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"*Santa Muerte*: A Transgressing Saint Transgresses Borders"

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Abstract

It has been twenty-five years or less that the media has begun to take notice of the rise of a very different type of popular saint. It was first identified as popular "among people living in the underworld or on the fringes of society" according to Mexican journalist Alma Guillermoprieto, and while today the cult of *Santa Muerte* (Saint Death or Holy Death) can be found not only in Mexico but also in borderlands like Los Angeles, Houston, and New York, it is still mostly identified with those whose lives remain marginalized in ways that are more than just about economic marginalization, for example those serving sentences in the penal system, transgender sex workers, narco-traffickers.

In my presentation I will discuss how *Santa Muerte* or *Santísima Muerte* belongs to that group of "pseudo saints" such as *Jesús Malverde*, *Juan el Soldado* (John the Soldier), *Rey Pascual* (Guatemala), *San La Muerte* (Paraguay and Argentina) that share a devotion based on nationality, locality, social class, and also social transgression of some form. But what makes *Santa Muerte* different is not only that she is the sole female saint of death from Patagonia to New York, but also that she has been traveling with her devotees, crossing borders with them into the United States, and establishing herself along the two-thousand mile border especially in border towns like El Paso, Laredo, or Brownsville. Surely *Santa Muerte* can be described as a "heterotopic saint" who otherness is found not only in her physical appearance but also in the fact that she is Other to the Roman Catholic Church thereby appealing to those men and women whose lives are lived in those many Other spaces outside both the law and the Church. *Santa Muerte*—the transgressing saint for human transgressors—truly a borderlands saint.