

Si muere el Hijo de la Santa Muerte.

The symbolic codification of *Comandante Pantera*'s death at the Temple in Tultitlán (Mexico)

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Introduction

Experts in new religious phenomena and of contemporary Mexico are familiar with the rapid growth of the folk devotion for *la Santa Muerte*. She is mostly worshipped by the poorest fringes of Mexican society: in their attachment to the bony saint, they express their disaffection both with governmental and Catholic institutions that in turn have stigmatized her. Various and competing are the attempts at institutionalizing the devotion: correspondingly, *la Santa* is represented and worshipped with significant variants from place to place, notwithstanding common beliefs and iconographic traits. Notable among such attempts was the foundation of the *Templo de la Santa Muerte Internacional* in Tultitlán (State of Mexico) by Jonathan Legaria Vargas (1982-2008), also known as *Comandante Pantera*. Currently, the temple is run by his mother, Enriqueta Vargas Ortiz (b. 1959). This article reconstructs the specific traits of the devotion as it is expressed and institutionalized at the temple in Tultitlán and the way in which the death of its founder has been narratively and symbolically codified.¹

The devotion for *la Santa Muerte*, as discussed in the article, presents a high degree of variance from shrine to shrine. However, the case of the Temple in Tultitlán is especially notable. Its foundation was the result of the specific creative and entrepreneurial initiatives of Legaria Vargas, which already at the outset displayed a marked, highly personal

¹ I thank David Byström, Fabrizio Lorusso, Elena Mazzetto, Enrica Gualtieri, and John Thompson for their practical assistance and for reading this paper's draft. I likewise thank *Señora* Enriqueta Vargas for her interview and for the warm welcome at the Temple.

distinction in terms of rituals and symbols (beginning with the very usage of the colossal effigy that towers in the Temple). Secondly, such initiatives have been abruptly interrupted by a dramatic and unexpected event, the founder's murder, to which Vargas Ortiz, in her capacity of new leader, had to respond both as a bereaved mother coping with a personal tragedy and as a spiritual entrepreneur overtaking a religious role with a different identity and background and in the context of a deep crisis. The result has been the emergence of a special narrative, as well as of an embryonic theology that is so far understudied and that stands out by virtue of its originality.²

The author of the present pages has adopted a twofold investigative methodology. On the one hand, while being based in Mexico City, he has personally approached the Temple, interviewing *la Madrina* and participating in Sunday rituals on two different occasions, thus embracing an ethnographic, descriptive approach. On the other hand, as a scholar trained in philosophy and textual analysis, he has thoroughly examined both *el Comandante's* and *la Madrina's* self-narratives (as they are contained in printed material authored by them and orally conveyed during the ceremonies) in order to grasp and analytically describe their conceptual structure so to understand some deep-seated reasons of the success of Vargas Ortiz' narrative. The result is an analytical reconstruction of the theological evolution of the devotion as it is practiced and preached at the Temple and that displays some surprising and utterly creative aspects, once again unique in the landscape of present-day *Santa Muerte* devotion. Although the Temple is occasionally touched upon in extant scholarship, analytical and comparative examinations of its leaders' written works, whose analysis requires a command of vernacular, Mexican low-class Spanish language are virtually non-existent.

Articles published in Mexican press are taken into account as well, mainly in order to reconstruct the *facts* concerning the Temple (as well as some other notable shrines), its foundation, and its vicissitudes. How-

² It should be remarked that the present article focuses on a notable and visible manifestation of the devotion, one of the few attempts at institutionalizing the discourse and rituals concerning *la Santa Muerte*. However, this should be regarded as an exception, not the rule. In fact, most devotees entertain a direct relationship with *la Santa* through domestic and street altars.

ever the usual interpretation promoted by popular Mexican press, and namely the one (subscribed to by the Roman Catholic Church and government alike) of the devotion as essentially linked to the world of organized crime and as satanic in character, is not considered complete or satisfactory in order to grasp and describe the aforementioned theology.

Representations

La Santa Muerte, an expression that can be translated as *Saint* or *Holy Death*, is also referred to as *Santísima Muerte* or with appellatives such as *la Flacalla Flaquita* (the Skinny/the Little Skinny One), *la Hermana Blanca* (the White Sister), *la Niña Blanca* (the White Girl), and *la Santita* (the Little Saint). She is represented in printing; with statues of varying dimensions and of various materials; in jewellery; in painting (especially *murales*); and in tattoos. Basically, she appears as a skeleton draped in a tunic or a cape whose aspect and nature can vary. Attributes include an arch and/or an arrow, an axe, a book, a candle, a cross, a crown, a globe (in her hands or under her feet), a halo, a hat, an hourglass, a lantern, a lock, an owl, a rose, balancing scales, a sceptre, a scythe, a skull, a sword, a torch, and angelic or bat wings. The number and dimensions of such attributes vary considerably. Notable is *la Santa* sitting on a throne; in this position, she can be represented as *piadosa* i.e. holding an emaciated corpse, or even the Christ himself. Further known representations include her riding a horse or a motorcycle, flying over graves with the rising dead, and even pregnant.

Santa-Muerte merchandising includes devotional books, incense, oils, powder, perfumes, soap, and sprays. Most common are votive candles (*veladoras*) of different colours, each one corresponding to an area of intervention: black (death), blue (success in studies), coffee (communication with the dead), golden (business and money), green (legal problems), purple (health), red or pink (love and friendship), and [bone] white (bodily purification); a version with seven colours, incorporating all the respective powers, exists as well. The effigies are usually placed in an altar,³ often in more than one exemplar. They

³ Researchers have recorded the existence of at least 300 altars in all of Mexico (cf. C. Reyes Ruiz, *Historia y actualidad del culto a la Santa Muerte*, «El Cotidiano»,

are prayed to (individually or collectively), and honoured with offers including: alcoholic drinks, balloons, candles, cigarettes and cigars (often lit and placed in her mouth or hands), cigar smoke (in a *pureo* or purification ritual), cocaine stripes, food, heroin (contained in a syringe), incense, jewellery, joints, money, necklaces, rosary beads, seeds, and toys. Other forms of honouring *la Santa* include chants and cheers (*porras*), dance, musical performances (for instance by *mariachis*), songs, and firecrackers.

Devotees state that she is very miraculous, «*milagrosa*»; actually, her interventions in human affairs are rather down-to-earth, concrete, and useful. She mainly helps them in finding a job, getting out of jail, achieving success in business, purging addictions, getting a lover back, protecting health, and finding a good defence attorney and just judge.

Recent (Mexican) history

The origin of the devotion pertains to the area of its interpretations and will be touched upon in the next section. Here we can recall some relevant, recent, and ascertainable episodes that occurred in the Mexican Republic as they were reported in the press.

On October 31, 2001 Enriqueta Romero Romero (b. 1945), a life-long devotee, decided to display a life-sized statue of *la Santa* that she had received from her son outside of her house in *calle* Alfarería 12 in the *barrio* Tepito in Mexico City. This marked the beginning of notable public manifestations of devotion. Presently, devotees stream to the shrine and participate in rosaries officiated on the first day of each month. They can reach 4-5,000 units. Over the years, the devotion at this altar has been taking on a more structured shape (there is even a voluntary team of crowd control), but *Doña* Queta never claimed any special powers nor has she or her family ever attempted to build a sacerdotal system; she only claims to be the warden (*guardiana*) of the shrine.⁴

26 [2011], no. 169, pp. 51-54).

⁴ Cf. V.A. Espinosa, V. Adrián, *Santa Muerte: Doña Queta, guardiana del altar en Tepito*, «El Universal», July 13, 2011 (www.eluniversaldf.mx/cuauhtemoc/nota29968.html) [all websites have been accessed on May 20, 2015; when not

David Romo Guillén (b. 1959) tried to institutionalize the devotion by infusing the belief in *la Santa* into the *Iglesia Católica Tradicional México-Estados Unidos, Misioneros del Sagrado Corazón y San Felipe de Jesús*,⁵ registered in 2003 (the petition dated back to 2000). Its seat, the *Santuario Nacional de la Santa Muerte*, founded one year before the registration, was located in *calle* Nicolás Bravo Street 35, Mexico City. A former employee of the Mexican Air Force involved in other religious groups earlier in life, Romo appointed himself as archbishop (*arzobispo*), tried to create a clergy, and raise funds allegedly for new temples.⁶ In 2005, the Church lost its legal status as a religious association; the Secretariat of the Interior claimed that the devotion for *la Santa* had not been declared while registering the association.⁷ «*Monseñor*» Romo organized public demonstrations,⁸ emphasised the difference between his Church and the Catholic one (for instance being open to the LGBT community), and he insisted on the difference between such devotion and the *narcos*.⁹ His plans came to an end in 2012; he was judged guilty of robbery, kidnapping, and extortion and was sentenced to 66 years in prison including a fine 2,666 times the minimum Mexican salary.¹⁰

The *Santa Muerte-narcos* equation, stigmatizing the devotion, was subscribed to by governmental institutions and fuelled by press cover-

specified, the articles are undated and/or anonymous].

⁵ It is unclear whether Romo's original intention was to use his church as a Trojan horse for the devotion or if he eventually «hijacked» it. The church does not accept sacraments, Papal authority, sacerdotal celibacy, Mary's assumption, and Immaculate Conception; it opposes abortion but not contraceptives (F. Lorusso, *Santa Muerte. Patrona dell'umanità*, Stampa Alternativa, Viterbo 2013, pp. 115-16).

⁶ J. Sánchez, *Santa muerte tendrá templo mundial en DF*, «El Universal», July 14, 2009 (www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/612176.html).

⁷ J.G. Mejía, *Fichados de criminales, fieles a la Santa Muerte*, «El Universal», January 8, 2011 (www.eluniversal.com.mx/ciudad/104751.html).

⁸ H. Villareal, *La 'guerra santa' de la Santa Muerte*, «Milenio semanal», April 6, 2009 (<http://hectorvillarreal.wordpress.com/2013/11/01/santa/>).

⁹ *Iglesia de Santa Muerte casa a gays*, «El Universal», March 3, 2010 (www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/663167.html).

¹⁰ C. Bolaños, *Dan 66 años de cárcel a líder de la Santa Muerte*, «El Universal», June 14, 2012 (www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/853603.html).

age, emphasising the discovery of altars or *Santa-Muerte* related items in drug dealers' raided houses or human sacrifices in her honour.¹¹ Since 2009 altars and chapels dedicated to *la Santa* have been systematically destroyed by federal authorities in different Mexican states. This was motivated by legal reasons (the buildings' irregularities) but bore a symbolic value in the fight against drug dealers.¹² The action also represented a convergence of the government (especially of the conservative and catholic PAN, National Action Party, in power between 2000 and 2012) and the Catholic Church. Norberto Cardinal Rivera Carrera, archbishop of Mexico City, even appointed exorcists to contrast the devotion, clearly considering it as satanic.¹³ Later on, the Vatican expressed itself officially; in May 2013, Gianfranco Cardinal Ravasi, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture speaking in Mexico City, defined it as a «degeneration of religion»;¹⁴ it is seen as a form of idolatry, connected to a theological mistake: Jesus, indeed, did *defeat* death (but a usual statement by the devotees that turns the official Catholic doctrine upside-down is that death is clearly most-powerful, since not even Jesus could escape her).¹⁵ However, devotees usually emphasise that they live their faith alongside a Catholic one. They state that *la Santa* for them is not a substitute for God, and insist in distinguishing themselves from drug dealers and delinquency in general, albeit recognizing that the devotion attracts people from any

¹¹ *Familia mexicana hacía sacrificios humanos en honor a la Santa Muerte*, «Univision.com», March 30, 2012 (<http://noticias.univision.com/article/967351/2012-03-30/mexico/noticias/familia-mexicana-hacia-sacrificios-humanos>).

¹² F. Gómez, *Levantán en frontera norte narcoaltares*, «El Universal», October 27, 2007 (www.eluniversal.com.mx/primera/29802.html); Id., *Autoridades mexicanas combaten la Santa Muerte*, «Informador», 2009 (www.informador.com.mx/mexico/2009/95966/6/autoridades-mexicanas-combaten-la-santa-muerte.htm).

¹³ H. Figueroa, *Incluirá Arquidiócesis a exorcistas en la lucha anticrimen*, «Excelsior», December 28, 2010 (www.excelsior.com.mx/node/699574).

¹⁴ *Vatican Declares Mexican Death Saint Blasphemous*, «BBC News Latin America & Caribbean», May 9, 2013 (www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-22462181).

¹⁵ F. Gaytán Alcalá, *Santa entre los malditos. Culto a la Santa Muerte en el México del siglo XXI*, «Liminar», VI (2008), no. 1, January-June, pp. 40-51.

walk of life, criminals included.¹⁶ Police members openly carry images of *la Santa* and the devotion flourishes in jails.¹⁷

Mexico is a federal republic subdivided into 31 states. Mexico City, with the status of federal district, is literally nestled into the State of Mexico which encloses it on all cardinal points except the south, where the capital borders with the State of Morelos. Tultitlán is a municipality situated in the central-northern part of the State of Mexico. There, on January 27, 2008, in Avenida López Portillo, Jonathan Legaria Vargas (also known as *Comandante Pantera* or *Padrino Endoque*) inaugurated the *Templo Internacional de la Santa Muerte*. Legaria never applied for official governmental recognition (neither for himself as a minister nor for the temple as a devotional place). On July 31, 2008 around 2 AM while leaving a radio station from which he regularly broadcasted a programme about the devotion, Legaria was mortally shot in his car with heavy weapons. He was 26 years old. Of the two women who accompanied him, only one was wounded.¹⁸

Notable scholarly interpretations

An entire academic article on *la Santa* appears as early as 1998, according to which she was first prayed to in connection with love matters.¹⁹ In 2005, Elsa Malvido, on the basis of an iconographic analysis, points out the European roots of *la Santa*, whose motif has strong analogies with the Catholic doctrines and representations of the «good death» and the «triumph of death».²⁰ In 2006, Claudio Lomnitz dedicates some pag-

¹⁶ C. Reyes Ruiz, *Historia y actualidad* cit., *passim*.

¹⁷ F. Gómez, *Autoridades mexicanas* cit.; R. Pacheco Colín, *El culto a la Santa Muerte pasa de Tepito a Coyoacán y la Condesa*, «La Crónica de Hoy», 2004 (www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2004/114661.html).

¹⁸ *Protección de la Santa Muerte no fue suficiente para su líder*, «El Universal», 2008 (www.zocalo.com.mx/seccion/articulo/proteccion-de-la-santa-muerte-no-fue-suficiente-para-su-lider); J.A. Román, *El Templo de la Santa Muerte de Tultitlán carecía de registro ante Gobernación*, «La Jornada», 2008 (www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/08/08/index.php?section=politica&article=018n1pol).

¹⁹ J. Thompson, *Santísima Muerte: Origin and Development of a Mexican Occult Image*, «Journal of the Southwest», 40 (1998), no. 4, pp. 405-36.

²⁰ E. Malvido, *Crónicas de la Buena Muerte a la Santa Muerte en México*, «Arque-

es of his *Idea de la muerte en México* to the devotion. He observes the devotion's diffusion among working classes; *la Santa* is seemingly a less remote deity than God, in whom marginalized and/or at risk people envisage a better «negotiator» for their lives in times of crisis.²¹

However, it was over the past few years that scholarly works mushroomed. For reasons of space, we can only mention three extensive studies here. Perdigón Castañeda's monograph (2008) is pivotal.²² It is based upon extant academic literature, but also upon interviews with more than 500 informants, participation in rituals, and documents in historical archives.²³ The Mexican scholar points out the existence of a cult of death-connected deities such as the Aztec Mictlantecuhlti and, on the footprints of Malvido, the introduction of Judaeo-Christian concepts and images that could act as precursors of *la Santa* during the colonial period;²⁴ she identifies three documented historical episodes (1754, 1793, 1797) in which the Catholic Church denounced and opposed local veneration of skeletal effigies.²⁵ However, she is cautious in not identifying a direct filiation of the devotion from any such phenomena. She speaks of «syncretism»,²⁶ a «bricolage of ideas»,²⁷ and a mixture of «belief and creativity [*inventiva*]». ²⁸ She also points out that *la Santa* is «neither good nor bad». ²⁹ R. Andrew Chesnut's monograph was published in 2012.³⁰ The US-American scholar based his study on field research in Tepito as well as press articles; scholarly sources directly related to *la Santa* are limited to Perdigón Castañeda's monograph and a few more; he includes discussions of the devotion in the

omex», 76 (2005), XIII, November-December, pp. 20-27.

²¹ C. Lomnitz, *Idea de la muerte en México*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City 2006, p. 469.

²² J.K. Perdigón Castañeda. *La Santa Muerte protectora de los hombres*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City 2008.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 19-29.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 31-33.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

³⁰ R.A. Chesnut, R. Andrew, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

US. The discussion is enriched with personal anecdotes. The findings, empirical and critical alike, are not different from or more original than those of Perdigón Castañeda. Fabrizio Lorusso's monograph appeared in 2013.³¹ His methodology includes participation in rituals, examination of academic literature, press articles, and devotional publications as well as informal interviews. Lorusso, in particular, deconstructs the journalistic myth that equates *la Santa* and the *narcos*.³² The devotion, he states, is the «great misunderstood in the recent history of folk cults»;³³ he defines the devotion «subversive»;³⁴ by always incorporating new elements it always acquires new forms; this, in Lorusso's words, «explains its persistence».³⁵

Other studies have emphasised that the devotion is also embraced by members of the middle class. This can be explained by referring to the widely shared assumption that *la Santa Muerte* protects all those who experience a situation of risk and uncertainty or feel they might be the victim of some injustice; the very concepts of «risk», «uncertainty» and «injustice» can be subjectively extended to any existential situation so that anybody, even a wealthy person, can feel that *la Santa* is a figure to whose protection they are entitled.³⁶

Jonathan Legaria Vargas' narrative

Two distinct narratives exist of Legaria's life. One is contained in two booklets published under the name of *el Comandante Pantera*. *Santa*

³¹ F. Lorusso, *Santa Muerte* cit.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 59-68.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 136-37.

³⁶ A. Huffsichmid, *Devoción satanizada: La Muerte como nuevo culto callejero en la Ciudad de México*, «iMex Revista. México Interdisciplinario», 2 (2012), no. 3, pp. 97-107; J.A. Flores, *Iconografías emergentes y muertes patrimonializadas en América Latina: Santa Muerte, muertos milagrosos y muertos adoptados*, «AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana», 9 (2014), no. 2, pp. 115-40; S. Bigliardi, *La Santa Muerte and Her Interventions in Human Affairs: A Theological Discussion*, «Sophia – International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions», 55 (September 2016), no. 3, pp. 303-23.

Muerte 'Revelations' and *The Son of la Santa Muerte – a Life with no Limits* were both published in 2007, in February and June respectively. The former contains a short definition of the religion, some self-biographical pages, and the instructions for several rituals. The latter was written in co-authorship with the journalist Carlos Marin Demier; the narrative is actually told from his viewpoint. Both show rather poor editing, with numerous orthographical errors.³⁷ A third narrative, partially contradicting or correcting Legaria's one can be found in his mother's book *Who Killed Comandante Pantera*.³⁸

In *The Son of la Santa Muerte*, the story is told through a series of strongly vernacular dialogues between the journalist and *el Comandante*. The former presents himself as having a background both in newspapers (*El Sol de Acapulco*) and in TV (*Canal 2, Canal 30*).³⁹ He develops an interest in the devotion and decides to approach someone who has been described to him by David Romo as *hijo de la Santa Muerte: el Comandante Pantera*.⁴⁰ After some hesitation, *el Comandante* decides to tell him his story but forces him to experience his daily life for several months. Carlos is thus involved in a series of vicissitudes that include a shooting and a clandestine passage to Texas together with a group of bikers. In the course of their conversations, numerous biographical details are revealed to us. *El Pantera* was born in Culiacán (State of Sinaloa) but abandoned in Tepito when he was two years old by an aunt. Enriqueta Vargas is never mentioned but she is most likely indicated with the appellative *la güera*, the blonde one.⁴¹ *El Pantera* describes how he grew up in the streets of Tepito while *la güera* and her family were not giving him any love or protection, nor did he receive a catholic education.⁴² The devotion for *la Santa* characterized him from his very childhood, but it was strengthened in crucial episodes. Once as a child, he saw a soldier being

³⁷ *Comandante Pantera*, 2007. *El hijo de la Santa Muerte*. Self-Published in Mexico (from now on abbreviated as: H); *Comandante Pantera*. 2007. *Santa Muerte «Revelaciones»*, self-published in Mexico (abbr.: R).

³⁸ E. Vargas, *¿Quien mató al Comandante Pantera?*, self-published in Mexico, 2011 (abbr.: Q). This publication displays accurate editorial work.

³⁹ H, p. 9.

⁴⁰ H, p. 15. Notably he is never identified with his proper name.

⁴¹ H, pp. 40-41.

⁴² H, pp. 30-31.

stabbed to death in the metro station Balderas; he grabbed the victim's backpack and ran home. Inside the backpack he found a statue of *la Santa Muerte*, a gun calibre .45, and a wallet with one million pesos.⁴³ He was trained as a boxer and started a career as a *luchador* (wrestler).⁴⁴ His encounter with a citizen of the Republic of Congo married to a Mexican woman, both devotees of the Afro-Caribbean *bryiumba*, was crucial.⁴⁵ They eventually took him to both Haiti, where he was initiated to Palo Mayombe,⁴⁶ and to Congo, where after a gory ritual, he was allowed to join the *Abakuá* fraternity.⁴⁷ After having collected significant material, Carlos was shot in the street by two men who had stolen his notes. He then had a near-death experience in which he saw both *la Santa* and *el Comandante*.⁴⁸ In the end, he participated in a private ceremony in which *Pantera* revealed that he was *el hijo de la Santa Muerte*, but also Carlos, as a testament to all he had gone through.⁴⁹

In this book, *el Comandante* is definitely described as a criminal, albeit a noble-hearted one, and with important political ties.⁵⁰ A series of archetypes is conflated in his character: youngster criminal in Tepito, inmate, drug dealer, policeman, wrestler, biker, clandestine, entrepreneur, and pimp. It is reported that he had ties with David Romo and participated in a staged demonstration with his bikers in front of *Los Pinos*, the presidential residence in Mexico City.⁵¹ It is doubtful that the book was strictly meant as biographical. It most likely worked as advertisement for the next opening of the temple, announced in the conclusion along with a 30 metres statue.⁵² Independently of the truth concerning the biographical account, it is notable how the connection with delinquency and violence is deeply marked especially considering the narrative concocted by Legaria's mother after his death.

⁴³ H, pp. 42-43.

⁴⁴ H, p. 45.

⁴⁵ H, p. 86.

⁴⁶ H, p. 90 ff.

⁴⁷ H, p. 94 and 141-42.

⁴⁸ H, p. 135.

⁴⁹ H, pp. 138-46.

⁵⁰ H, p. 122.

⁵¹ H, p. 130.

⁵² H, p. 156.

This connection is emphasised as well in the other booklet, *Revelations*, where the religion is presented as the only one in which «nobody is judged» and the devotees are simply invited to be themselves and to do well whatever they have decided to do in life.⁵³ Also in its pages we find a short account of Legaria Vargas' Afro-Caribbean initiation⁵⁴ as well as his ties with delinquency.⁵⁵ One of the rituals explained in the book is called «For the criminal – in order not to be arrested», stating that it has been tested on people and inmates used to committing robberies or assaults [*sic*].⁵⁶

Let's consider Enriqueta's biography of the son. While reconstructing it, she refers to his longer book as «likely aimed at creating a myth of himself»⁵⁷ and does not relate anything about *Pantera's* difficult childhood; she states that he was her son by Ignacio Legaria Ramírez (b. 1940), an attorney (*abogado*) with a background in politics; Jonathan was born in the State of Mexico, Ciudad Satélite, Naucalpán.⁵⁸ She defines herself as an entrepreneur, possessing and managing the first karaoke-bar in the State of Mexico.⁵⁹ She confirms the travels (Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nigeria, Congo, and the USA) and the initiation of Jonathan, explaining for example that he was also known as *Padrino Endoque* that indicates a high position in the *santería*.⁶⁰ However, she states that he received a catholic education.⁶¹ The nickname *Pantera* referred to a tattoo that he sported on his left arm, and *Comandante* to his role among the bikers.⁶² The plot on which the temple was founded, according to her tale, was given to Jonathan as a present by a devotee who unsuccessfully tried to claim it back after

⁵³ R, p. 6.

⁵⁴ R, pp. 7-12.

⁵⁵ R, pp. 19-28.

⁵⁶ R, pp. 52-53.

⁵⁷ Q, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Q, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁹ Q, p. 17. She also defines herself as a «composer» and indeed some *corridos* (songs) reported in the book are hers (*see* for instance Q, p. 112).

⁶⁰ Q, p. 24.

⁶¹ Q, p. 19.

⁶² Q, p. 23.

his death.⁶³ She describes Jonathan's costly lifestyle: expensive clothes, restaurants, cars, and motorcycles but insists that he was no criminal, his income deriving from a mechanic's workshop he owned as well as from other unspecified '*comercios*'.⁶⁴ She states that he was very athletic, had a perfect command of English,⁶⁵ and married a girl but separated from her after a while to start a relationship with a woman with whom he had two children.⁶⁶ Both in the book and in an interview she gave me on January 25, 2015,⁶⁷ Enriqueta emphasised his extraordinariness (he was able to read at the age of 8 months) and his devoutness – for instance he could not stand the sight of the suffering crucifix and always took Jesus out of the cross. She also confirmed his contact with Romo but without explaining how it came about; she explained that Jonathan was irritated by Romo's decision to replace the image of *la Santa* with that of Romo's wife.⁶⁸ Enriqueta also stated that Jonathan predicted his death.⁶⁹

The Temple: structure and rituals

The temple can be reached in a 10 minute car-ride from the central station of Tlittlán. Such station can be reached from Mexico City in half an hour with a metropolitan train. It is a plot of land that comprehends a two-storey building and a rectangular yard (approximately 50x20 m²) that can be accessed through a large gate or through the building, whose first storey hosts a shop selling *Santa Muerte*-related items. The second storey hosts Enriqueta Vargas' personal offices. The buildings, as well as the shop's walls, are decorated with colourful *murales* showing *el Comandante*, his mother, and the Aztec god of the dead.

In the yard, on one of the long sides, is located an effigy of *la Santa* standing 22.17 meters high. She is represented as a caped skeleton

⁶³ Q, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Q, pp. 21-22 and 19 (the unspecified '*comercios*' were mentioned in our personal interview, *see below*).

⁶⁵ Q, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Q, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁷ Recording currently available in the author's archives.

⁶⁸ Q, p. 55.

⁶⁹ Q, pp. 112-13.

stretching her arms, the rib cage also being visible. The cape was once white but Enriqueta had it painted black after her son's death. The giant effigy is actually hollow: it is a metal structure on which are mounted panels covered with asphalt. In front of it stands a kiosk painted in gold: it is *el Pantera's* personal altar whose internal curtains are disclosed during ceremonies. Other kiosks on its right side host statues of *la Santa*, each one dedicated to a specific area of intervention according to the colour. All templets are replete with offers. One of them hosts, among other statues, one of *la Santa* holding Jesus' corpse. Another one is dedicated to a specific ceremony invented by Legaria. He believed that any time an image of *la Santa* was accidentally broken, that meant that it had «absorbed» a negative event that would have otherwise hit its owner. Thus the devotees bring the broken statuettes to the templet where they are first left some days to «discharge» and eventually buried under it.

During the ceremonies, the devotees take their place on plastic chairs placed under a plastic roofing right in front of *Pantera's* templet and the giant effigy. On such occasions, a life-size figure of *Pantera* is placed next to the golden kiosk. Tables are located in front of the chairs where the devotees place their own images of *la Santa* so that they can be blessed during the ceremony. According to filmed interviews with Enriqueta, baptisms and marriages (including same-sex ones) are performed at the templet.⁷⁰ Ceremonies usually take place on Sundays at 1 pm. I have participated in two of them, respectively on January 25 and May 18, 2015.

Enriqueta, simply dressed but wearing her son's colourful necklaces, led the first one. The participants numbered about a hundred; they seemed to be mostly low-class families. Before Enriqueta arrived, a loud-speaker was playing songs dedicated to *la Santa* as well as to her son. To begin with, *la Santa* was «awakened» with the sound of a rain stick and a shell. The ceremony was basically a sequence of invocations to her and the *Padrino* as her intercessor, led by Enriqueta (she read aloud a book placed in front of her on a golden bookstand and the devotees repeated). Some elements were clearly *borrowed* from Catholic mass: the Lord's Prayer repeated several times as well as an exchange of

⁷⁰ *Santa Muerte. Siguiendo un legado*, 2010, self-produced documentary on DVD, *Templo de la Santa Muerte Internacional*. Also available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9WZbjIWn90.

the sign of peace. At the beginning, *la Madrina* (as she is referred to) uttered, «Here there are no criminals nor policemen, only *hermanos* [brothers]!». During an introductory speech in which she welcomed the people present not from Tultitlán, she boasted the internationalization of the «cult» (a term she herself employs). In different phases of the ceremony the devotees stand up, sit down, bow to their knees, stand up again, and join their hands. At some point, all stood still and silent and *la Madrina* touched each one's forehead with her palm while murmuring a blessing. At the end, Enriqueta invited everybody to help *la Santa* help themselves and to enjoy life precisely because we cannot know when death will come. She finally sprinkled the devotees, their *Santa-Muerte* items, and even their wallets with holy water through an aspersorium. Eventually, the devotees lined up to receive a second, individual aspersion and blessing. A small portion of rice and chicken and a glass of Coke was served to everybody.

On the second occasion Enriqueta was in Cancún, she led the ceremony through a mobile phone whose sound was amplified. The ceremony began with *la Santa's* awakening, but this time it included several formulas that *imitated* Catholic ones with significant modifications. The devotees crossed themselves «In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of *Pantera's spirit*» and *la Santa* was invoked in a prayer mimicking the Lord's Prayer that began with the words «Our mother in earth...» Enriqueta's daughter, wearing *Pantera's* necklaces, imparted the final aspersion as well as the individual blessing, once again in the name of *Pantera's spirit*.

Enriqueta Vargas' narrative

I have already referred to Enriqueta Vargas' book in order to reconstruct some data regarding her son's life. The book also tells the story of how she learned that he had been murdered and the investigations she carried out with many difficulties. For reasons of space, I will only focus on the narrative about her conversion; I can just mention that she identifies a federal agent as her son's killer who was eventually killed in his turn.⁷¹

⁷¹ Q, pp. 125-26.

She relates that, upon seeing her son's death, her first reaction towards the *Santa* was a reproach: «Why did you let my son die, who loved you so much? Why didn't you look after him?».⁷² She also reports some odd events that followed his death: anybody who tried to take his place in the radio broadcast was soon impeded by «his spirit» that turned off their microphones or moved their chair.⁷³

Enriqueta narrates how she used to get jealous when Jonathan stated that *la Santa* was his mother and Enriqueta only his «earthly mother»; once they fought over this statement; after that she turned to an effigy that he kept in his room and furiously shouted: «I am his mother. Not you! Do you understand? I am his mother!» and she concludes, «perhaps by taking him she wanted to show that he belonged to her, not to me».⁷⁴ After Jonathan's murder, the devotees began reporting *la Santa's* miraculous interventions as well as *el Padrino's*; an old lady told Enriqueta that, after being touched by him, she got rid of her pains and left the temple feeling «like a 15-year old». This marked Enriqueta's approach to *la Santa* that culminated with a promise:

I am going to raise you as much as possible. And you, *Santísima Muerte*, deliver my son's murderers to me! Since the damned authorities do not intend to do anything about it, take charge of them! Let them cry a thousand times more than I did! Let them never pay enough for what they did to my son! May they die and not find place even in hell!⁷⁵

Enriqueta states that *la Santa* knows her pain and that she still believes in God, but through *la Santa*.⁷⁶ Once, while visiting her son's grave, she desperately asked *la Santa* to demonstrate her existence; at first there was no reaction, and she left the cemetery in great sorrow. Eventually, she approached her grandchild Aldevarán's cradle. The baby at that time was one year old. He hugged her and kissed her and unexpectedly spoke using the nickname she had always used with Jonathan as

⁷² Q, p. 44.

⁷³ Q, p. 78.

⁷⁴ Q, p. 69.

⁷⁵ Q, p. 71.

⁷⁶ Q, p. 72.

a child: *Teté*. This was proof of *la Santa*'s existence for Enriqueta.⁷⁷ *La Santa* communicated with her in numerous ways. When she still feared her, she once came home at night and cried in front of a mirror; all of a sudden her own image appeared distorted and cried in a hoarse voice, «Cursed! May them be cursed!». That day, Enriqueta lost her fear for *la Santa* and was «in communion» with her.⁷⁸ Once, in a time of difficulty, she unexpectedly found her son's *abrecaminos* [*path-opener*] necklaces in her car after having left them next to Jonathan's picture in an altar.⁷⁹ Another time, tens of colourful butterflies appeared during a sermon and indicated that a problem was soon to find a solution.⁸⁰

Enriqueta finally decided to take her son's place as the temple's leader as well as symbolically:

For you, my son, I am going to carry on with what you did. I am going with everything and against everything. I will always bear your words in mind: «Without pain. Without fear. And with faith». I will carry on with a heritage. Now, I am the daughter of *la Santa Muerte*!⁸¹

Another time, an inflatable puppet representing Santa Claus appeared in Enriqueta's bar. On December 3, 2009, she dreamed of her son's face covered with blood. The following day she heard the news of Emilio Gómez Sánchez (allegedly the man who had murdered Jonathan) being killed by some people riding motorcycles and understood that *la Santa* had communicated with her through the puppet: «Her Christmas had come on a motorcycle».⁸²

Enriqueta reports other extraordinary events: her son appeared in pictures taken of his personal altar, *la Santa* warned devotees of street accidents that they were thus able to avoid,⁸³ or her images broke all of a sudden (as well as flower pots and journalists' cameras) on the an-

⁷⁷ Q, pp. 72-73.

⁷⁸ Q, p. 134.

⁷⁹ Q, p. 81.

⁸⁰ Q, p. 88.

⁸¹ Q, p. 103.

⁸² Q, pp. 105-06.

⁸³ Q, pp. 137-38.

niversary of Jonathan's murder.⁸⁴ During our interview, Enriqueta told me similar versions of such tales and added one of a dream in which a man appeared to her, only one half of whose face could be seen, stating that he had taken Jonathan unwillingly; next to him was an archangel who said, «I need to keep on fighting the devils».

Concluding remarks

The symbology of the colours, the typology of miracles attributed to *la Santa Muerte*, the kind of people who attend the temple, their needs and wishes: all in Tultitlán seems to conform to the general descriptions that scholars have elaborated of the devotion. However, some creative variations that marked its specific identity were introduced by the founder, such as the ritual of the «broken *Santas*»; another powerful identity marker was of course the founder's persona as he shaped it through his narratives. His murder was unexpected and devastating: the hierarchy was beheaded, the reputation of the leader was tainted, and the symbolic appealing of *la Santa*, i.e. her elementary theology, was severely jeopardized by a disruptive event that seemingly demonstrated her non-existence or at least her powerlessness.

Showing an unusual fortitude, as well as remarkable entrepreneurial skills, Enriqueta Vargas managed to produce a powerful counter-narrative (that in part, as we have seen, contradicts Jonathan's tales, adding to the ambiguity) and perform an efficacious action that turned a seemingly ineluctable decline into a renewal of the devotion, which acquired an even more marked identity in Tultitlán.

La Santa is often described by her devotees with human characteristics, like jealousy or being a *cabrona* (a term used semi-ironically, with an ample spectre of meanings including «stubborn» or «tough»). She is, in other words, perceived by the devotees as «one of them». However, she lacks a main narrative, a hagiography, with which a devotee can emotionally and biographically identify. She is not a human being who has been sanctified. She did not appear for the first time anywhere, so that self-identification isn't possible either with a first sighting, and there is no principal, original miracle.

⁸⁴ Q, p. 143.

In Tultitlán, the absence of such narrative is compensated by Enriqueta's biographical narrative, a *Madrina* who is a suffering mother (a clear symbolic overlapping with Mary) and who also can present herself as a convert. Having suffered the deepest sorrow a mother can experience, and having realized *la Santa's* existence and power, she synthesises in herself the two experiences that characterize most devotees: pain and conversion. This makes for a powerful self-identification on part of the devotees and creates a special charisma. Such narrative also neutralizes a trait that otherwise might distance Enriqueta from the devotees – being a middle-class entrepreneur, married to an *abogado* with important political ties (a point she nevertheless proudly stresses in her biography).

Jonathan based his own narrative construction of religious authority on esoteric apprenticeship around the world and his persona on the «tough» image of a criminal. In the account of his life produced by his mother, the focus shifts from this to his *early vocation*; he is described as endowed with extraordinary qualities, including honesty and innocence, in order to oppose the malignant rumours that followed his murder. Narratively and visually, he has become a «*Santo de la Santa*». He now plays a role similar to that of Mary, mother of Jesus (*advocata nostra*) in Catholic doctrine. In other words, he can either perform extraordinary deeds in person or intercede with *la Santa* for the devotees. It should be noted that this «new trinity» (*Santa Muerte-Padrino-Madrina*) definitely overshadows Catholic figures, despite the devotees' (and Enriqueta's) insistence that they still believe in God. The shift was confirmed by the formulas I heard during the second ceremony in which *la Santa* replaced God and *el Padrino* the Holy Spirit.

La Santa Muerte is an ambiguous figure; she can avoid death, *because/but* she *is* death. She saves you every time, states a scholar, except the last one.⁸⁵ If she does not avoid somebody's death, she can at least concede that it happens without pain. Enriqueta, symbolically and psychologically, deals with this deep-seated ambiguity (as well as the overwhelming, terrible *fact* that her son was killed) through the creation of a narrative in which Jonathan's atrocious murder (apparently a *failure* as his plans were *not* accomplished and *la Santa* did *not* protect him) turns into a *success story*. Enriqueta lost her son, but at the same time

⁸⁵ F. Gaytán Alcalá, *Santa entre los malditos* cit.

managed to deeply understand him as she had never done before. She developed a privileged relationship with *la Santa*, took upon herself his role as *hija de la Santa Muerte*, and became a tireless leader who courageously endures pain, illness, and enemies' threats. Mary is traditionally described as «daughter of her own son». Enriqueta is now «sister of her own son». Jonathan already described death as a «mother» but now she is even the mother of two: Jonathan's death was his mother's second birth. His plans can be accomplished through her; the very fact that he actually died is exorcised by claiming that death did come, but by intervention of *la Santa* it came «without pain».

Furthermore, each difficulty adds to Enriqueta's charisma as a leader who can understand the devotees' pains and problems, and each success reinforces the message according to which *la Santa's* power, as well as her son's, is well present and efficacious. Finally, *la Madrina* can also present herself as a «political» hero who fights for freedom of expression and against corruption both in Mexican politics and in the Church.

La Santa Muerte is deeply ambiguous. At first sight, such ambiguity might be perceived as an inconsistency, but it is actually a theological strength allowing for the construction of always positive narratives. If someone escapes death, it is claimed it was by her intervention. If someone actually dies, that very event is taken as a warning and a reminder of her existence, power, and inescapability. It can also be stated that she at least conceded that the passing was rapid and painless. As Enriqueta Vargas has deeply understood, death always triumphs.



Santa Muerte effigy in Tultitlán



Effigy of Comandante Pantera