a Mexican drug cartel in the first place, and when *Santa Muerte* came into the picture of these illicit organizations. Journalist Josh Whittington explains this in his news article “The Battle For a Nation’s Soul,” and argues that *Santa Muerte*’s popularity started to rise in the 1990s; the period in which Mexico’s economy faltered (5). In this article Whittington states: “Typically poor, uneducated and superstitious members of a struggling population looking for answers were drawn inexorably to the deathly folk saint who could grant miracles without judgment” (Whittington 5). Thus, it is in this period *Santa Muerte* made a name for herself.

Economic scholars Chiara Binelli and Orazio Attanasio of the University of Southampton and University College London expand on this and explain the consequences of the 1995 financial crisis in Mexico on the general Mexican population in their article “Mexico in the 1990s: The Main Cross-Sectional Facts.” They argue that this crisis led to high unemployment rates and an increasing poverty level (Binelli and Attanasio 238). Consequently, unemployed Mexicans started seeking other ways to support themselves and their families financially. Some of the unemployed joined illicit organizations, such as the Mexican drug cartels. These organizations were more than welcoming towards them, and

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<sup>15</sup> An available report demonstrating the nature of a number of illicit incidences in Mexico linked to *Santa Muerte* has been included in Appendix I (iii). Furthermore, Robert J. Bunker’s list of examples of illicit incidences and violent acts in Mexico linked to *Santa Muerte* is included in the same appendix (iv).

furthermore could offer these people money, hope and the feeling of belonging in return for their loyalty (Whittington 5).

However, joining such an illicit organization could cause a burden on someone's moral consciousness, needing psychological support to deal with the sense of guilt and fear that derives from the violent and illicit activities Mexican drug cartels participate in. E. Bryant Holman, author on *Santa Muerte*, elaborates on this in his book *The Santísima Muerte: A Mexican Folk Saint*, and states:

Mexicans and Mexican Americans [...] seek to define their identity in terms that reflect the political realities in which they find themselves. What has emerged is essentially a worldview which seeks symbols in order to sum up these realities and bind those without a firm identity and a feeling of being left out of the mainstream into a sense of community. (3)

In the case of the illicit, this sense of community is called narcocultura, and is defined as:

The production of symbols, rituals, artifacts – slang, religious cults music, consumer goods – that allow people involved in the drug trade to recognize themselves as part of a community, to establish a hierarchy in which the acts they are required to perform acquire positive value and to absorb the terror inherent in their line of work. (Bunker and Sullivan 748)

*Santa Muerte* is one of those symbols embedded in narcocultura. As Mexican cartel members felt and still feel that the traditional faith could not and cannot satisfy their needs, they have taken their faith one step further and created their own unsanctioned saint “to address needs found lacking a proponent within mainstream traditions” (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 161; Whittington 5-6). Muñoz explains this in his publication “Santa Muerte Syncretism”:

It is a spiritual void for individuals alienated from the dominant society and its discredited religious norms. In their planning to commit acts considered morally wrong, in order to get ahead or simply survive, these disenfranchised individuals cannot pray to the Virgin Mary, or to Jesus Christ, or any of the Christian saints for success. (5)

In contrast, *Santa Muerte* is believed to be amoral, and therefore is believed to serve the psychological needs of the Mexican drug cartel members who commit immorally wrong acts (Muñoz 5).

This ties in with another reason why Mexican drug cartel members have recently started to worship *Santa Muerte*. In the criminal conversion by the *¿Plata O Plomo?* (“take our silver or we fill you with our lead”) cartel technique (Bunker and Bunker 1), one can either choose to embrace the criminal path taken and receive the money that comes with it or be killed. Consequently, these people, when accepting the criminal life, “compromise their values” (Bunker and Bunker 2), while saving their own lives. As highly acclaimed scholars in the field of *Santa Muerte* Pamela and Robert Bunker state in their article “The Spiritual Significance of *¿Plata O Plomo?*”: “No moral salvation exists for those who cross the line and accept the silver of the narcos” (2). Therefore, they turn to *Santa Muerte* for help.

Thus, recently *Santa Muerte* has gained awareness and popularity as a narco saint<sup>16</sup>; a saint for the drug dealers and traffickers. Chesnut states the following about this in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*:

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. (98)

As these narcos believe *Santa Muerte* can be jealous and vengeful when not conducting the right rituals or sacrifices to please her, they have started to use more extreme forms of violence, such as beheadings and/or decapitations, in her name (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 163, 172; Whittington 1).

In this manner, one can argue that, when looking at the illicit *Santa Muertistas*, *Santa Muerte* can be seen as “an explosive mixture of religion and criminal activity... [wherein] religious elements are used by criminals as a way of seeking divine or supernatural protection that will intercede with God on their behalf, and thereby expiate their sins” (qtd. in Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 171). Therefore, these occurrences of extreme violence by the Mexican drug cartels have been tied by several scholars from different disciplines to their group’s belief system “performed in ritual fashion to fulfill religious or spiritual demands” of *Santa Muerte* (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 145-147). It could therefore be argued that *Santa*

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<sup>16</sup> The definition of “narcotic” by the *Longman Advanced American Dictionary*: “Relating to illegal drugs” (Pierson).

*Muerte* gradually starts to become the overarching religious movement that unites cartel members, gives them a sense of meaning and justification for their acts (Bunker and Bunker 2).

#### iv. Clash in Perspectives

However, licit Santa Muertistas do not believe in the violent ritualistic killings performed by the illicit Santa Muertistas to please *Santa Muerte*, which results in a clash in perspectives over *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance between both groups. This debate over *Santa Muerte*'s character can be studied as a site of encounter.

The difference in interpretation can be found in the way both groups interpret *Santa Muerte*'s vengeful character. To licit Santa Muertistas, *Santa Muerte* is a "compassionate and good-hearted saint who does not traffic in vengeance" (Chesnut 64), as can be seen in the variety of subjects she deals with (Lomax 2). However, they agree on the fact that she can punish you when breaking the vow made to her, but those punishments are not as severe as the illicit adherents consider them to be (Chesnut 63). On the contrary, the illicit Mexican drug cartel adherents of *Santa Muerte* believe in an extremely vengeful and non-Christian *Santa Muerte* (Chesnut 96). Consequently, they have intertwined that perception of *Santa Muerte*'s character with their "groups belief system" (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 145); they have started to employ more extreme forms of violence, such as decapitations, in "ritual fashion to fulfill religious or spiritual demands" of her (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 145, 172). An example that can be given to illustrate this is the black-colored candle. Illicit Santa Muertistas pray with this color candle to *Santa Muerte*, because they want to focus on harming their enemies, whereas licit Santa Muertistas mainly pray with the black candle to *Santa Muerte* for protection from violence (Chesnut 118).

Furthermore, according to Bunker and Bunker, the relationship between the violent killings performed by Mexican drug cartel members and *Santa Muerte* can be found in the historic syncretisation process of this folk saint: "The subsequent melding of Indian and Spanish bloodlines, the overlay of Catholicism upon indigenous religious beliefs, and the passage of centuries of time in Mexico has resulted in a far more benign perspective on and relationship to death – one that is culturally unique" (Bunker and Bunker 163). As Mexican drug cartel members cannot turn to the Catholic Church with their illicit practices, they turn to the folk saint that, in their eyes, represents that part of their business they need help for; protecting themselves and harming their enemies. In the process, they only use *Santa*

*Muerte*'s amoral character and change the remaining part of her meaning in such a way that it suits their needs (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 163) .

As the licit Santa Muertistas do not need to address this amoral part of *Santa Muerte*'s character, they do not believe and do not take part in the violent ritualistic killings the Mexican drug cartel members conduct in her name. *Santa Muerte* can thus be considered a religious process, which syncretized components complement the belief of Santa Muertistas in different ways. Following this train of thought, a clash in perspectives over *Santa Muerte*'s meaning between both groups is taking place today in Mexico. This clash can therefore be seen as a site of encounter in which both the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas meet, clash and debate with each other over the different interpretations of *Santa Muerte*'s character and the rituals and practices that come with it. Moreover, it can be argued that this conflict will persist, due to the social, historical and political forces that *Santa Muerte* embodies. As those larger social and political forces in Mexico will continue to change and influence the lives of the Mexican people and thus their perception of this folk saint, this conflict over her meaning and significance will not cease soon.

Now it is established that *Santa Muerte* can be considered a site of encounter between the licit and illicit, we can move on to discuss a second way in which she can be studied as a site of encounter; a site of encounter between the "licit"<sup>17</sup> Catholic religion, according to the officially established Catholic Church and the Mexican government, and the mostly "illicit" religions and practices of which *Santa Muerte* is syncretized. The following chapter aims to explain this.

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<sup>17</sup> The words licit and illicit are in between quotation marks here to emphasize the vision of the Catholic Church and the Mexican government. They consider the Catholic Church to be licit and *Santa Muerte* to be illicit, whereas other opinions diverge from this standpoint.



## Chapter III

### Spiritual Conflict

Religion is “lived and played out daily” in Mexico (Zavaleta 665), Antonio Noë Zavaleta, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Brownsville University, states in his article “La Santísima Muerte.” As approximately eighty-one percent of the population is Catholic, this is especially the case for Catholicism (Donoso, par. 3; Grayson 17). However, in present-day Mexico, “the monopoly of the [...] Catholic Church has become lost” (Chiang 2164), meaning that Mexico is facing an increase in diverse religious groups (Chiang 2164). Consequently, the number of people believing in a so-called informal religion, a religion that is not institutionalized, is growing (Chesnut 4, 6). According to the Catholic Church, *Santa Muerte* proves to be one of those informal, and therefore illicit, religions (Chesnut 44; Michalik, par. 17).

In order to combat this illicit religion, the Catholic Church fights hard to regain and secure its control in Mexico, by downplaying the significance of the, in their eyes, illicit “cult”<sup>18</sup> of *Santa Muerte*, and to put this religious movement in a bad light (Guillermoprieto, par. 9; Whittington 6). Therefore, one can argue that *Santa Muerte* can be seen as a site of encounter between the heterodox<sup>19</sup> and the orthodox<sup>20</sup>. Both the licit and illicit devotees of *Santa Muerte* and the officially established Catholic Church in Mexico meet, clash, and debate with each other over the meaning and significance of this folk saint.

In pursuance of expounding this, it first needs to be explained how this conflict unfolded. Therefore, the following part will focus on the unstable position of the Catholic Church in Mexico.

#### i. Secularization

Over the last two decades, the Catholic Church has been facing difficulties in preserving its religious monopoly in Mexico, even though the majority of the population still consider themselves to be Catholic (Chiang 2163-2164; Donoso, par. 3; Grayson 17).

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<sup>18</sup> The word cult is in between quotation marks here, because of the fact that the academic world is in debate whether or not *Santa Muerte* can be regarded a cult movement. This is going to be discussed in the following part of this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> The definition of “heterodox” by the *Longman Advanced American Dictionary*: “(Of beliefs, practices etc.) against accepted opinion, especially in religion” (Pierson).

<sup>20</sup> The definition of “orthodox” by the *Longman Advanced American Dictionary*: “Holding accepted (especially religious) opinions” (Pierson).

According to Rubi III in his Master's thesis "Santa Muerte: A Transnational Spiritual Movement of the Marginalized," "intensifying religious competition and an advancing tide of secularism have eroded the political influence and religious and cultural hegemony of the Catholic Church in increasingly pluralist democracies" (8). The Catholic Church is thus facing competition from, among others, "Protestant churches, the sects, the non-Christian groups and the new religious movements" (Chiang 2164), one of which is *Santa Muerte* (*La Santa Muerte*).

According to acclaimed sociologist Peter L. Berger in the article "Secularization in Mexico City as a Constant, Current Paradigm," secularization is "the process by means of which sectors of the society and of the culture are removed from the authority of the religious institutions and symbols" (qtd. in Chiang 2165). Three important factors are key in this process: "(1) social differentiation, (2) socialization, (3) and rationalization" (Chiang 2166). Social differentiation is the way in which institutions develop itself and activities spontaneously emerge independently in a modern society, and consequently differentiate from each other (Chiang 2166). As a consequence, people will continuously (try to) adapt to this changing society. This adaptation process is called socialization (Chiang 2166). The result of these two processes ensures "the decline of a moral and religious system, the privatization of the religion and its push towards the margins and interstices of the social order" (Chiang 2166), as a religious monopoly of the Catholic Church is not needed anymore, and cannot survive in this modern and continuously changing society. Consequently, the ways in which people understand and perceive the world in such societies changes. This process is called rationalization (Chiang 2166).

This is precisely what is happening in Mexico today. Santa Muertistas turn to a non-consecrated saint for help, and depart from the established Catholic Church, as they feel the Catholic Church cannot and/or will not support them (Chiang 2171; Whittington 6). As these Santa Muertistas perceive the world differently than two decades ago when the Catholic Church still had a religious monopoly in Mexico, they have started looking for other religions that can and will serve their (changed) needs; one of those religions being *Santa Muerte*.

Since the past decade, the Catholic Church has publicly been downplaying the significance of *Santa Muerte*, and has put this folk saint in a bad light in order to regain their monopoly in Mexico (*La Santa Muerte*; Whittington 6). However, this is not only a recent phenomenon. This conflict between the heterodox Santa Muertistas and the orthodox Catholic Church over *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance has already been taken place surreptitiously since the eighteenth-century.

## ii. History of the *Santa Muerte* Cult

For centuries, the Catholic Church has pushed devotion to *Santa Muerte* underground. In the 1790s, the first specific references to *Santa Muerte* appear in records from the Spanish colonizers (Chesnut 31). In a document titled “Concerning the Superstitions of Various Indians from the Town of San Luis de la Paz,” dated 1797, she is mentioned for the first time (Chesnut 31). This document describes an Inquisition encounter with an Indian ritualistic performance of Chichimec people living in Mexico at that time, 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. (qtd. in Chesnut 31)

Thereupon, the Inquisition destroyed the chapel in which this superstitious, and thus considered illicit, ritual was performed (Chesnut 31).

In that same time period, the Inquisition records cite another case of Indians worshipping death (Chesnut 32). For example, in 1793 a Franciscan priest accused a group of Indians of such an act. His statement is as follows: “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’” (qtd. in Chesnut 32). This Just Judge would be a fusion between Christ and the Grim Reaper. As the Inquisition considered worshipping death to be satanic, this devotion was also persecuted by the Catholic Church, similar to the case in San Luis de la Paz (Chesnut 32).

Consequently, due to this intense persecution by the Catholic Church, *Santa Muerte* then disappears from historical records (Chesnut 33). Chesnut explains the consequences of this persecution in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*:

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. (37)

However, in 2002 this changes when two individuals gradually start trying to turn the furtive devotion of *Santa Muerte* into a public cult (Chesnut 37).

A cult can be defined as a “small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a somewhat charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture” (Richardson 349). Furthermore, a cult poses a threat to “themselves or others under the direct control of their leaders” (Rubi III 8). The general consensus of scholars researching *Santa Muerte* is that it is a cult movement (Freese, par. 4). However, according to religious studies scholars Douglas Cowan and David Bromley, authors of the article “The Term Cult is Misused for New Religious Movements,” and Rubi III, these scholars thereby ignore the licit Santa Muertistas who have no intention in being regarded as dangerous:

While a relative few may know someone who has joined a group colloquially regarded as a ‘cult,’ in reality most people get the majority of their information about new or controversial religions through the media. And, though there are occasional exceptions, ‘cult’ has become little more than a convenient, if largely inaccurate and always pejorative shorthand for a religious group that must be presented as odd or dangerous for the purposes of an emerging news story. (qtd. in Rubi III 8)

Therefore, Rubi III argues in his Master’s thesis that *Santa Muerte* cannot be considered a cult, but rather a folk religion (Rubi III 9). As of yet, the debate about this is unresolved.

Whether or not *Santa Muerte* can be considered a cult movement, it can be explained how this religion gained the public attention it receives today. In the 1990s, today’s spokesperson and defender of this religious group Padre David Romo established the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church. At that time, Romo was not a *Santa Muerte* devotee, but due to an increasing number of Santa Muertistas attending his church services, his interest in this folk saint was sparked (Chesnut 42-43). Romo started researching *Santa Muerte* in order to determine if the Christian faith permitted devotion to this folk saint (Chesnut 43).

In 2002, this religious folk saint gained public attention when another devotee, Mexican Santa Muertista Enriqueta Romero, decided to create a sacred room on the street Alfarería in the notorious Mexico City barrio Tepito. In this sacred room she placed an enormous statue of *Santa Muerte* which people could worship. She opened this place of

worship after her son Marcos had been released from prison before his due date, after having prayed to this saint (*La Santa Muerte*). This sacred space became the first public shrine of *Santa Muerte*, and can, according to Chesnut, be considered today's "most renowned Santa Muerte shrine in the world" (Chesnut 37-41).

Whereas Romero leads an informal worship center from her home, Romo has tried to institutionalize the *Santa Muerte* religion. In the same year Romero opened her *Santa Muerte* shrine, Romo filed a request to register his Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church as an official, thus licit, church (Chesnut 43). His request was granted by then Mexican President Vicente Fox of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party) in 2003. Consequently, "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" (Chesnut 43), such as raising money and owning property in Mexico (Associated Press "Mexico Arrests Saint Death Cult Leader," par. 15). However, this would not last for long.

After his study on *Santa Muerte* in Christian theology was completed, Romo decided that the Christian faith indeed allowed *Santa Muerte* worshipping. Ergo, he started incorporating *Santa Muerte* rituals and practices in his church services, and thus institutionalized the *Santa Muerte* religion (Chesnut 43). However, this led to resistance from the Catholic Church. For example, in a press conference in 2004 archbishop José Guadalupe Martín Rábago not only depicted *Santa Muerte* as a satanic religious group, but furthermore refuted the licit status of the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church that was granted to them by the Mexican government ("Registra Segob Sectas Satánicas"):

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 sects, and they are psychologically disturbed and disoriented. The damage done to them is very severe. (qtd. in Chesnut 44)

Subsequently, one of Romo's own priests accused the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church of violating the law by introducing *Santa Muerte* rituals and practices in the church services. Consequently, the Fox administration revoked the church's licit status in 2005 (Chesnut 43). Apparently, according to Chesnut, "Mexican law does not call for sanctions, much less revocation of legal status, for religious groups that change or modify

their beliefs and rituals” (Chesnut 43). As Romo had not mentioned *Santa Muerte* in his application to register his church, he was not allowed to introduce this folk saint in his church practices after having received legal status.

Ironically, Romo blamed the Catholic Church for the revocation. Romo reasoned that the then ruling *Partido Acción Nacional* had always been conservative and in favor of the Catholic Church, as both institutions share a similar social agenda (Chesnut 113). As the Catholic Church condemned *Santa Muerte*, the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church was also considered illicit by the then ruling *Partido Acción Nacional* (Chesnut 43-44).

### iii. A Clash in Interpretations; The Orthodox Versus the Heterodox

Since the revocation of the Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church’s licit status in 2005, a public debate between the orthodox Catholic Church, with the support of the *Partido Acción Nacional*, and the heterodox Santa Muertistas, in specific Romo and Romero, arose over *Santa Muerte*’s meaning and significance. In turn, both groups have used this debate to assert certain (political) actions.

For example, in March 2005 Romo decided to organize a protest march through Mexico City, in which he and five hundred other *Santa Muerte* devotees chanted pro-*Santa Muerte* slogans, while carrying around *Santa Muerte* statues (Chesnut 44-45). During this protest march, Romo stated the following: “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” (qtd. in Chesnut 45). This event can be regarded as the first public event in which Romo used *Santa Muerte* as a counterpart of the Catholic Church. He organized this protest march to win public sentiment and to pressure the Mexican government to legalize Romo’s church and the *Santa Muerte* religion in general.

Since then, the public debate between the Catholic Church, the *Partido Acción Nacional*, and the Santa Muertistas has only intensified. In the prize-winning<sup>21</sup> documentary *La Santa Muerte* (in English: “Saint Death”) by Mexican filmmaker Eva Aridjis, a Mexican priest named Sergio Román explains why exactly the Catholic Church considers *Santa Muerte* to be illicit. In this documentary he states the following:

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

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<sup>21</sup> This documentary won the “best documentary award” at the Trieste Film Festival in Italy (*La Santa Muerte*).

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 of Christ, 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 worshipping Satan. (qtd. in *La Santa Muerte*)

Thus, according to the Catholic Church, devoting a representation of death is an illicit act.

In that same documentary Romero responds to this accusation by stating:

I say that, unless I'm ignorant, there's only one Death and only one God. And the Death that is going to take me is going to take everyone. And the God that people believe in regardless of what you call him, is the same God that I pray to. So I pray to the same God as the Church. So it's the same thing. And when those people are finished on this earth... Well I would like to know: who's going to take them away? (qtd. in *La Santa Muerte*)

This quote clearly demonstrates that Romero refutes Román's opinion by setting out the ironic opinion about death the Catholic Church upholds.

Also anthropologist Piotr Grzegorz Michalik, author of the article "Death With a Bonus Pack: New Age Spirituality, Folk Catholicism, and the Cult of Santa Muerte," disagrees with Román, and argues that "perceiving Santa Muerte primarily as a personification of death is not consistent with the point of view expressed by the devotees themselves" (par. 64). They rather perceive her as an efficient saint who grants devotees' requests, he argues (Michalik, par. 64). It can be argued then that the Catholic Church in Mexico is rather ignorant of *Santa Muerte*'s multifaceted character.

However, not only the Catholic Church, but also the *Partido Acción Nacional* is ignorant of *Santa Muerte*, as they also consider her to be an illicit religious movement. This opinion shines through in Mexican policy in the period that Felipe Calderón, the successor of Fox and also a member of the *Partido Acción Nacional*, was President of Mexico. In December 2006 he took office, and immediately made it clear that his first concern was waging a war against the drug cartels, as he considered them to be the main cause of "death and destruction" in Mexico (Chesnut 193). Additionally, Calderón also started waging a war against *Santa Muerte*, as this folk saint plays a crucial role in this war.

The Mexican government under Calderón considered *Santa Muerte* to be the patroness and saint of the drug cartel members who ask her for illicit deeds. Furthermore, certain

prominent drug lords have identified themselves as Santa Muertistas. Consequently, Calderón had listed her as “religious enemy number one” in his war against the Mexican drug cartels (Chesnut 194). For example, in March 2009 he ordered his administration to bulldoze numerous *Santa Muerte* shrines on the roadside of Nuevo Laredo and Tijuana near the U.S.-Mexico border (Chesnut 4, 45). In doing so, the Calderón administration “did a big favor to the Catholic Church by eliminating in one fell swoop tens of competing sacred sites” (Chesnut 114), and affirmed a close relationship and alliance with the Catholic Church, Chesnut argues in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*.

Additionally, another reason can be given why Calderón was waging war against *Santa Muerte*. In Romo’s public acts, such as the 2005 protest march, he strongly expressed anti-*Partido Acción Nacional* and anti-Catholic sentiments. Furthermore, as public spokesperson of *Santa Muerte*, he has turned her media image in a representation of exactly those thoughts; an anti-Catholic and anti-*Partido Acción Nacional* saint (Chesnut 114; *La Santa Muerte*). Instead, he aims to position *Santa Muerte* as pro-*Partido Democrático Revolucionario* (Party of the Democratic Revolution), which is the left-wing and opposing party of the *Partido Acción Nacional* in Mexico (Chesnut 115).

At a press conference in July 2009, for example, Romo tried to convince Santa Muertistas to vote against the *Partido Acción Nacional* in the congressional elections, as this party is in favor of the Catholic Church and thus unquestionably against the illicit *Santa Muerte* religion. Furthermore, out of provocation, Romo has begun to perform same-sex weddings at his Traditional Holy Catholic Apostolic Church in 2010. This is discrepant with the Catholic Church’s conservative ideas of opposing this kind of marriage (Chesnut 113-114). As the *Partido Acción Nacional* is conservative and has adjusted its social agenda to that of the Catholic Church, disapproving such an act by opposing Romo’s church, was the only right thing to do according to Calderón.

Consequently, in January 2011 Romo was arrested in Mexico City on kidnapping and money laundering charges (Daily Mail Reporter, par. 1; Wilkinson, par. 1). In June 2012 he was sentenced to prison, in which he not only has to serve sixty-six years, but also has to pay an enormous fine of 666 times the average wage in Mexico (Bolaños, par. 1). It is noteworthy to mention that this enormous fine also indirectly expresses the *Partido Acción Nacional*’s sentiments towards the *Santa Muerte* religion and its self-proclaimed leader, as 666 is the number of the devil (Wang 201).

Subsequently, Santa Muertistas accused the prosecutors of siding with the Mexican government and the Catholic Church. They argue that the Mexican government has no



evidence against Romo. Instead, they only want to downplay the significance of *Santa Muerte*, by locking up their self-proclaimed leader (Chesnut 188; Wilkinson, pars. 7, 15). Nevertheless, Romo remains incarcerated, and the truth has not been uncovered today.

This constant public and media-covered clash between Romero and Romo on one side and both the *Partido Acción Nacional* and the Catholic Church on the other side has ensured *Santa Muerte* to gain the attention she receives today in Mexico (Chesnut 46). However, how this debate will continue is, as of yet, somewhat unclear.

Since current Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December 2012, the debate surrounding *Santa Muerte* has silenced to some extent. However, that does not mean that the Catholic Church has won the fight regarding the meaning and significance of this folk saint. Nieto is a member of the left-wing *Partido Democrático Revolucionario*, which opposes the Catholic Church and the *Partido Acción Nacional* (Corcoran, par. 9). Not being in line with the Catholic Church means that the Catholic Church has less influence on current Mexican policy making. Furthermore, no official statement regarding Nieto's position towards *Santa Muerte* has been issued to the media so far. Consequently, the question emerges to what extent Nieto is concerned about *Santa Muerte*, her position in the drug war, and the drug war in general.

In an interview with the Associated Press in December 2012 Nieto stated he was going to continue Calderón's fight against the production and trafficking of narcotics (Corcoran, par. 3). According to journalist Katherine Corcoran, author of the news article "Mexico Drug War: President Enrique Peña Nieto Vows to Continue Fight," Nieto said "he is committed to putting up a united front against organized crime, pushing for better coordination among local, state and federal police forces and completing the overhaul of Mexico's broken and corrupt justice system" (par. 6). In an interview with Bloomberg News Editor-in-Chief John Micklethwait in June 2015 Nieto explains how he is going to accomplish this. As of January 2016, a national police code is implemented, meaning the whole of Mexico follows the same criminal procedure. Furthermore, Nieto wants transparency on all layers of Mexican government to fight corruption. In order to do this, he wants to open up a public dialogue and debate to come up with a new strategy to implement this (Nieto). Thus, looking at Nieto's current policy making regarding the drug war, he is highly concerned with this topic. However, *Santa Muerte* does not seem to catch his interest so far.

Nevertheless, the Catholic Church continues to soldier on in the fight against the, in their eyes, illicit cult of *Santa Muerte*. On May 8, 2013, the Catholic Church gave its first official statement against *Santa Muerte*, when Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the

Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture, stated the following at an interfaith dialogue in Mexico City: "It's not religion just because it's dressed up like religion; it's a blasphemy against religion" (Associated Press "Vatican Calls Santa Muerte," par. 1; Guillermprieto, par. 9). However, this does not seem to have the desired effect.

As a result of Romero's and Romo's efforts to gain awareness for *Santa Muerte*'s multifaceted character and to institutionalize this religious movement, and a change in ruling parties in Mexico in 2012, among other reasons, the Catholic Church in Mexico is losing myriad devotees in a short period of time (Chesnut 115). Sociologist Armando García Chiang of the *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana* in Mexico City explains this phenomenon in his article "Secularization in Mexico City as a Constant, Current Paradigm":

The economic, political, religious or scientific mutations that can lead, inside every field, not only to internal tensions but to serious dissonances, do not exist among the internal mutations of the religious. In this way religion can, in interaction with other fields, modify or restrict its social pretensions, or in certain cases is even able to provoke a loss of its own social influence. (2167)

Thus, the Catholic Church is losing its influence in Mexico, whereas *Santa Muerte* is gaining more devotees every day (*La Santa Muerte*). Therefore, it can be argued that if the Catholic Church continues this fight, it is more likely to lose in the end.

#### iv. The Catholic Religion and *Santa Muerte*

It is astonishing and ironic that the Catholic Church has been persecuting devotion to *Santa Muerte* for more than four centuries now, as this syncretized folk saint has much similarities with the Catholic religion. Michalik argues in his article "Death With a Bonus Pack: New Age Spirituality, Folk Catholicism, and the Cult of Santa Muerte," that *Santa Muerte* "consists of a set of highly syncretic beliefs and practices labeled as Catholic, but shaped by influences of local indigenous culture or eclectic spiritual current from colonial and postcolonial times" (par. 14). Therefore, Michalik argues that *Santa Muerte* appertains to Mexican folk Catholicism (Michalik par. 14). Accordingly, one would expect the Catholic Church to accept *Santa Muerte* as an addition to the Catholic religion.

Noteworthy, numerous Santa Muertistas already consider *Santa Muerte* to complement their Catholic faith, or even consider this folk saint to be part of Catholicism

(Chesnut 115; Michalik, par. 23; Paulas, par. 10). Chesnut explains this in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*:

Most prayers offered to Santa Muerte [...] 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. (80)

Some examples of this Catholic repertoire can be given to illustrate Chesnut's statement.

*Santa Muerte* statues often wear embellished jewelry, such as silver rosaries, which refer to her power of giving Santa Muertistas prosperity and success (Chesnut 66, 134). Additionally, they evoke her "folk Catholic identity" (Chesnut 66), as praying the rosary is a tradition taken from Catholicism and incorporated in the worshipping of *Santa Muerte*, similar as praying to a statue or shrine (Chesnut 180, 192).

Also the seven color candles that Santa Muertistas use in the worshipping of *Santa Muerte* is used in a traditional Catholic manner; similar to Catholics, Santa Muertistas offer candles as "symbols of vows or prayers made to particular saints" (Chesnut 70). This is similar to *votos*, which are also taken from Catholicism. These "offerings related to vow or promises made to a saint" consist of tokens of appreciation for the help received from a saint (Chesnut 79), and are highly important in the *Santa Muerte* religion.

Furthermore, as the importance of flowers on a *Santa Muerte* altar has been discussed in the previous chapter, it is interesting to note that the *rosa blanca*, the white rose, is often found on a *Santa Muerte* altar. This flower is an important symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe; the Catholic and licit counterpart of *Santa Muerte* (Chesnut 71). This then again demonstrates the Catholic tradition Santa Muertistas employ in their own rituals.

Thus, as demonstrated, the *Santa Muerte* religion has much in common with Catholicism (Chesnut 192). However, as Chesnut notices in his book: "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" (Chesnut 193). Some examples can be given to illustrate this.

First of all, the illicit Santa Muertistas believe in an anti-Christian saint, who grants sinful and illicit requests, which would never be acknowledged by a consecrated saint.

Presumably, the content of such a request sent to *Santa Muerte* differs between Catholics and illicit Santa Muertistas, as Catholics are not likely to ask canonized saints to harm people, whereas the illicit Santa Muertistas use the black-colored candle to request exactly such an act (Chesnut 180). Furthermore, the folk Catholic rituals and practices that Santa Muertistas engage in differ from the orthodox Catholic ones, as the folk Catholic rituals focus on less-likely, and therefore almost impossible requests; miracles (Michalik, par. 14).

Moreover, according to historian, anthropologist, and author of the book *La Santa Muerte, Protectora de los Hombres* Katia Perdigón Castañeda, it has to be noted that fanatic Santa Muertistas, in comparison to devotees of other folk saints, more often express a strong disinclination of Catholicism (Michalik, par. 21). This is especially the case for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender devotees of *Santa Muerte*. As the Catholic Church forbids being or conducting in lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender practices, these people feel they are outcasts of society. In turn, they thus ask an unconsecrated saint for help and protection from hatred (Michalik, par. 23; Paulas, par. 14).

Thus, even though the *Santa Muerte* religion and Catholicism partially share a religious repertoire, *Santa Muerte* still strongly diverges from the Catholic faith. Therefore, today the orthodox Catholic Church is downplaying the significance of the, in their eyes, illicit cult of *Santa Muerte*, and is putting them in a poor light, in order to defend the Catholic faith and to regain its religious monopoly in Mexico (Whittington 6). Consequently, a religious debate is now taking place between the heterodox Santa Muertistas and the orthodox Catholic Church, which, until December 2012, had the support of the ruling conservative and pro-church *Partido Acción Nacional*, over *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance.

## v. Religious Debate

It can be argued that the public debate between the, by the Catholic Church considered, illicit cult of *Santa Muerte* and the officially established Catholic Church and the *Partido Acción Nacional* can be seen as a site of encounter, in which these groups and institutions meet, clash, and debate with each other in Mexican society and the media over the meaning and significance of this folk saint. Moreover, this clash can be regarded an example of how social and political forces shape the perception of *Santa Muerte*.

On the one hand, the *Santa Muerte* devotees consider *Santa Muerte* to be an honest folk saint who grants favors to her faithful devotees. On the other hand, however, the orthodox Catholic Church as well as the *Partido Acción Nacional* consider *Santa Muerte* to

be an illegal and satanic religion; a representation of death that plays a crucial role in the drug war as a narco saint has no place in Mexican society.

In this debate *Santa Muerte* is also used as a political tool, with which both the orthodox and the heterodox side express their opinions and assert certain actions on the social agenda. For the heterodox Santa Muertistas, *Santa Muerte* represents equality and thus has been positioned by Romo as a pro-left-wing *Partido Democratic Revolucionario* saint, in opposition to the conservative and pro-Catholic Church *Partido Acción Nacional*. In response, the orthodox Catholic Church and the *Partido Acción Nacional* have declared *Santa Muerte* as a religious enemy for contradicting their social agenda, which therefore does not deserve a licit status in the religious assortment of Mexico. However, now that left-wing *Partido Democratic Revolucionario* member Nieto is President of Mexico, and has not openly expressed an opinion regarding *Santa Muerte*, the debate about *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance might change and silence somewhat. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church seems to soldier on in the fight against *Santa Muerte*.

Now that it has been explained that the public debate around *Santa Muerte* can be considered a site of encounter between the licit Catholic religion, according to the officially established Catholic Church and the *Partido Acción Nacional*, and the mostly illicit religions and practices of which *Santa Muerte* is syncretized and what she represents, we can move on to discuss the third and final way in which *Santa Muerte* can be considered a site of encounter.

The following chapter aims to set out the different perspectives that exist on *Santa Muerte* in the U.S.-Mexico border region and in certain regions of the United States. Additionally, this chapter will elaborate on the clash that results from these different perspectives in both the U.S.-Mexico border region and the United States. In turn, this chapter aims to explain how this information adds to our understanding of *Santa Muerte*.

## Chapter IV

### Transcending Borders

“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,” Chesnut states in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint* (51). It is clear that this folk saint operates across the U.S.-Mexico border when looking at the various groups of people and institutions, both licit and illicit, that live in either Mexico or the United States and who undergo the consequences of the *Santa Muerte* religion, regardless of whether or not they adhere to this folk saint. For example, not only the Mexican drug cartels and (illicit) immigrants, but also law enforcers, such as prison guards, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and police officers either venerate this folk saint or are influenced by her in the way in which they carry out their work. However, due to the different positions these groups of people and institutions hold in society, their perspectives on *Santa Muerte*’s meaning and significance can differ tremendously. In turn, this tension over perspectives on *Santa Muerte* plays out in both the U.S.-Mexico border region and in different regions of the United States.

This chapter therefore aims to explain the debate over the differences in perspectives between these different groups of people and institutions on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Consecutively, this chapter aims to demonstrate that this debate in itself can be studied as a site of encounter, in which the licit and illicit in both the U.S.-Mexico border region and in different regions of the United States meet, clash, and debate with each other over the meaning and significance of this folk saint. This chapter will therefore place *Santa Muerte* in a transnational context by actually crossing a physical border; the U.S.-Mexico border. In doing so, this chapter finalizes the research presented in this thesis.

#### i. Transnationalism

Accordingly, the definition of transnationalism used in this chapter needs to be clarified. Transnationalism refers to “multiple ties and interactions linking people and institutions across the borders of nation-states” (“Trans-nationalism,” par. 1). *Santa Muerte* is one of such ties, as she can be perceived in both the U.S.-Mexico border region and different regions of the United States. She facilitates, influences and emphasizes (the need of) interaction between both licit and illicit groups of people and institutions within these regions.

In order to explain this, the following questions need to be answered: In what ways does *Santa Muerte* transcend the U.S.-Mexico border? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the different sites in which *Santa Muerte* is present? And how does this information add to our understanding of her?

The following part aims to offer a first answer to these questions. This part will address the first site in which (the need of) interaction between different groups of people and institutions, specifically the Mexican drug cartels and Mexican and American law enforcers, is facilitated, influenced and emphasized by *Santa Muerte*; the U.S.-Mexico border region. The emphasis tends to be on the economic relationship between Mexico and the United States in this region, as this not only tells us how the Mexican drug cartels are able to uphold and strengthen their position in this region, but also shows us one way in which *Santa Muerte* is able to transcend the U.S.-Mexico border into the United States. In turn, this will help us understand the role *Santa Muerte* plays in this region, and the different perspectives on her meaning and significance present in this region.

## ii. The U.S.-Mexico Border Region

In the article “Stretching the Border: Smuggling Practices and the Control of Illegality in South America” Aguiar defines border regions as “border spaces” (4), which are “more or less clearly demarcated territory between national cultures (or national political systems)” (4). The border space surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border is established by the La Paz Agreement<sup>22</sup> of 1983, and is the strip of land a hundred kilometers north and south of the border between both countries (“Border Region,” par. 3). As of 2010, approximately 14.5 million people live in this region (Lee, at all 9). According to Oscar J. Martínez, Professor of History at the University of Arizona and author of the book *Border People – Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, this makes the U.S.-Mexico borderland the only region in the world in which “so many millions of people from two so dissimilar<sup>23</sup> nations live in such close proximity and interact with each other so intensively” (27).

Consequently, this interaction created a strong interdependent and synergistic relationship between Mexico and the United States (Martínez 8-9). Martínez argues in his book *Border People – Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, that, due to this relationship, a specific “borderlands milieu” arose in the U.S.-Mexico border region (10).

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<sup>22</sup> “Agreement between the United States of America and the United Mexican States on cooperation for the protection and improvement of the environment in the border area” (“La Paz Agreement,” par. 2).

<sup>23</sup> The United States and Mexico are culturally, economically, politically, and linguistically different from each other.

This milieu consists of “transnational interaction, international conflict and accommodation, ethnic conflict and accommodation, and separateness” (Martínez 10).

In the U.S.-Mexico border region intense transnational interaction is possible due to the geographic location of this borderland, Martínez argues in his book. The U.S.-Mexico borderland is located a far distance from the core of the country and in close proximity to an adjacent country, creating an international and heterogeneous environment in this region (Martínez 10). For example, looking at the position of the U.S.-Mexico border region, it can be argued that people living in this region are exposed to various products and cultures Mexicans and Americans living outside of the border region are not so easily exposed to. This is possible due to transnational interaction, which is enhanced by the large numbers of Mexicans or people of Mexican descent living in the United States border region, who have maintained close relationships with family and friends in Mexico (Martínez 11). Martínez states the following about this topic in his book:

An open international environment exposes borderlanders to foreign values, ideas, customs, traditions, institutions, tastes, and behavior. Borderlanders find it easy to see how members of other societies make their living, how they cope with daily life, how they acquire an education, and how they exercise their responsibilities as citizens. Consumers are able to purchase foreign products, business people find it possible to expand their clientele beyond the boundary, and employers have access to foreign workers. (Martínez 10)

It can thus be concluded that borderlanders are “active participants in transnational economic and social systems that foster substantial trade, consumerism, tourism, migration, information flow, cultural and educational exchange, and sundry personal relationships” (Martínez 10).

However, transnational interaction cannot always be considered a positive process. In his book Martínez argues that transnational interaction can also lead to tension or conflict between borderlanders. He states: “the greater the differences in race, religion, customs, values, and level of economic development, the more pronounced the intergroup tension” (Martínez 16). What is often perceived in a border region then is the dominant group of people trying to assimilate smaller groups to their culture, which can result in strong resistance from those groups who are determined to preserve their own culture and identity (Martínez 16). Martínez explains this as follows: “Borderlanders with the weakest national loyalty are those with strong links to the population across the border, be it through intermarriage, social relationships, business ties, or property ownership. Such individuals



develop an internationalist vision that clashes with the official stance of core-oriented authorities” (Martínez 19). As is going to be demonstrated, this is the case with the illicit Mexican drug cartels and the Mexican and American law enforcement agencies operating in the U.S.-Mexico border region, whose contact and (need of) interaction is facilitated, influenced and emphasized by *Santa Muerte*. In order to explain this, the location and economic situation in the U.S.-Mexico border region need to be elaborated on, as these factors, besides the heterogeneous composition of the U.S.-Mexico borderland, play a role in this conflict.

The U.S.-Mexico borderland lies between two nations and thus two legal systems, meaning coherent implementation and regulation of law enforcement is difficult if not impossible. Consequently, the U.S.-Mexico border region has become a safe haven for the illicit and their activities (Aguiar 4; Martínez 13).

The U.S.-Mexico border region has a notorious reputation when it comes to illicit activities. Today, smuggling, such as illicit trade and the crossing of illegal immigrants from Mexico to the United States, is ubiquitous in this border region (Martínez 15, 21). Martínez states the following about this topic in his book:

Statutes dictated by the national government that do not interfere with local customs or cross-border symbiotic relationships meet no resistance, but those that do are routinely circumvented or violated. For example, borderlanders find it morally and culturally acceptable to breach trade and immigration regulations that interfere with the “natural order” of cross-border interaction. (Martínez 23)

This attitude is affirmed by their distant position from the core of the country, in which the central government resides. This gives them the feeling they do not have to adhere to national laws (Martínez 23). Some borderlanders are trying to use this crooked situation to make their ends meet or to make a profit. Martínez explains that in his book: “This sense of economic independence emboldens them to ignore or circumvent laws they dislike and to carry on relationships with foreign neighbors that promote their own interests and those of their binational region” (Martínez 24).

In the article “Stretching the Border: Smuggling Practices and the Control of Illegality in South America” Aguiar explains the economic situation that emboldens illicit organizations to participate in criminal ventures in a border region. He argues that the exchange of goods and mobilization of people becomes attractive at a border when the market- and economic

situation between two countries greatly differ from each other (Aguiar 5). These differences generate “border synergy” as Aguilar calls it (Aguiar 5), and is thus “the ratio of the differences or asymmetries between nations that become materialised at the border, causing market opportunities from which actors profit” (Aguiar 5). In the transport of goods and people across the border, agents employ the market- and economic difference between both countries surrounding this border to benefit financially; economic interdependence (Aguiar 5; Martínez 8-9).

Mexico and the United States have an economic interdependent relationship. Especially after Canada, the United States and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a trilateral trade block in North America, in 1994, trade between these countries increased (The United States. Office of the United States Trade Representative). To give an illustration, the United States is the number one trading partner of Mexico, and Mexico is the third largest trading partner of the United States (Eds. Wilson and Lee 62). This economic interdependent relationship can be perceived specifically in the U.S.-Mexico border region, as the four American border states<sup>24</sup> and the six Mexican border states<sup>25</sup> have “close bilateral economic ties” (Eds. Wilson and Lee 63). However, one of such ties is the illicit trade in and law enforcement against prohibited narcotics.

According to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, the United States holds the world’s lead position in consuming narcotics, such as cocaine, marijuana and heroin, which is smuggled from Colombia and Mexico (The United States. Central Intelligence Agency). The United States thus constitutes the world’s largest narcotics market (Chesnut 100). Given Mexico’s ideal geographic location as the southern neighbor of the United States and lies in close proximity to drug producing countries such as Colombia and Bolivia, it transformed itself to the main supplier of narcotics to the United States (Chesnut 100). Consequently, the Mexican drug cartels thrive in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

The North American Free Trade Agreement is another reason why the Mexican drug cartels thrive in the U.S.-Mexico border region, Tony Payan, Director of the Mexico Center at the Baker Institute, argues in his book *The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security*:

The large cartels now ride the formal NAFTA economy. There are nearly 5 million semi-trucks that cross the U.S.-Mexico border every year.... NAFTA is turning out to be a heaven-

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<sup>24</sup> California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

<sup>25</sup> Baja, California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas.

sent blessing to the drug cartel.... Tons of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and now methamphetamines ride hidden in the millions of trucks that cross the border. These same millions of trucks also move the drugs on U.S. highways to the major metropolitan areas throughout the country. (qtd. in Stephen 271)

The Mexican drug cartels participating in this trade regard their illicit activity to be normal practice in the region. They even expect officials to be tolerant towards their illicit practices, otherwise consequences will follow (Martínez 53). Therefore, it can be argued that today the U.S.-Mexico border region can be regarded a place of conflict between the Mexican drug cartels who want to make a profit with their illegal narcotics trade in this region and licit Mexican and American law enforcement agencies combating these illicit organizations.

*Santa Muerte* plays a pivotal and complex role in the drug war played out in both Mexico and the region surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border. On the one hand she is both protector of the Mexican drug cartels and one of the catalyzers of the violence inflicted by these narcos, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis. On the other hand, however, she is protecting and supporting the ones that (try to) combat these Mexican drug cartels, thus indirectly combating the narcos herself (Chesnut 99).

Ever since Calderón started waging war against the Mexican drug cartels, violence in Mexico has escalated (Chesnut 101). For example, in July 2014 the Mexican government released data that revealed that over 164,000 people were killed between 2007 and 2014 in Mexico alone due to this war (Breslow, par. 3). In order to combat this violence, both Calderón and Nieto mobilized the Mexican army and police. These organizations can be regarded the main law enforcement agencies in Mexico today (Chesnut 101).

According to Chesnut, devotion to *Santa Muerte* is, besides the Mexican drug cartels, widespread among the people who are combating the Mexican drug cartels, such as the military, police and prison guards (Chesnut 107). In both his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint* and in the book *The Santísima Muerte: A Mexican Folk Saint* by Holman several examples are given to substantiate this statement. For example, in his book Chesnut mentions that an enormous *Santa Muerte* portrait stands at the entrance of a building in Mexico City occupied by police commandos (Chesnut 107). Furthermore, he states that approximately half of the police force of municipality Valle de Chalco, Mexico wears an image of *Santa Muerte* on their uniforms. Former Chief of Police Tomás Lagunes Muñoz explains this to Chesnut in an interview: “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” (qtd. in Chesnut 107). Also Holman gives an example in his book, and mentions a portrait of *Santa Muerte* hanging at the main gate of the Chihuahua City state penitentiary. According to him, this portrait represents the wish of both prisoners and prison guards to be protected by her (Holman 24). It can be argued then that the licit Santa Muertistas combating illegality also worship this folk saint for protection and to secure a fast and hopefully painless way to death, similar to illicit Santa Muertistas. Thus, both the licit and illicit in the U.S.-Mexico border region venerate *Santa Muerte* for the same reason; protection against each other.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that *Santa Muerte* has been targeted as a religious enemy of Mexico by former Mexican President Calderón<sup>26</sup>, as discussed in chapter three. This is ironic, as part of the Mexican law enforcement, such as the police force and the Mexican army, as demonstrated are themselves Santa Muertistas. Chesnut lucidly explains this in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*:

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? (103)

Following this train of thought, and keeping in mind that the drug war in Mexico will not end soon (Eds. Lusk et al. 17), *Santa Muerte* will continue to grow as a religious movement in this region as the Mexican drug cartels carry her with them and bring her into the United States. The following part aims to explain this.

### iii. *Santa Muerte*; A Transnational Religious Movement

In the Wilson Center research report *The State of the Border Report: A Comprehensive Analysis of the U.S.-Mexico Border*, edited by border studies scholars Christopher E. Wilson and Erik Lee, the possibility and risk of “spillover violence” conducted by Mexican drug cartels from Mexico to the United States is discussed (100). Lee and Wilson define spillover violence as “the violence that occurs as a result of the transnational trafficking of drugs. It can be directed at civilians, law enforcement officers, and other criminals or criminal

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<sup>26</sup> As discussed in chapter three of this thesis, as of yet, no official statement regarding Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto’s position towards *Santa Muerte* has been issued to the media.

organizations” (Eds. Lee and Wilson 100). In the article “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos” Bunker, Campbell and Bunker mention this spilling over of violence, specifically violence conducted in the name of *Santa Muerte*, to the United States from Mexico:

Across the border in the United States, rates of narco-violence and torture are much lower, and coverage is still somewhat of a rarity during nightly news broadcasts. Even so, torture is known to have been conducted there by Mexican drug traffickers, their enforcers, and affiliated and freelance kidnapping and human trafficking gangs.<sup>27</sup> (148)

In particular, the U.S.-Mexico border region is a region in which violence and torture conducted by Mexican drug cartels is being perceived, retired United States army general and news commentator for *NBC News* General Barry R. McCaffrey and former United States army major general and military analyst Robert H. Scales argue in their military assessment “Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment”:

Living and conducting business in a Texas border county is tantamount to living in a war zone in which civil authorities, law enforcement agencies as well as citizens are under attack around the clock. The Rio Grande River offers little solace to the echoes of gunshots and explosions. News of shootings, murders, kidnappings, beheadings, mass graves and other acts of violence coming across the border go far beyond any definition of “spillover violence.” (10)

For example, in 2006 American teenagers Rosalio Reta and Gabriel Cardona were charged with being *sicarios* (assassins) for the Zeta cartel (Kalder, par. 2; McKinley Jr., par. 3). The fact that they enjoyed American citizenship and lived in the border town Laredo, Texas, and the fact that both boys were fluent in both Spanish and English, meant they could easily cross and thus operate on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border (Kalder, par. 2; McKinley Jr., par. 8). Because of these reasons, *Los Zetas* not only recruited Reta and Cardona, but are suspected of recruiting similar young Americans to this day to carry out illicit practices on both sides of the border.

In court Cardona testified to having kidnapped and killed two American teenagers with a broken bottle, after which he collected their blood in a glass to toast to *Santa Muerte* (McKinley Jr., par. 18). Cardona being both an American Santa Muertista and member of a

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<sup>27</sup> An available report on some murder cases in the United States in which Mexican cartels were involved, have been included in Appendix II to demonstrate the nature of such violent acts (i).

Mexican drug cartel thus shows us how the Mexican drug cartels carry *Santa Muerte* with her across the U.S.-Mexico border. In turn, this demonstrates *Santa Muerte*'s transnational character.

For that reason, it can be argued that also in the United States people hold certain beliefs regarding *Santa Muerte*. However, as the Mexican drug cartels are not yet as influential in the United States as they are in Mexico, and as the consequences of the drug war are still less felt in the United States than in Mexico, the following questions emerge: To what extent have transnational operations of Mexican drug cartels influenced the transfer of *Santa Muerte* to the United States? Do American law enforcers differ in their perception of *Santa Muerte* in comparison to Mexican law enforcers, and if so, in what ways? And how does this information add to our understanding of *Santa Muerte*? In order to answer these questions, we need to look at certain drug related cases in the United States, in which *Santa Muerte*<sup>28</sup> played a role<sup>29</sup>.

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008, a federal grand jury in Greeneville, Tennessee charged thirty-three people with the possession, manufacturing and distribution of more than a thousand marijuana plants (Drug Enforcement Agency). According to Chesnut in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*, the following account of the Drug Enforcement Agency regarding this case demonstrates their ignorance of *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance:

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," known in Mexican culture as 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. (qtd. in Chesnut 105; Drug Enforcement Agency)

The fact that the Drug Enforcement Agency in Tennessee not only misspelled her name as "La Santa Muerta," but that they also consider her to only be part of "Mexican culture"

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<sup>28</sup> An available report demonstrating the nature of a number of illicit incidences in the United States linked to *Santa Muerte* has been included in Appendix II (ii).

<sup>29</sup> The discussed examples are chosen because of their coverage in prominent media and/or academic materials, and thus have academic relevance. Nevertheless, more, however less academic, examples can be found online.

proves their ignorance of *Santa Muerte* in general and her transnational character in specific, Chesnut argues (Chesnut 106).

Reading this example, it can be argued that the Drug Enforcement Agency has a different perception of *Santa Muerte* than Mexican law enforcers. Whereas Mexican law enforcers turn to *Santa Muerte* for help and protection, similar to the illicit Mexican drug cartels, no trace of American law enforcers turning to *Santa Muerte* for help and protection could be found in this particular case. Instead, the Tennessee Drug Enforcement Agency shows no true understanding of this folk saint, as can be seen in the misspelling of her name and the fact that they disregard her transnational aspect.

Another case in which ignorance of *Santa Muerte* among American law enforcers comes to the fore is the New Mexico Tenth Circuit United States Court of Appeals case *United States v. Medina-Copete*. In this case, the Tenth Circuit United States Court of Appeals overturned the verdict of Maria Vianey Medina-Copete and Rafael Goxcon-Chagal, who were convicted on drug trafficking charges (Metcalf, par. 2). As in the vehicle in which Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal transported the drugs New Mexico State Police found a *Santa Muerte* prayer card, prosecutors called upon United States marshal, cult expert and law enforcer Robert Almonte to discuss the symbolic representation of *Santa Muerte* (*United States v. Medina-Copete*).

When asked about *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance in court, Almonte stated the following:

Individuals pray to Santa Muerte [f]or different reasons, depending on who's praying to her, but very often in my line of work and what I train... very often criminal drug traffickers and other criminals pray to her for protection from law enforcement or anybody else they consider to be their enemy. [...] The purpose of a prayer like this, this particular prayer I would say would be protection from law enforcement. [...] The thing that is most glaring to me in this prayer is...it says, 'may no one prevent me from receiving the prosperity that I am asking of you today my powerful lady bless the money that will reach my hands and multiply it so that my family lacks for nothing and I can outreach my hand to the needy that crosses my path.' So it's my opinion that this trip had something to do with gaining some money. [...] The theme mentioned in that prayer ... is .... common among traffickers who use Santa Muerte. (qtd. in *United States v. Medina-Copete* 10-11)

Ignorance of *Santa Muerte* on the part of American law enforcers again shines through in this particular case. This time American law enforcers, in particular Almonte, only focus on the

amoral part of her character and the ways in which she influences the illicit. Both the jury and Almonte completely ignored her multifaceted character. Again, this is different than the Mexican law enforcers who ask her help for licit requests, such as protection from illicit organizations, and thus acknowledge her multifaceted character.

According to David B. Metcalfe, researcher, writer and contributing editor for *the Revealer*, the online journal of New York University's Center for Religion and Media, in his article "Overturning Bias – 10<sup>th</sup> Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals & Santa Muerte," such close-minded assumptions on *Santa Muerte* Almonte and the jury have are dangerous and conceal "the true social implications of traditions such as those that follow Saint Death" (par. 6). Subsequently, the Tenth Circuit United States Court of Appeals realized the ignorance on the part of Almonte and the jury, and stated that Almonte's statement was culturally biased and thus unjustly influenced the jury (Metcalfe, par. 2). Their opinion is reported as follows in the case file: the "testimony [...] proffered was both impermissible and prejudicial, requiring us to reverse the convictions and order a new trial" (qtd. in *United States v. Medina-Copete* 2).

However, the ignorance of *Santa Muerte* presented in the discussed cases is not omnipresent among law enforcers in the United States. For example, in May 2011 the National Latino Peace Officers Association, an organization which focuses on promoting equality and professionalism in American law enforcement, hosted a conference on *Santa Muerte* to educate five hundred law enforcement officials from across the United States on *Santa Muerte* "shrines, tattoos, symbols and their affiliation to gangs and drug traffickers" ("About Us," par. 2; Holguin, par. 3). According to Sarah Pullen, public information officer for the Drug Enforcement Agency in Los Angeles, "you become very much aware of" *Santa Muerte* (qtd. in Saraswat, par. 12), "as soon as you start working in investigations" in Los Angeles (qtd. in Saraswat, par. 12). Therefore, it is necessary to educate American law enforcers working in the field of drug enforcement to educate them on *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance.

Therefore, sergeant Oscar Mejia of the Inglewood Police Department, present at the conference, argues that it needs to be emphasized that finding a *Santa Muerte* related symbol on the scene can, but does not necessarily, signify "there is criminal activity afoot" (Holguin, par. 5). Furthermore, the National Latino Peace Officers Association stresses that "there's nothing illegal about worshipping any of the icons" (Holguin, par. 4). Thus, this example demonstrates ignorance of *Santa Muerte* is not omnipresent among American law enforcers. On the contrary, her multifaceted character is addressed publicly by both American law enforcer Mejia and the National Latino Peace Officers Association.



However, dissimilarities can be perceived between American law enforcers and Mexican law officials when comparing their perceptions regarding *Santa Muerte*. Foremost, no scholar nor the American media has covered cases in which American law enforcers worshipped *Santa Muerte*, whereas in the U.S.-Mexico border region this is common practice among Mexican law enforcers. Moreover, among American law enforcers different perspectives on *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance can be perceived, whereas a more comprehensive understanding of *Santa Muerte* is present amid Mexican law officials. The question that emerges then is whether *Santa Muerte* is present in regions within the United States outside of law enforcement, and if so, what happens with her meaning and significance in these regions. The following part aims to answer this question.

#### iv. Immigration

The U.S.-Mexico borderland does not only include the region a hundred kilometers north and south of the U.S.-Mexico border, but is also metaphorically used to refer to

how individuals cope with social inequalities based on racial, gender, class, and/or sexual differences, as well as with spiritual transformation and psychic processes of exclusion and identification – of feeling ‘in between’ cultures, languages or places. And borderlands are spaces where the marginalized voice their identities and resistance. All of these social, political, spiritual, and emotional transitions transcend geopolitical space. (Eds. Segura and Zavella 4)

When looking at where *Santa Muerte* is present in regions within the United States outside of law enforcement, she is found in immigrant communities far from the U.S.-Mexico border. Within those communities, *Santa Muerte* is used by devotees to voice their identities and to protect them from structural violence<sup>30</sup> (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 399). In order to explain this, immigration patterns to the United States from Mexico are going to be discussed first<sup>31</sup>, as this will help us understand the problems the United States government encounters regarding immigration policy implementation, and the effects this has on immigrant

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<sup>30</sup> “The indirect violence built into repressive social orders creating enormous differences between potential and actual human self-realization” (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 339).

<sup>31</sup> Due to constraints of space and time, immigration patterns from Mexico to the United States will not be discussed extensively. However, the interested reader can read the following articles and books about this topic:  
 - *Beyond Borders: A History of Mexican Migration to the United States* by Timothy J. Henderson (Henderson).  
 - “Mexican Migration to the United States: A Critical Review” by Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey (Durand and Massey).  
 - “Understanding Mexican Migration to the United States” by Douglas S. Massey (Massey).

communities throughout the United States. In turn, this will then help us understand the role *Santa Muerte* plays in regions within the United States outside of law enforcement, and demonstrates another way in which *Santa Muerte* is able to transcend the U.S.-Mexico border into the United States.

Immigration is “the entry of a person into a political unit, usually a state, with the aim of establishing permanent residence” (Anheier 877), and has been a contested issue in the United States government for the past decade (“Obama’s Immigration Order Should Stand,” par. 5). According to cultural anthropologist Lynn Stephen, Director of Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies of the University of Oregon and author of the article “Expanding the Borderlands: Recent Studies on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” scholars of immigration widely agree that the past three waves of migration from Mexico to the United States have largely set up the current migration flow (Stephen 271-272; Zong and Batalova, pars. 1-2). Due to this large-scale migration from Mexico to the United States, scholars of immigration are currently embracing the “idea of foregrounding the large Mexican population in many parts of the United States as a part of greater Mexico, thereby extending the borderlands concept to include geographic parts of the United States far from the southern border” (Stephen 267). In order to explain this, four migration waves from Mexico to the United States are going to be discussed, as they will not only illustrate the large-scale migration flow, but will also explain the expansion of the U.S.-Mexico borderland. In turn, this will help us understand the role *Santa Muerte* plays in this phenomenon. Additionally, this information will add to our understanding of her.

The first wave of Mexican migration to the United States began in the beginning of the twentieth century. In this period, political unrest in Mexico<sup>32</sup> and labor demand in the United States drove Mexicans to the United States to work in agriculture (Zong and Batalova, pars. 1-2). In 1930, approximately 624,400 Mexicans lived in the United States (Zong and Batalova, par. 1).

The Bracero Program of 1942 to 1964, a series of laws and regulations allowing Mexicans to temporarily work in the United States, initiated the second wave of Mexican migration to the United States (Stephen 271; Zong and Batalova, pars. 1-2). In those twenty-two years, over 4.5 million Mexicans, mostly agricultural workers, were legally contracted in the United States (Zong and Batalova, pars. 1-2).

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<sup>32</sup> The Mexican Revolution (1910-192) was a major armed conflict, which started as a middle-class protest against the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (Knight, par. 3).

The third wave of Mexican migration to the United States started after the Bracero Program was terminated in 1964, and after the United States government set the first numerical restrictions on migration from Mexico to the United States (Zong and Batalova, par. 2). According to immigration scholars Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, authors of the article “Mexican Immigrants in the United States,” this was the reason the third wave was largely unauthorized, and consisted mostly of seasonal agricultural workers who travelled back and forth between Mexico and the United States (par. 2).

The fourth and current wave of Mexican migration to the United States was ushered in by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (Stephen 272). This act legalized approximately 2.3 million Mexicans working in the United States, in return for “tougher border enforcement and penalties for American employers who hired unauthorized workers” (Stephen 272; Zong and Batalova, par. 2). Due to the Immigration Reform and Control Act, legalized Mexicans in the United States began to bring their families to the United States. As a result, between 1990 and 2010 over 7.5 million Mexicans, most of whom illegally, migrated to the United States (Zong and Batalova, par. 2).

According to the Census Bureau’s Population Estimates Program, approximately 35,320,000 people of Mexican descent lived in the United States in 2014 (The Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program). The Migration Policy Institute, a United States think tank dedicated to the analysis of migration worldwide, states on their website that over eleven million of those 35,320,000 people are unauthorized immigrants, who, similar to legal immigrants, participate in American society and enjoy the benefits of living in the United States (Cohen, par. 4; “Mission,” par. 1; “Unauthorized Immigrant Population Profiles”). Former *CNN* Wire news editor Tom Cohen argues in his article “With Congress Divided, Obama to Go His Own Way on Immigration,” that “an increase in tougher enforcement laws and resources without any corresponding legal remedies for undocumented immigrants” led to this high number of illegal immigrants (par. 5). This has had far-reaching practical, economic and political consequences thus far (Chishti, Hipsman, and Bui, par. 1).

For instance, Congress is utterly divided over the future of America’s immigration system. In 2013, the Senate passed a bipartisan immigration reform bill that would provide a path to legalization for long-term illegal immigrants in the United States in return for tougher border enforcement (Cohen, par. 8). In order to receive legal status, illegal immigrants would have to register with the American government to start the legalization process. Furthermore, they would have to pay a fine and learn English (Cohen, par. 9). However, Republicans believe illegal immigrants should be deported, as this bill, among other reasons, would grant

amnesty to immigrants participating in illicit activities (Cohen, par. 11). Therefore, the Republican-led House of Representatives refused to put the bill up for a vote (Cohen, par. 10; “What Is President Obama’s Immigration Plan?,” par. 6). This means America’s broken immigration system is not fixed yet.

Consequently, in November 2014 President Obama decided to take unilateral action on immigration reform and announced a series of executive actions, which would give approximately four million undocumented parents whose children are legal residents in the United States deferral opportunities (“What Is President Obama’s Immigration Plan?,” par. 2). Deferrals would include the authorization of living and working in the United States for at least three years, with an option of extending the deferral (“What Is President Obama’s Immigration Plan?,” par. 2). Obama’s plan would also expand the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allows illegal immigrants who entered the United States as children to apply for temporary residence and work permits, to include those illegal immigrants who entered the United States as children before January 2010 (“What Is President Obama’s Immigration Plan?,” par. 3).

Thus far, the future of President Obama’s immigration actions remain uncertain. In January 2016 the Supreme Court stated that it would consider to legally challenge Obama’s overhaul of America’s immigration system, to examine the reach of the executive branch (Liptak and Shear, par. 1). Still, a solution regarding the broken immigration system in the United States has to be found soon, as funding is lacking and immigrants are prone targets of structural violence.

The debate in Congress over illegal immigration and several policy changes at the U.S.-Mexico border, such as providing legal counsel to unaccompanied minors caught at the border, has reopened the debate over comprehensive border enforcement. In turn, this debate has raised the costs for American border enforcement tremendously (Chishti, Hipsman, and Bui, pars. 4, 16). The American government worries that illegal immigrants who made it to the United States function as a magnet for further migration from Mexico to the United States (Chishti, Hipsman, and Bui, pars. 16, 17). Consequently, the American government has strengthened border security, with all its financial consequences. For example, today approximately 20,000 border patrol agents work at the U.S.-Mexico border. These agents all need to get paid (The United States. U.S. Customs and Border Protection).

Moreover, illegal immigrant households in the United States cost the United States government and taxpayers a tremendous amount of money. For example, children of illegal immigrants born in the United States receive public education funded by the American

government. Moreover, they are eligible for government welfare (Rector and Richwine, par. 8). Robert Rector, senior research fellow in domestic policy at the Heritage Foundation, an American conservative think tank, and former Heritage Foundation staffer Jason Richwine argue in their article “The Fiscal Cost of Unlawful Immigrants and Amnesty to the U.S. Taxpayer,” that illegal immigrant households in the United States received approximately \$24,721 in government benefits and public services per household in 2010 (par. 9). This cost United States taxpayers approximately \$10,334 per household (Rector and Richwine, par. 9). According to Rector and Richwine, this amount of money will increase when Obama starts to grant amnesty to illegal immigrants. They would then be eligible for over eighty welfare programs, such as Obamacare and Medicare (Rector and Richwine, par. 9).

Besides economic consequences, illegal immigration also has practical consequences for the illicit population in the United States themselves. “Living in the shadows, immigrants are prone to abuses and are less likely to come to the police if they’re the victim of a crime” (“Obama’s Immigration Order Should Stand,” par. 5), the *Boston Globe* states on their website. According to Ludovica Bello, a graduate in international relations from Maastricht University and author of the article “Improving Access to Justice For the Most Vulnerable: Solutions for Immigrant Communities,” this is due to the fact that they are repeatedly underrepresented in politics, and have limited access to justice (2). Anthropologists James Quesada, Laurie K. Hart, and Philippe Bourgois draw a similar conclusion regarding immigrant vulnerability in the United States in their article “Structural Vulnerability and Health: Latino Migrant Laborers in the United States”:

Latino migrant laborers are a population especially vulnerable to structural violence because their economic location in the lowest rungs of the US labor market is conjoined with overt xenophobia, ethnic discrimination, and scapegoating. Simultaneously perceived as unfair competitors in a limited-good economy and freeloaders on the shrinking welfare safety net, they are subjected to a conjugation of economic exploitation and cultural insult. (399)

The 2014 *Hate Crime Statistics Report* of the Federal Bureau of Investigation proves that immigrants are a vulnerable group in the United States. According to this report, of the 5,462 single-bias hate crime incidents reported in 2014 11.9% of the incidents were based on ethnicity and 47.0% on race (The United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation). Consequently, immigrants often tend to live together in socially excluded and impoverished

communities, which enables them to maintain their own cultures and voice their own identities; borderlands. *Santa Muerte* is one of the means through which they achieve this.

In Los Angeles immigrant communities, for example, several *Santa Muerte* shrines can be found (Leovy, par. 7). Santiago Guadalupe, preacher at *Sanctuario Universal de la Santa Muerte*, argues that these *Santa Muerte* shrines draw different kinds of devotees. Most Santa Muertistas turn to *Santa Muerte* because they feel excluded and alone in the United States, rather than praying to *Santa Muerte* for a material request (Leovy, par. 20). These immigrants have the feeling they cannot turn to other saints for help and support, as “Santa Muerte accepts them no matter their age, creed or color. She is accepting of all religions” (Leovy, pars. 20-21). This example demonstrates immigrants in Los Angeles turn to their own religion for support, as they believe only *Santa Muerte* will accept them and support them. Thus, within the United States (illegal) immigrants hold onto their own religion. Moreover, similar to Santa Muertistas in Mexico, they acknowledge her multifaceted character, rather than only addressing the amoral part of her character.

Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding an immigrant community in Virginia, the United States. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, immigrant and owner of a folk-medicine and esoteric store in Richmond, Cristina Perez states she prays to a homemade *Santa Muerte* altar in her store every morning: “In the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit, I invoke your spirit to be present here today. I ask you to bring us abundance, work, health and family unity” (Facio-Krajcer, par. 3). Similar to Mexican Santa Muertistas, she turns to *Santa Muerte* for a variety of reasons, thus invoking her multifaceted character.

Additionally, *Santa Muerte* is also extremely popular in this immigrant community. Perez sells a variety of *Santa Muerte* commodities in her shop, which makes up half her sale (Facio-Krajcer, pars. 5, 7). It can thus be argued that also in this immigrant community (illegal) immigrants rather turn to a familiar religion in the United States, than an orthodox religion.

*Santa Muerte* can also be found in New York, the United States. The project “Faith in the Five Boroughs” of Julia Elliott and Matt Ozug documents faith and religion in immigrant communities in New York. In the short documentary *Loving the Bony Lady* the story of Mexican immigrant and transgender Arely Gonzalez is covered. She runs a *Santa Muerte* worshipping center from her bedroom in Queens. In this documentary she states the following:

The people who come to the altar, well, they're folks like all of us: simple people, humble people. Like her name says, I think we're all one short step from life to death. Sooner or later, she takes the rich, the poor – everyone. There is no one who can save himself from her. (qtd. in *Loving the Bony Lady*)

This excerpt shows us, similar to above discussed examples, how a Mexican immigrant acknowledges *Santa Muerte*'s multifaceted character, as Gonzalez believes this folk saint accepts people from all layers of society, similar as Mexican Santa Muertistas consider her to be.

Furthermore, being raised in a Catholic family in Mexico, a country in which the majority of the population still considers themselves to be Catholic, it is interesting to note that Gonzalez started devoting *Santa Muerte* in the United States. In *Loving the Bony Lady* Gonzalez concludes the following: "The Catholic religion limits you a lot for being gay. La Santa Muerte doesn't have intolerance, she tolerates anything from you" (qtd. in *Loving the Bony Lady*). Hearing this, it can be argued that Gonzalez found the liberty to worship *Santa Muerte* in the United States; a country in which the Catholic influence is less present.

According to several *Hate Crime Statistics Reports* of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the LGBT-community has been the "third most frequent target of hate violence" in the United States in the past fifteen years ("Hate Crimes," par. 1). According to the 2014 *Hate Crime Statistics Report*, 18.6% of the 5,462 single-bias hate crime incidents reported in 2014 were because of sexual orientation (The United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation).

Two conclusions can be drawn regarding Gonzalez' story and the information given by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Foremost, *Santa Muerte* appeals to different kinds of illicit groups. Not only the immigrants in the United States are prone to violence and discrimination, but also the LGBT-community is likely to be a target of such assault. Therefore, these considered illicit groups turn to *Santa Muerte* for help and support, as they feel they are not excluded by this folk saint. Noteworthy, *Santa Muerte*'s amoral character is not addressed in these examples. Rather, devotees focus on her multifaceted character as a saint that focuses on all aspects of life. Thus, both these groups acknowledge her multifaceted character.

## v. Extending the U.S.-Mexico Borderland

As this chapter demonstrates that *Santa Muerte* is also present in the United States, it can be argued that *Santa Muerte* is a transnational entity. In turn, it can be argued that in both the U.S.-Mexico border region and in different regions of the United States different perspectives between the licit and illicit devotees of *Santa Muerte* and Mexican and American law enforcement agencies exist, which leads to a clash in perspectives over her meaning and significance. This clash can be studied as a site of encounter between the licit and illicit.

The difference in interpretation can be found in the way both groups interpret *Santa Muerte*'s character and the reasons for which they turn to her. In the U.S.-Mexico border region *Santa Muerte* plays a pivotal and complex role in the drug war. On the one hand she is both protector of the illicit Mexican drug cartels and one of the catalyzers of the violence inflicted by these narcos. The Mexican drug cartels consider her to be a patroness of the drug trade and protector of their members. On the other hand, however, by the licit she is believed to be protecting and supporting the ones that (try to) combat these Mexican drug cartels, thus indirectly combating the narcos herself (Chesnut 99). Therefore, it can be argued that in the U.S.-Mexico border region different perspectives on *Santa Muerte* exist.

In different regions of the United States this is also the case, but in a different way. Dissimilarities can be perceived between American law enforcers and Mexican law officials when comparing their perceptions regarding *Santa Muerte*. Foremost, no scholar nor the American media has covered cases in which American law enforcers worshipped *Santa Muerte*, whereas in the U.S.-Mexico border region this is common practice among Mexican law enforcers. Moreover, among American law enforcers different perspectives on *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance can be perceived. In some cases only her amoral character was addressed. Illicit practices were instantaneously linked to *Santa Muerte*, which demonstrates ignorance American law enforcers have regarding *Santa Muerte*'s versatile character. In other cases, however, her multifaceted character is emphasized by American law enforcers, when they nuance *Santa Muerte*'s influence regarding illicit practices. Whereas diverging perceptions of *Santa Muerte*'s character can be perceived among American law enforcers, Mexican law officials tend to have similar understandings of *Santa Muerte*'s character. They turn to *Santa Muerte* for help and protection combatting the illicit.

Last but not least, an important conclusion can be drawn regarding this chapter. As demonstrated, *Santa Muerte* can be found in immigrant communities within the United States. As this politically and socially vulnerable group lacks governmental and judicial support in



the United States, and as integration into American society is difficult, they turn to a familiar saint they believe accepts them. Consequently, *Santa Muerte* is used to voice their identity. Mexican immigrants thus strongly hold onto and express their own culture. In the discussed examples of immigrants worshipping *Santa Muerte*, a comprehensive understanding of *Santa Muerte*'s multifaceted character shines through. The immigrants address her multifaceted character for a variety of reasons, but mostly for help and support coping with life in the United States.

The Mexican immigrants thus carry *Santa Muerte* with them across the U.S.-Mexico border into the United States. The same can be said about the Mexican drug cartels, who carry *Santa Muerte* with them across the U.S.-Mexico border when they conduct in illicit practices in the United States. As a result, her presence can currently be found in both immigrant communities throughout the United States and in American law enforcement regarding the prohibition of drugs. It can thus be argued that the U.S.-Mexico borderland has indeed extended to American cities far beyond the hundred kilometers north of the U.S.-Mexico border, which is in line with other research on immigration (Stephen 267). Most importantly, *Santa Muerte* can be considered the carrier of this U.S.-Mexico borderland.

## Conclusion

As it is now possible to draw certain conclusions regarding the research presented in this thesis, it is time to return to the research questions posed in the introduction. After having studied *Santa Muerte* as a site of encounter between the licit and illicit from three different angles, it can be concluded that *Santa Muerte* can indeed be considered a site of encounter, specifically a religious one.

Looking at *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance from one angle demonstrates that the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas have different point of views on this. Research has shown that licit Santa Muertistas do not (feel the) need to address *Santa Muerte*'s amoral part of her character and do not believe and do not take part in the violent ritualistic killings the illicit conduct in her name. It thus can be argued that *Santa Muerte* is a religious process, which syncretized components complement the belief of Santa Muertistas in different ways. Consequently, a clash in perspectives over *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance between both the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas is taking place in Mexico today. This clash can therefore be seen as a site of encounter in which both the licit and illicit Santa Muertistas meet, clash and debate with each other over the different interpretations of *Santa Muerte*'s (multifaceted) character and the rituals and practices that accompany it.

Angle two presents us with a different way in which *Santa Muerte* can be considered a site of encounter between the licit and illicit. According to the officially established Catholic Church in Mexico, worshipping death is a satanic practice. Therefore, the veneration of *Santa Muerte*, the saint of death, is condemned by this orthodox institution. Former ruling party *Partido Acción Nacional*, under the leadership of both Fox and Calderón, shared this denunciation. As *Santa Muerte* played and still plays a pivotal role in the drug war as a narco saint who helps the illicit, the Mexican drug cartels, to succeed in criminal ventures, forced the *Partido Acción Nacional* to combat the devotion of this Mexican folk saint. Furthermore, as the *Partido Acción Nacional* and the Catholic Church shared a similar social agenda, an alliance on religious policy was inevitable.

However, the licit Santa Muertistas see *Santa Muerte* as an honest folk saint who grants all kinds of both licit and illicit favors to her faithful devotees. Nevertheless, this multifaceted character of *Santa Muerte* is completely ignored by the Catholic Church and the *Partido Acción Nacional*. This clash between the orthodox Catholic Church, with the support of the *Partido Acción Nacional*, and the heterodox Santa Muertistas can be considered a site

of encounter, in which they meet, clash and debate with each other over the meaning and significance of *Santa Muerte*.

Looking at *Santa Muerte* as a site of encounter from the third and final angle demonstrates that different perspectives on *Santa Muerte* exist between the licit and illicit in the U.S.-Mexico border region and different regions of the United States. The difference in interpretation of *Santa Muerte* can be found in the reason(s) for which they turn to her. In the U.S.-Mexico border region *Santa Muerte* plays a pivotal and complex role in the prevalent drug war. On the one hand she is both protector of the illicit Mexican drug cartels and one of the catalyzers of the violence inflicted by these narcos, as the illicit conduct violent murders in her name. *Santa Muerte* is thus a patroness of the Mexican drug cartels and the drug trade in general. On the other hand, however, the licit believe she is both protecting and supporting the ones that (try to) combat these Mexican drug cartels; the law enforcement agencies. Respectively, *Santa Muerte* is indirectly combating the narcos herself.

Dissimilarities can be perceived between American law enforcers and Mexican law officials when comparing their perceptions regarding *Santa Muerte*. Foremost, no scholar nor the American media has covered cases in which American law enforcers worshipped *Santa Muerte*, whereas in the U.S.-Mexico border region this is common practice among Mexican law enforcers. Moreover, among American law enforcers different perspectives on *Santa Muerte*'s meaning and significance can be perceived. In some cases only her amoral character was addressed. In these cases illicit practices were instantaneously linked to *Santa Muerte*. These cases thus demonstrate ignorance regarding *Santa Muerte*'s versatile character amongst American law enforcers. In other cases, however, her multifaceted character is emphasized by American law enforcers. In these cases they nuance *Santa Muerte*'s influence regarding illicit practices, and emphasize her multifaceted character. Whereas diverging perceptions of *Santa Muerte*'s character can be perceived amongst American law enforcers, Mexican law officials tend to have similar understandings of *Santa Muerte*'s character. They turn to *Santa Muerte* for help and protection combating the illicit. They thus demonstrate a comprehensive view of *Santa Muerte* as a versatile folk saint who helps both the licit and illicit in various ways.

After having presented the general findings of this research, it is now time to focus on the final research question posed in the introduction: How can this case study on *Santa Muerte* demonstrate the useful contribution of a religious perspective in border studies by expounding their relationship? Chesnut already shortly touches upon this question in his book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*: “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” (67). In other words, *Santa Muerte* transcends different kinds of borders.

Foremost, *Santa Muerte* herself is a syncretized product of different religions, myths, rituals and practices, whose devotees take and use those syncretized components they see fit to their lives. Moreover, these Santa Muertistas come from different religious backgrounds. *Santa Muerte* thus transcends religious borders.

Not only do the Santa Muertistas have different religious backgrounds, they also come from a variety of racial backgrounds. Additionally, devotees believe *Santa Muerte* does not make a distinction between men and women. Moreover, it is believed that the LGBT-community, who cannot turn to a consecrated saint for help, is not ignored by this folk saint. Therefore, it can be argued that *Santa Muerte* also crosses racial, gender and sexual borders.

Last but not least, *Santa Muerte* transcends national boundaries. *Santa Muerte* cannot only be found in Mexico, but also in other parts of Latin America and in the United States, as demonstrated in chapter four of this thesis.

These observations on *Santa Muerte* prove that certain similarities between religion and border studies can be noticed. *Santa Muerte* transcends borders in different ways. It can thus be argued that religion can be considered a border crosser. As border crossing is an important concept within border studies, it demonstrates one way in which religion is entangled with border studies.

Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that the concept sites of encounter, which links religious- and border studies together, is successfully applied on a religious case study. It is noteworthy that *Santa Muerte* and the concept sites of encounter share an important characteristic; *Santa Muerte* is a process, similar to the notion of a site of encounter. Both concepts will continue to change, evolve and adapt to their surroundings, due to their vigorous relationship. This observation thus emphasizes an important element that religion and border studies share.

Moreover, another conclusion can be drawn regarding the relationship between religious- and border studies, namely that border studies is included in religious studies. Within the *Santa Muerte* religion certain boundaries can be perceived that are drawn by both licit and illicit Santa Muertistas and religious, political and legal institutions when it comes to the meaning and significance of this Mexican folk saint. This is dependent upon the social, economic and political factors within Mexico and the United States that are at play and influence the different parties involved in or influenced by *Santa Muerte*. These include the following: 1) the social and economic backgrounds of the Santa Muertistas, 2) the social and

political positions of the Santa Muertistas and institutions involved in or influenced by *Santa Muerte*, such as the orthodox Catholic Church and the Mexican government, and 3) the legal positions of the Santa Muertistas and institutions involved in or influenced by *Santa Muerte*, such as the Mexican drug cartels, (illegal) immigrants, and Mexican and American law enforcement agencies. As these factors continue to change throughout the years, the way(s) in which *Santa Muerte* is perceived by these different groups of people and institutions will consequently also change. Hence *Santa Muerte* embodies larger social, political and historical forces that are at play in both Mexico and the United States.

Therefore, it is important for both the Mexican and American government to understand this folk saint, as she will continue to play a crucial role in both these countries. This research on *Santa Muerte* has demonstrated how both the Mexican drug cartels and Mexican immigrants in the United States carry the U.S.-Mexico borderland with them through their belief in this Mexican folk saint. In turn, the U.S.-Mexico borderland has extended to American cities far beyond the hundred kilometers north of the U.S.-Mexico border. It can be argued that *Santa Muerte* carries the U.S.-Mexico borderland with her.

An important lesson can be learned from this observation. The violent ritualistic killings performed by Mexican drug cartels in name of *Santa Muerte* have spilled over to American soil, with all its consequences. Furthermore, as shown, the United States government experiences difficulties from insufficient laws and regulations regarding immigration from Mexico to the United States. This thesis thus shows how *Santa Muerte* facilitates and influences interaction between different groups of people and institutions, both licit and illicit, on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. In turn, this thesis demonstrates the (extent of the) problems that arise when U.S.-Mexico border security is insufficient and the illicit are consequently able to cross the U.S.-Mexico border into the United States. It can thus be concluded that *Santa Muerte* basically is a site of encounter between Mexico and the United States, whose strong presence and dynamic and fluid meaning and significance in both Mexico and the United States demonstrates and emphasizes the need of cooperation between Mexico and the United States regarding immigration policy and border enforcement.

### Suggestions for Further Research

By successfully placing the Mexican folk saint *Santa Muerte* in the field of border studies, this research has emphasized the need of and given the start of incorporating a

religious perspective in border studies. However, this study raises further questions that could be studied in future research.

The case study chosen to investigate the research questions posed in the introduction of this thesis was *Santa Muerte*. A lack of academic and all-encompassing research on this folk saint made it difficult to conduct comprehensive research. Therefore, a first suggestion for further research would be to do additional research on *Santa Muerte*. As *Santa Muerte* is becoming the fastest growing religious movement in the world, she is going to become an important, but mostly interesting topic for scholars from different disciplines.

In addition, it would be interesting to analyze the different perspectives people across the globe hold on *Santa Muerte*. The scope of research could then be expanded by including other countries than the ones discussed in this thesis. Scholars could in this manner research how the different environments people across the world live in can influence their attitudes towards this folk saint. Also the ways in which *Santa Muerte* rituals and practices evolve and adapt while traveling across the globe could be documented then.

Furthermore, the research conducted in this thesis has primarily focused on Mexican drug cartels. Therefore, it should be interesting to investigate to what extent other drug cartels use *Santa Muerte* as a justification for the violence they employ. As Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker predict an increase in drug war violence leading to “levels of brutality heretofore unseen” in their article “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos” (145), the importance of further research on this topic should be accentuated.

Lastly, this thesis aimed to offer a first attempt of expanding the framework of border studies by including a religious perspective. It is interesting to examine to what extent a religious perspective is useful in border studies. Furthermore, this question then poses the challenge of finding other case studies that are suitable to be used in research that focuses on other ways in which religion can be included in border studies. Additionally, it could be investigated how other, not yet included, fields of study could be incorporated in the field of border studies.

Until further research on these topics is conducted, all these suggestions for future research are open for discussion. Hopefully this thesis intrigues and motivates other scholars to conduct additional research on either *Santa Muerte* or the importance of a religious perspective in border studies, and the ways in which this perspective can be included in this field of study.

## A Final Note

As this research relies heavily on Chesnut's book *Santa Muerte: Devoted to Death – The Skeleton Saint*, it is more than logical and appropriate to end this thesis with one of Chesnut's conclusions regarding *Santa Muerte*. He ends his book stating that “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” (Chesnut 200). Therefore, similar to the metaphor sites of encounter, which theory ran as a red line through this thesis, this thesis will hopefully encourage an understanding of this highly contested topic, and stimulate dialogue across lines of difference. Optimistically speaking, this would mean a greater transnational and cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of one of the most powerful, intriguing, influential, but most importantly, fastest growing religious movement in the world; *La Santa Muerte*, the saint of death.

Word count: 28,128<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Excluding the following:

- Cover Page
- Essay Cover Sheet
- Abstract
- Table of Contents
- Foreword and Acknowledgements
- Appendices
- Bibliography
- Parenthetical References

## Appendix I

- i. This diagram shows an increase in violent killings performed by Mexican drug cartels between 2007 and 2011:



Muedano



## ii. Table 1 - Beheadings by cartels, gangs and enforcers in Mexico (2006 – 2009):

Date	Beheading	Organization	Location	Remarks
20 April 2006	Two police officers beheaded	Unknown	Acapulco	The officers' heads were stuck on metal poles in front of a government building mere blocks from an Acapulco tourist strip. A note nearby read: "So that you learn to respect."
8 May 2006	Lawyer beheaded	Possibly Millennium Cartel	Aguaje, Michoacán	The lawyer was defending an alleged member of an independent drug cartel led by Armando Sanchez Arreguin, AKA <i>The Grandfather</i> . The head was hung from an archway that served as one of the entrances to Aguaje. A homemade <i>Welcome</i> sign was affixed nearby.
21 June 2006	Beheaded bodies of three Baja police officers and one civilian found	Unknown cartel	Rosarito Beach	The heads were found hours later in Tijuana. The civilian was a Mexican American resident of Arizona. Witnesses claimed that some 100 persons wearing Mexican AFI uniforms kidnapped and killed the individuals.
24 June 2006	One police officer beheaded	Unknown gang	Guerrero	Three additional police officers were found shot.
29 June 2006	Man's head found on City Hall steps	Possibly Los Zetas	Acapulco	A handwritten note, signed with the letter Z was left. The discovery came one day after a beheaded body, with the letter Z carved into the chest, was found outside the residence of a city employee.
30 June 2006	Two heads found	Possibly Los Zetas	Acapulco	The heads were placed in front of a government office, with a note signed with the letter Z: "One more message, dirtbags, so that you learn to respect." One of the heads had the eyes and mouth taped shut, while the other had one eye covered.
21 June 2006	Three police officers and a civilian found beheaded	Arellano Felix	Tijuana	Authorities alleged that Arellano Felix ordered the beheadings while in prison.
10 July 2006	At least five heads left beside a cross	Unknown	Tepalcatepec	Killers reportedly avenging the death of a drug smuggler left heads beside a black metal cross which had been erected at the location of his death. Each head was left with a threatening message.
18 August	Milenio Cartel	La Familia	Uruapan,	Notes left.

2006	member beheaded		Michoacan	
4 September 2006	Cheese-maker beheaded	Los Zetas	Apatzingang, Michoacan	The man was a relative of <i>The Grandfather</i> and was beheaded for revenge; four more beheadings followed. A note left with the cheese-maker warned: "One by one you go falling. Greetings. La Familia sends its regards."
21 September 2006	Five severed heads dumped onto a nightclub dance floor	La Familia	Uruapan, Michoacan	Armed men with faces covered came into a dance hall and shot into the air. They dumped five heads from a sack they were carrying and left a message written on cardboard: "The Family doesn't kill for money. It doesn't kill women. It doesn't kill innocent people, only those who deserve to die. Know that this is divine justice."
16 March 2007	Human head found outside state security office	Unknown	Villahermosa, Tabasco	Tabasco at the time was a relatively new target of traffickers.
30 March 2007	Video showing the beheading of a cartel hit man	Gente Nueva	YouTube video	<i>Do something for your country, kill a Zeta!</i> Read a written message opening the 5-minute video. A man in his underwear was shown tied to a chair, with a Z written on his chest in market and the message <i>Welcome, kill women and children...</i> The video showed the man being interrogated, punched several times, then beheaded with a cord tied to metal rods and twisted. The footage ends with "Lazcano, you are next."
3 May 2007	Mutilated, beheaded body found outside of a military base	Unknown	Tijuana, at the US border	-
12 May 2007	A severed head was deposited at an army base	Gulf cartel, Zeta-10s, or Gente Nueva	Veracruz	The incident occurred a day after President Calderon's government announced it would send troops to the Gulf Coast state. A note signed by Z-40 was left with the head: "We'll keep on going when the federal forces get here."
26 May 2007	The severed head of a town councilman was dumped outside	Unknown	Villahermosa, Tabasco	The newspaper's publishers said that this was an attempt to intimidate reporters. Reportedly, the head was wrapped in

	offices of a newspaper			newspaper inside a cooler and left by a man who stepped out of a sports utility vehicle.
17 September 2007	Head found on a road	Unknown	Puerta Campuza bus stop	The victim was likely a member of Preventative Police.
24 September 2007	Beheaded and decomposed body of kidnapped police officer found	Unknown	San Isidro, Lerdo, Durango	Following the kidnapping, two other police officers failed to report to work.
8 October 2007	Remains of three beheaded men found	Unknown	Outside of Acapulco	The bodies had been set ablaze and left near a highway.
15 December 2007	Four beheaded bodies and one mutilated body found	Sinaloa	Mexico City (2) and Tlalnepantla (2)	The beheadings were likely carried out to avenge a half-ton cocaine seizure at the airport. One head and an index finger stuffed in its mouth, another had a finger in its ear.
7 January 2008	One head found	Unknown	San Simon de la Laguna, Donato Guerra	The victim's headless body was found earlier in a shallow grave. The head was found approximately one kilometer away on Highway 18.
23 May 2008	Four heads in ice chests dumped on a highway	Unknown drug-trafficking hit men	Durango city	-
23 May 2008	Five bodies (two beheaded) found in an empty lot	Unknown rival to Sinaloa cartel	Ciudad Juarez	A co-located message read: "This is what happens to stupid traitors who make the mistake of siding with El Chapo Guzman."
7 June 2008	Male head found	Unknown	Villahermosa, Tabasco	The head was left in front of the El Correo de Tabasco newspaper offices, while the headless body was found in an area ranch. Both sets of remains had messages that threatened informants.
3 July 2008	Four beheaded bodies found on a street	Unknown rival to Sinaloa cartel	Culiacan, Sinaloa	-
4 July 2008	Three beheaded bodies found with a dead snake	Possibly Sinaloa	Culiacan, Sinaloa	The event was possibly related to the Beltran Leyva/Sinaloa rivalry.
31 July 2008	Beheaded body found	Unknown rival to Sinaloa cartel	Chihuahua, Chihuahua	The body was accompanied by a message directed at El Chapo Guzman.
3 August 2008	Two beheaded bodies found	Unknown	Vicente Guerrero, Durango	-
28 August	11 headless	Gulf Cartel	Merida (a	The bodies had been handcuffed,

2008	bodies with signs of torture found	and/or Los Zetas	colonial city in Yucatan)	beaten, market with star signs and the letter Z. The bodies also had tattoos, mainly of the <i>Death Saint</i> . Previously Yucatan had experienced only scattered violence, not violent rival cartel fighting. The following day, police arrested three suspects with a bloody hatchet. According to the press, police suspected that the heads were burned in a ritual; several scorched spots were discovered in a nearby clearing, and an altar to Santa Muerte was found in the home of two of the suspects.
28 August 2008	Beheaded body found	Unknown	Small town east of Merida	The body showed signs of torture. During a seven day period ending 29 August 2008, more than 130 people died violently throughout Mexico and headless bodies turned up in four states.
30 August 2008	Four beheaded bodies found	Rival, possible faction of Arellano Felix	Tijuana	The event was seemingly linked to control of the drug corridor into San Diego. One of the bodies had its head placed on the upper back. The other three were found with the heads placed at the feet, at an illegal dump.
25 September 2008	Beheaded bodies of three men found	Unknown	El Huahote, Sinaloa	The bodies were found on a road with hands bound; the heads were found in sacks nearby.
30 September 2008	Headless body found	Unknown	Ciudad Juarez	The head was found nearby in a black bag.
4 October 2008	Two beheaded bodies found on a road	Unknown	Tijuana	The heads were found in black plastic bags nearby.
17 October 2008	Four beheaded soldiers found	Unknown	Nuevo Leon	-
19 October 2008	Three beheaded soldiers found	Unknown	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	-
1 November 2008	A man and woman found beheaded on a beach	Unknown	Tijuana	The heads were found in plastic bags; a message believed to be from a cartel was found besides them.
5 November 2008	Two beheaded males discovered	Rival to Arellano Felix	Tijuana	The discovery was near the Otay Mesa border crossing with the US. The bodies were inside large plastic barrels, their heads placed on the lids. A handwritten message was left, signed <i>la mana</i> .
7	Beheaded,	Unknown	Ciudad Juarez	The victim's head was found in a

November 2008	handcuffed man found hanging from an overpass			bag in a nearby plaza.
15 November 2008	Man's head found wrapped in duct tape	Unknown	Tijuana	-
23 November 2008	Three bodies (two beheaded) found	Unknown	Tijuana	The bodies were dumped on baseball fields.
30 November 2008	Nine adults beheaded	Unknown	Tijuana	The beheadings included two police officers whose badges were stuffed into their mouths.
2 December 2008	Man found beheaded	Unknown cartel or enforcers	Iguala, south of Mexico City	The man had been in jail for killing three police officers, when armed men possibly impersonating agents from Mexico's Federal Investigative Agency broke into the jail and took him. A message left by his head was signed <i>The People's Avenger</i> .
7 December 2008	Two headless corpses found	Unknown	Chilpancingo, Guerrero	A note read: "Soldiers, who are supposedly fighting crime, and they turn out to be kidnappers. This is going to happen to you."
9 December 2008	Mexican soldiers decapitated	Possibly Beltran Leyva	Chilpancingo, Guerrero	Sergeant Carlos Alberto Navarrete Moreno's head was deposited in a bucket on the monument to the Flags, with the message: "According to the soldiers, they are combating organized crime. They are kidnappers. This is going to happen to them because they're whores."
21 December 2008	Seven Mexican soldiers and one lawyers beheaded	Possibly Beltran Leyva	Chilpancingo, Guerrero	The soldiers were between 21 and 38 years of age, assigned to the 35 <sup>th</sup> Military Zone based in Chilpancingo. They were off-duty, and were intercepted at night in different areas of the city by one or more armed commandos – some intercepts occurred in front of several witnesses. Residents found the heads on a busy city street before dawn; hours later the bodies were found several kilometers away, according to police. Some showed signs of torture. Forensics showed that they had been beheaded while still alive, and that a giggy saw had been the

				beheading weapon.
21 December 2008	Three beheaded bodies found	Unknown	Village outside of Chilpancingo, Guerrero	-
November 2008	Head discovered in an ice chest	Gulf Cartel	Port city of Lazaro Cardenas, Guerrero	Retaliation against La Familia.
17 January 2009	The head of a 62-yr old police chief found in an ice chest outside the police station	Sinaloa Cartel	Praxedis G. Guerrero, Chihuahua	Commander Martin Castro had been on the job only five days; he was abducted along with five other police officers. Following his beheading, mass police resignations occurred in two towns.
17 January 2009	Three heads found in an ice box	Unknown	Ciudad Juarez	Additionally, a headless body was found in a dirty canal a few miles away, which may have belonged to one of six kidnapped policemen.
9 February 2009	Beheaded man found	Unknown	Manzanillo, Colima	The body was identified as that of a known drug dealer.
10 February 2009	Two heads in coolers found inside a car	Unknown	Tepotzotlan (outside Mexico City)	The heads were accompanied by a message threatening the municipal police chief.
26 February 2009	Headless body found	Unknown	Manzanillo, Guerrero	Police found the body while on patrol in a neighborhood. A narco message had been placed next to the body.
7 March 2009	Three beheaded men found by joggers	Unknown organized crime hit	Tijuana	One of the men was a US citizen and former Chula Vista, CA resident recently released from prison. The three bodies were missing their hands, and one its feet. A taunting narco message was co-located.
10 March 2009	Five severed heads found	Unknown	Ixtlahuacan del Rio, Guadalajara, Jalisco	The heads – of males between the ages of 30 and 50, were found in five coolers left by the roadside. Each had their eyes taped shut. The tops of the ice chests were inscribed with messages, such as: “Like these, I am going to finish everyone, and I’m going after you, Goyo.”
7 May 2009	One of two male bodies found was beheaded	Unknown	Tijuana	Found by police
5 June 2009	Woman’s beheaded body found	Unknown	Acapulco	The body was naked; police said that they were unable to identify her or establish a motive.
5 June	Two male heads	Unknown	Tijuana	A message from one cartel to

2009	found			another gang was found, but officials would not comment on the contents.
30 June 2009	Severed head found	Unknown	Apatzingan, Michoacán	-
1 July 2009	Police found beheaded body and severed head miles apart	Unknown	Veracruz state	-
1 July 2009	Residents found a man's beheaded body	Unknown	Boca del Rio, Veracruz	The body had its hands and feet bound and showed signs of torture. Police refused to make public a note from the killers attached to the body. Authorities found a head in a nearby city.
4 July 2009	Severed head tossed into the street	Possibly Zetas or Mata Zetas	Boca del Rio, Veracruz	Mid-term elections were the next day.
5 July 2009	Two human heads found	La Familia	Tetepantla	La Familia left a message claiming the two beheadings. (Bunker, Campbell, Bunker 158)
7 July 2009	Five people beheaded	Hitmen wearing AFI uniforms	Coahuayutla, Guerrero	The hitmen ambushed two pickups, murdering eleven people, five of which were beheaded.
20 July 2009	Man shot and beheaded	Unknown	Cacahoatan, Chiapas	Residents in the area stated that the man had been involved in robbing houses in the area and was most likely a member of a criminal gang. Given this, police believe that the incident could have been related to a settling of scores. (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 151-158)

iii. A number of incidences of torture and beheadings linked to *Santa Muerte* worship:

Date	Event
13 May 2005	A car chase between unknown assailants from a rival drug trafficking group and members of the gang, Los Sapos, in the Tepitos neighbourhood of Mexico City ended in a shootout at the Santa Muerte chapel, resulting in the brain death of one of its members. The victims were thought to have been seeking her protection.
2006	In Tijuana, Mexico, four drug smugglers turned on one of their partners who they believed to have stolen money from them. "This subject gets a saw and cuts off his leg, cuts off another leg, cuts off his arm. He's dead and then this girl gets the cutting saw and cuts off his head and offers it to Santa Muerte."
11 May 2007	Murdered victims of the notorious Mexican Gulf Cartel were left at a public shrine to Santa Muerte in Monterrey, Mexico.

2007	Gunmen from the powerful Gulf Cartel handcuffed three men and shot them dead at a Santa Muerte altar in Nuevo Laredo, leaving lit candles, flowers, and a taunting message for rivals.
August 2008	In southeastern Yucatán Peninsula, 12 headless bodies of local drug dealers were dumped into two ranches. Five were decapitated while alive but the rest had been dismembered after first having been strangled or beaten to death. The suspects were alleged to have been members of the Zetas. Police also claim the killings may have had a ritual dimension after searching the suspects' houses and finding altars to the death saint. It is believed that the presence of burned spots in a nearby clearing indicate that the heads were ritually offered to Santa Muerte.
2008	In Juárez, decapitated and stacked bodies were found five separate times with the ritualized nature casting suspicions it might be related to Santa Muerte worship.
2008	In Nuevo Laredo, Gulf Cartel enforcers captured Sinaloa Cartel members, took them to public Santa Muerte shrines, and executed them. Analysis by a U.S. law enforcement officer suggests that the perpetrators killed them as offerings to Santa Muerte.
2008	In Ciudad Juárez, authorities found decapitated and stacked bodies at crime scenes in five separate incidents. Links were inferred to Santa Muerte worshippers.
December 2009 - January 2010	In Ciudad Juárez, perpetrators murdered individuals in apparent Santa Muerte ritual killings. Regarding one incident, authorities found at the crime scene the remnants of an apparent altar and the words "Santa Muerte" and <i>cuídanos flakita</i> (take care of us, skinny) spray painted. In the second crime, gang members burned a victim behind a house containing an altar and a small Santa Muerte statue. Interviewed neighbors said that the killers – part of the Hillside 13 Gang – asked for "something big"; as a result, the perpetrators performed multiple human sacrifices.
January 2010	In Culiacan, a suspect placed a decapitated head by the tomb of deceased cartel leader Arturo Beltran Levya. Earlier, after Beltran Levya was killed in his apartment, authorities found items related to the cult of Santa Muerte, suggesting that one of his former fellow gang members may have presented the head as an offering.
April 2010	In Camargo and Miguel Aleman, perpetrators tortured and decapitated individuals, carved the letter "Z" into their chests, and placed the victims' heads on the roof of a desecrated, graffiti-covered roadside chapel. Based on the graffiti messages, the victims belonged to the Gulf Cartel. The perpetrators comprised members of the Los Zetas Cartel, which has embraced Santa Muerte as its patron saint. Many of the group's members have tattoos of her image on their upper arm or chest.
June 2010	In Cancun, investigators found the bodies of six tortured victims, three with their hearts cut out and with the letter "Z" carved into their abdomens, in a cave outside of the resort



	city. Presumably the killers belonged to the Los Zetas Cartel, and the victims belonged to a competing group.
July 2011	In Ciudad Juárez, Mexican police discovered a skeleton dressed as a bride at a Santa Muerte altar in a house used to hold kidnap victims. The perpetrators left two skulls and numerous cigarette packs as offerings. The circumstances behind the origins of the skeleton and skulls – if they were prior cult victims – remain unknown. (Bunker “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings”; Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 166)

iv. Robert J. Bunker’s list of examples of sadistic (pleasure) killings and human sacrifice (ritualized) killings conducted by Mexican drug cartels:

- \* The stacking of headless bodies and the staged placement of body parts.
- \* The staging of a skinned skull resting on severed arms with the victim’s male genitalia held in the palm of one of their hands.
- \* Decapitated heads left at the tombs of deceased drug lords – implicated as Santa Muerte worshippers – as sacrificial offerings.
- \* Decapitated heads offered directly to Santa Muerte by her worshippers.
- \* Victims killed at Santa Muerte altars/shrines.
- \* The ritual burning of decapitated heads as offerings.
- \* The removal of the hearts of victims.
- \* The skinning of victims while alive.
- \* The castration and then decapitation of victims while alive.
- \* The desecration of at least one shrine belonging to a more benign Saint with the body parts of the victims strewn over it and their heads lined up on the roof.
- \* The use of black candle magic to request that the deity kill one’s enemies.
- \* The threatening of a kidnap victim at a Santa Muerte altar with divine wrath if they failed to cooperate with their captors.
- \* The alleged smoking of a victim’s ashes mixed with cocaine in a ‘smoking death’ ritual.
- \* The likely rise of cannibalistic rituals during cartel-led ‘spiritual’ retreats. (Bunker “Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico” 12)

## Appendix II

### i. Table 1 - Beheadings in the United States connected to Mexican crime or Mara gangs:

Date	Beheading	Organization	Location	Remarks
Fall 2001	Male nearly beheaded	MS-13	Alexandria, VA	A high-ranking clique leader, along with other MS-13 members, lured, stabbed and attempted to behead a suspected rival gang member using a dull steak knife.
20 May 2005	Female hacked to death	MS-13	Alexandria, VA	MS-13 members killed a pregnant teen who had returned to the gang after becoming a federal informant. She was discovered on the Shenandoah river; she had been stabbed 13 times and her head had been nearly cut off.
24 September 2007	Headless male body found in a Louisiana river	Possibly Mexican gang members	Atchafalaya River, St. Marin, Louisiana	The victim had been shot and beheaded before being dumped in the river. All four suspects and the victim were Mexican nationals. Two of the suspects had tattoos said to be connected with Mexican gangs; however, the gang and/or cartel significance is unknown.
30 July 2008	Young girl raped and beheaded	Mexican traffickers	Florida panhandle	A little girl, after resisting rape, was brought to Florida from Mexico and made an example of by being beheaded in front of other girls, who were being held to be raped repeatedly. Her body was left in a room with them for several hours. (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 159)

### ii. A number of incidences of illicit practices in the United States linked to *Santa Muerte* worship:

Date	Event
2005	Seven murders over a one-year period in Laredo, Texas in 2005 led to the arrest of two US teens – homegrown assassins recruited into Los Zetas to carry out hits for the Mexican Gulf Cartel. Both sported tattoos of Santa Muerte.
May 13 2005	A car chase between unknown assailants from a rival drug trafficking group and members of the gang, Los Sapos, in the Tepitos neighborhood of Mexico City ended in a shootout at the Santa Muerte chapel, resulting in the brain death of one of its members. The victims were thought to have been seeking her protection.
2006	In Laredo, Texas, sheriff's deputies report finding a Santa Muerte altar in a stash house upon which pictures of a Mexican military unit lay in a bowl of blood, sprinkled with herbs

	and roots.
2006	In Tijuana, Mexico, four drug smugglers turned on one of their partners who they believed to have stolen money from them. ‘This subject gets a saw and cuts off his leg, cuts off another leg, cuts off his arm. He’s dead and then this girl gets the cutting saw and cuts off his head and offers it to Santa Muerte.’
11 May 2007	Murdered victims of the notorious Mexican Gulf Cartel were left at a public shrine to Santa Muerte in Monterrey, Mexico.
2007	Gunmen from the powerful Gulf Cartel handcuffed three men and shot them dead at a Santa Muerte altar in Nuevo Laredo, leaving lit candles, flowers, and a taunting message for rivals.
2008	Small altars are becoming a common scene at stash houses in South Texas. “People begin with incense, candles, to indescribable things, like obtaining items from a cemetery, human remains to accomplish what you want,” a 2008 source said.
August 2008	In southeastern Yucatán Peninsula, 12 headless bodies of local drug dealers were dumped into two ranches. Five were decapitated while alive but the rest had been dismembered after first having been strangled or beaten to death. The suspects were alleged to have been members of the Zetas. Police also claim the killings may have had a ritual dimension after searching the suspects’ houses and finding altars to the death saint. It is believed that the presence of burned spots in a nearby clearing indicate that the heads were ritually offered to Santa Muerte.
2008	In Juárez, decapitated and stacked bodies were found five separate times with the ritualized nature casting suspicions it might be related to Santa Muerte worship.
March 2009	La Joya officers found 10 illegal immigrants packed into an SUV covered with decals of Santa Muerte... An anthropologist at UT-Brownsville says worship of the saint came to the valley around about a decade ago and “In the last five years, it’s spread like wildfire.”
April 2009	In Charlotte, NC, a man was sentenced to 24 years in prison for sex trafficking. One of his victims reported being taken to a Santa Muerte shrine and threatened with her wrath if the woman tried to escape or report him.
2009	At Webb County Jail, South Texas, inmates arrested on drug trafficking charges pray for help to Santa Muerte at an altar that the Director let them set up. (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 166-167)

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