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Cristina Ballí (review)

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Film Reviews

La Santa Muerte: A Folk Saint in Texas. 2017. By Charlie Lockwood and Cristina Balli. 23 min. DVD format. (Texas Folklife, Austin, TX.)

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La Santa Muerte: A Folk Saint in Texas is a short documentary film that provides an in-depth perspective on the rise of the La Santa Muerte, Saint Death, or Holy Death figure in Texas. There have been numerous news reports and YouTube videos regarding the phenomenon, and this film certainly answers a need for a more analytical perspective on this figure. The film also highlights how people possess incredibly contradictory perspectives about controversial figures like Holy Death. In the documentary, the Santa Muerte figure is examined as a folk saint, an object of Satanism, and a supernatural helper—monikers that are held and believed by different people, illustrating the discrepancy of perception.

The filmmakers chose their experts well; all have tremendous and differing insight into aspects of La Santa Muerte worship. A key voice is R. Andrew Chesnut, a Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University who specializes in Latin American Religion and is the author of *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford University Press, 2001). He notes that folk saints exist because people believe in them, yet they are not canonized. He explains that followers are proliferating in Texas among Mexican immigrants, due additionally to the increasing conversion of people of many ethnic heritages and professions. Chesnut makes two very compelling points about believers. The first is that two of the most important figures in Mexican American culture are female: Holy Death and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Secondly, he asserts that Santa Muerte is appealing to those who worry or believe that death is coming for them soon, which is so uni-

versal that the magnetism of the figure will likely grow. Another expert consulted is Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, Professor of Hispanic Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Texas, San Antonio, author of *Fierce Feminine Divinities of Eurasia and Latin America: Baba Yaga, Kālī, Pombagira, and Santa Muerte* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). She views these divinities as demonized goddesses, connecting death and female power, sex, and rage. While many see these figures as diabolical, she calls La Santa Muerte “a saint of last resorts.” A figure “that is asked for things that an official saint cannot be asked for,” La Santa Muerte has particular appeal to outsiders and people living in marginal situations. Oleszkiewicz-Peralba also discusses how government institutions hold disdain for this worship as devotees often escape official channels of control.

Differing opinions are also presented in the film. Marisela Guevara, who is a *curandero* or traditional healer, views Santa Muerte as strong, beautiful, and useful to her clientele who have specific requests. Priscilla Murr, a Jungian psychoanalyst and author, states: “I do feel it’s very positive, and I feel it’s positive because it puts people in touch with a transcendent energy which includes both the dark and the light and it is very energizing for them.” She opines that people must find their own ways to believe and express their spirituality. Beliefs about the Santa Muerte focus on humanity, life, and death.

A final perspective on Santa Muerte worship is from the Most Rev. Michael D. Pfeifer, O.M.I. Bishop Emeritus, who states: “Santa Muerte is not holy. It’s all about promoting Satanism, it’s a cult, it’s been condemned by the church, just recently.” He is concerned with how strong Santa Muerte is, particularly near the border. He believes that the saint makes “something evil look good.” Pfeifer sees the skeleton, often dressed in mantles similar to those of Mother Mary, as a corruption of both religion and culture, which he perceives as a negative influence

on those who believe that their devotion protects them.

This documentary relies heavily on fieldwork and interview materials, and all of the informants are knowledgeable and engaging. News reports where worshipping activities occur provide additional information. Often, the media views Santa Muerte worship as “strange beliefs from a distant land” that are tied to drugs and murder. Law enforcement interviewees also connect the saint with the drug trade. One investigator explains that it is not far to go from giving the saint some candy to committing murder on her behalf.

As long as her followers provide her gifts, Santa Muerte will ensure heaven after death. I particularly enjoyed the film’s footage of Santa Muerte merchandise in stores, illustrating the commercialization of the figure, and the filmmakers’ engagement with shop owners and salespeople. Multiple versions of the Santa Muerte figure are available—all made in China. As Andrew Chesnut visits a spiritual grocery store, he asks a woman in the store if Santa Muerte is a Catholic saint. She replies decisively, “I think she’s a saint for all.”

The Texas Folklife website also includes a link to a complementary short film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtO5lQG4wjQ>). At 4:40 minutes, *I Call Her “La Flaca”* (which means “The Skinny Girl”) illustrates one Latino New Yorker’s devotion to Santa Muerte. We see her tending to her altar, which allows viewers to examine the diverse and versatile beauty of the altar and understand the function of the items placed on it. If using *La Santa Muerte* in the classroom, I recommend screening both films. They work well as companion pieces, as the additional short provides a glimpse into the mind, faith, and altar artistry of a true believer.

This documentary would be useful in a class on religion or folk religion, Latin American or Texan culture, or in a discussion regarding belief systems and syncretism, altars and folk artistry or popular culture, and the use of traditional imagery and beliefs. Just as the Mexican American community is under attack from the highest levels of the US government, mainstream America is intrigued by Dia de los Muertos, a festival introduced by immigrants.

The tradition has become popularized through Day of the Dead-themed items in big-box stores, the Walt Disney Company animated film *Coco* (2017), and theme park decor. *Calaveras*, clay or sugar human skull representations, often used in Dead of the Dead celebrations, have certainly become increasingly familiar. Surely, it is only a short step to Holy Death herself, with new insights into the faith of La Santa Muerte.

Because of the War. 2018. By Toni Shapiro-Phim. 63 min. DVD format, color. (Philadelphia Folklore Project, Philadelphia, PA.)

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For most who will view this film, war is experienced through the lens of history or from a geographic distance. This was never more apparent to me than when watching Toni Shapiro-Phim’s documentary, *Because of the War*, a documentary film focused on four Liberian women living, working, and singing in Philadelphia, all of whom are refugees of the civil wars that ravaged their homeland. Their individual experiences in war become a collective voice to audiences in addressing “injustices at home in West Africa and in exile in North America” (as described on the back of the DVD cover). Instead of letting their grief and pain overwhelm or cause them to turn away from their talents and past experiences, these resilient women use their personal and community histories to power their voices through song, sharing their lives with audiences as the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change.

The documentary highlights the stories of Tokay Tomah, Zaye Tete, Marie Nyenabo, and Fatu Gayflor, from their childhoods in Liberia to living in exile in Philadelphia, while focusing on the roles of music and the Liberian civil wars in their individual journeys. Divided into four segments connected by scenes from rehearsals and performances, each woman’s unique story is presented. As we learn more about each of them, viewers begin to see similarities in the women’s lives as they move from their homeland to a new world due to the horrors of war.