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*Because of the War* by Toni Shapiro-Phim (review)

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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.

The connective chord is their music, both individually and as an ensemble. Three of the women, Fatu, Tokay, and Zaye, performed as young women in the National Cultural Troupe of Liberia. President William Tolbert recruited Tokay and Zaye for the ensemble. Maria performed with the Liberian Cultural Ambassadors Dance Troupe, joining just as the civil war was starting in 1990 and using her gifts of music and dance to work for the antiwar movement. After the war, her attention turned to the evils of human trafficking, and she again used her artistry to call attention to the practice and to warn women to protect themselves and their daughters. Each of the film's subjects employs her music to work against the civil wars from a variety of places and organizations, both in Liberia and in other West African countries. Tokay, Zaye, Marie, and Fatu also experienced the personal anguish of the loss of loved ones, and some of the women have lost children through death or displacement. It is compelling and heartbreaking to watch them navigate the landscapes of grief and geography to establish new lives in America while coming to grips with losing family and friends left behind in Liberia.

The concept of "migratory mourning" posits that the grief refugees and migrants feel for the loss of their lives as they were lived in their countries of origin is akin to the grief experienced following a death. Such mourning relates to the loss of loved ones, financial stability, and social status, and the separation from a familiar

culture and language, in addition to the loss of contact with ethnic groups, and an increased risk to physical security (see [www.hcnewyork.com/migratory-mourning.html](http://www.hcnewyork.com/migratory-mourning.html)). It is no surprise that the four women appear to experience migratory mourning and use singing as a way of moving beyond their despair.

If the focus of the film is to tell the individual stories of these women, it is substantive in that respect. However, I left wanting to know more about the music that the film's subjects continue to make together in the United States. *Because of the War* is appropriate for a folklore course that addresses personal experience narrative, and it is a good example of how to tell the story of the civilian wartime experience. The documentary is also suitable for a course on documentary film, though it is more a work of methodology than theory.

Given that the Philadelphia Folklore Project produced the film, it is perhaps intended less for academic research and more as an accessible resource for a general audience. The documentary provides a glimpse into the horrors of war as experienced by these women, but ultimately the film is a celebration of the lives that they have established and are living in Philadelphia. The website (<http://becauseofthewar.org>) that accompanies the film contributes additional context to the journeys of Tokay, Zaye, Marie, and Fatu. *Because of the War* is a reminder that there are many within our own communities who bear hidden histories.