

## *Devotional Crossings*

Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and  
Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco

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In the early evening hours in the living room of a Guadalajara brothel, “Veronica,” a male-to-female transgender sex worker who plies her trade in both Mexico and the United States, rose from her chair to turn up the volume on the stereo. The song, “*A quien le importa*” (Who Cares?) sung by the Mexican pop diva Thalia, filled the room. Veronica explains that the song echoes the way that many transgender sex workers live their lives: on their own terms, despite condemnation.

People point me out  
They point at me with their fingers  
They whisper behind my back  
And I don't care at all

I know that they critique me  
They swear that they hate me  
Jealousy tears away at them  
My life overwhelms them

Maybe it's my fault  
For not being mainstream  
It's too late  
To change now  
I will stay firm in my convictions  
I will reinforce my ideas  
My destiny is the one I decide on and choose for myself  
Who cares what I do?  
Who cares what I say?  
I am this way and I will continue to be, I will never change

Veronica's perspective, one that combines defiance with an acute awareness of societal opprobrium, is indicative of much of the devotional practices that are described in this essay. Our focus is on the spiritual practices and religious cosmology crafted by Mexican transgender sex workers who journey between San Francisco, California, and Guadalajara, Mexico. Based on ethnographic research and interviews in both the United States and Mexico, we explore how Mexican male-to-female transgender sex workers craft unique devotional rites and beliefs among one another in order to create spiritual solidarity and confront the often precarious life circumstances that can result from sex work, border crossings, and gender nonconformity.

These religious practices are best placed in cultural and political economic context. Our goal is to better understand how these devotional practices and beliefs coincide with the way Mexican transgender sex workers are, themselves, understood and treated by the state, in Mexico and in the United States, as well as by the social orders of which they are a part. We argue that these devotional practices are not renegade rituals to saints and icons outside of the traditional Catholic pantheon. Rather, the belief systems created by transgender sex workers as they cross geopolitical borders and gendered boundaries, serve to create spiritual agency within structural systems that are hostile to sex work, transgender persons, and border-crossing individuals from the south. Transgender sex workers in Mexico and in the United States, we argue, are acutely aware of the ways in which they are marginalized and thus seek alternative communities and develop spiritual practices that are shared among one another, not to disavow the Catholic traditions they may have learned as children, but to reshape their faith and the meaning they bring to devotion.

Devotions, prayers, and offerings to these saints or "pseudo saints," such as St. Jude and La Santísima Muerte (Saint Death or the Holy Death), might appear to be a way in which marginalized individuals find solace in their difference by embracing the radical fringes of devotion. We argue, however, that the opposite is true. In fact, transgender sex workers in both the United States and Mexico create a mobile, devotional subculture among themselves by sharing, translating, and crossing borders to reevaluate the role of particular saints and religious practices in their lives. In this sense the culturally distinct devotional practices they invent lend further evidence to the deterritorialization of religion, faith, and culture that has followed in the wake of mass migrations and "flows" (Appadurai 1996) of the late-capitalist postcolonial world (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Hannerz 1989). The border provides a conceptual lens; the border influences the lives of those who traverse it and mediates the unique spiritual practices developed by those who cross it.



A desire to feed one's faith and follow a spiritual path lies at the heart of the religious practices of the transgender sex workers whose voices and experiences are represented here. Migrating from Guadalajara, Mexico, to San Francisco, California, and back again is one factor in the devotions that these women choose—there is an imperative of mobility for religious symbols, easily transported, that “travel well” (Kaplan 1996) on their circular journeys between Mexico and the United States.<sup>1</sup> Coping with what some have called “a generalized condition of homelessness” (Said 1979, 18) entails creative responses. However, the perception that the traditional Catholic Church has rejected them also compels people like Veronica to seek spiritual guidance and faith in particular saints, sanctified virgins, or “unofficial” icons, such as the Holy Death. Mexican transgender sex workers have created a spiritual cosmology that draws from more marginalized icons. In part this reflects their own structurally precarious positions in society, but more than this it reflects their spiritual ingenuity and ability to creatively embrace saints who they believe light their particular way in the world.

To explain the shared spiritual traditions circulated among Mexican transgender sex workers in San Francisco and Guadalajara we first elaborate a definition of transgender and describe the socioeconomic circumstances of the sex workers whose experiences are represented here. Integral to their life dynamics are the conditions of border crossing in both a literal and symbolic sense; we

will explain how “the border” provides a key conceptual lens in addition to being a literal geopolitical boundary. Second, we elaborate the historic and migratory ties between San Francisco and Guadalajara, as well as the symbolic significance of each city as particularly tolerant of sexual and gender difference. The cities are linked symbolically as “open,” and through word of mouth workers in Guadalajara’s *casas* (brothels) are integrated into single residential occupancy (SRO) hotels in San Francisco. We also draw attention to “sexual migration,” a process whereby individuals choose to migrate not simply for familial or economic reasons, as much of migration studies and political pundits would have us believe, but for reasons of sexual freedom and expression. Finally, we turn to the social conditions, in particular the social services, available to sex workers in both cities. These structural elements, we argue, must be understood alongside of the religious practices and rearticulations of faith and spirituality that are realized through devotion to St. Jude and to Santísima Muerte.

In both San Francisco and Guadalajara the altars that transgender sex workers construct for the Virgin of Guadalupe (the indigenous virgin of Mexico), Saint Jude (the patron saint of “lost causes”), and Santísima Muerte were adorned with flowers, candles, incense, and money. While all of the sex workers who were interviewed in this research also had relationships with St. Jude and the Virgin of Guadalupe, Santísima Muerte appears to provide a very specific divine intervention in their lives. The Virgin of Guadalupe and St. Jude are both part of the accepted pantheon of viable saints to which one may offer devotions. St. Jude, well known as the saint of lost causes or desperate circumstances, would be an expected source of spiritual sustenance for those who toil in dangerous work like the conditions that confront transgender sex workers on a daily basis. Guadalupe is a national saint, and one’s belief in and devotion to her index one’s *mexicanidad* or “Mexicaness.” Sharing information, tips, images, and techniques of worship to Guadalupe and St. Jude clearly provide a spiritual cohesion among transgender sex workers as they move between San Francisco and Guadalajara.

We will argue, however, that it is Santísima Muerte who reveals the most important axis of spiritual solidarity among Mexican transgender sex workers—it is her feminine form, challenging death, that plays the most dramatic role in their religious lives. Santísima Muerte, who is the most marginalized figure in this trinity, is most like the women themselves and closest to their experience. Most importantly, one learns about Santísima Muerte from friends and fellow sex workers who provide images, statues, and altar-preparation rules.

Santísima Muerte's secrets are circulated among the small network of women who struggle against many odds on a daily basis. She is a shared deity who is condoned by the Church but rather sanctioned through a reciprocal process among transgender sex workers themselves. The Holy Death functions, effectively, to network and knit together transgender sex workers through their shared devotional practices in a spiritual solidarity.

#### STUDY SCOPE: MOBILITY AND METHODS

Because people, commerce, and discourses now constantly cross borders (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996)—some more easily than others—the research for this essay was mobile rather than situated in a single locale. Interviews with twenty-nine transgender sex workers, all originally from Guadalajara, were conducted in Spanish in both San Francisco and Guadalajara over a course of two years (2002 and 2003). Most participants came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, even those who started working as prostitutes in Mexico when they were teenagers still managed to finish high school, and some spoke with a very sophisticated vocabulary. In Guadalajara the interviews were conducted onsite at the brothels where participants worked, as well as in cafés, parks, restaurants, and private residences. Interviews were conducted with casa managers, as well as with priests, nuns, and other religious workers who work with transgender sex workers and who preferred to remain anonymous.

The interviews in San Francisco were sometimes stalled due to the precarious residency status of the participants; none of whom had legal documentation. These women speak very little English, are sometimes plagued by alcohol and drug abuse, and live in blighted neighborhoods. After more than a year of visiting their homes and speaking with sex workers on the street and in health clinics, the women who participated in the study developed a level of comfort and commitment to the interview and research process. At one time, there were eighteen transgender sex workers from Guadalajara living in the same residence hotel in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. This dynamic fluctuated however, as transgender women went back to Guadalajara and, in turn, came north again.

In addition to individual interviews, countless hours were spent in residence hotels, casas, social service agencies, churches, health clinics, street corners, the occasional bar, and other sites in San Francisco and Guadalajara frequented by transgender sex workers.

## GENDER TRANSITIONING AND THE AMBIENTE GAY

The term “transgender” is contested territory. “Transgender” was originally understood to designate those who wished to change their biological sex (hormonally and surgically) to match their gender identification. Here we use transgender in a more comprehensive sense in order to include those who live outside the social expectations and norms of gender behavior and comportment (Halberstam 1998; Hooley 1997). Rather than understanding transgenderism as a pathology, our definition focuses on the transcending, or crossing, of culturally defined categories of gender (Bockting, Robins, and Rosser 1998; Nemoto et al. 1999) to include those who wear other-gendered clothing and who may have undergone, or wish to undergo, surgical or hormonal therapy in order to transform their bodies to better suit their perceived gender. In the study conducted in Guadalajara and San Francisco, the majority of participants were male-to-female (or MTF) transgender persons who exchanged sexual services for remuneration (that is, “sex workers”). Three participants identified themselves as “transvestites” and had not had any surgical or hormonal therapy to transform their biological sex to suit their gender. Most commonly, the participants felt that they were born as the wrong gender. They always identified themselves as women and felt attracted to men. Since childhood, they had felt the desire to both act like a girl and wear feminine clothing.

The ability to physically transform one’s body was one of the primary reasons that transgender sex workers gave for their decision to migrate North. Earning dollars to pay for gender-transforming surgeries ranked high in their priorities. Cosmetic surgeries that reshape the body (breasts, face, and hips, for example) are of course available in Mexico, but many participants felt that conditions in the facilities there are more dangerous than in those in the United States. News reports in the United States add to this belief, with stories such as the one about a former stripper in Mexico who started her own plastic surgery clinic without any credentials.<sup>2</sup> Instead of injecting citrus blends to burn fat, or bovine collagen to increase the size of hips or lips, she allegedly used a mixture of industrial silicone (for sealing car parts and appliances) and soy oil (a gelatin-like substance). Similar incidents are common in Brazil (Kulick 1998) and in other parts of Mexico (Prieur 1998). In Latin America transgender sex workers have innovated ways to radically alter their physical form, though often not without dire physical consequences and side effects.

A complete sex-change operation, whether in Mexico or in the United States, is highly expensive and very few of the women interviewed can afford the cost,

coming as they do from underprivileged backgrounds and having to earn their living in the sex trade.<sup>3</sup> Directly related to their sexual labor is the decision by most to keep their original (male) genitalia. Numerous times they explained that one of their best assets, and one that draws clients to them, is their ability to affect a very feminine appearance—but with male genitalia. Their clients, they explained, prefer them to biological women because many of them desire penetration, or else simply the idea of being with a woman with male genitalia. While these women described their decisions not to undergo genital surgery as one of market strategy or a professionally based decision, there may have been other unspoken reasons that did not emerge through the interviews.

Typically, sex workers had breast implants and surgery to increase the appearance of fat and curves around the hips and buttocks. Lips and eyelids are also made fuller and more “feminine.” Alternately, they might use hormonal treatments to increase their body’s own production of tissues in strategic locations. Without the benefit of surgery or hormones, some women resorted to street strategies, including injecting themselves with industrial silicone or other ingredients to create more feminine hips. In Mexico, the women reported, there are many transgender women who inject motor oil to create breasts—a very dangerous practice as the oil migrates around the body and into the bloodstream.

Among the transgender sex workers who participated in this study, almost all of them found support for their emerging transgender identity in the *ambiente gay* (gay community or gay scene); in the ambiente they were able to find romantic and sexual partners even if the transgender women themselves did not consider themselves “gay” but rather women who were attracted to men. Being a part of this community, being an *entendida* (someone “in the know”) was fundamental to their ability to embrace their gender identity and to be a part of a shared knowledge structure, as one who “understands the significances and nuances of queer subaltern spaces” (Rodríguez 2003, 24).

It is important, however, to point out that in the case of the women who participated in this study, and for other transgender people, there is not a seamless relationship between transgender and “gay” identities. One can be transgender and engage in sexual behavior with the “opposite” sex—or a heterosexual relationship. Alternately, a transgender male-to-female individual might have a sexual and affective relationship with another woman—effectively a “lesbian” relationship. These but two possible configurations make clear how complex gender identification and sexual practices can be—how elusive they are to strict, definitive categorization. Thus a number of scholars have advocated both

dissolving the binaries by which we codify gender and sexuality (Altman 2001; Butler 1990; Saldívar 1991; Warner 1999) as well as reconsidering the “classificatory grids” (Donham 1998) that conflate gender and sexual behaviors.<sup>4</sup>

Transgender is a gender category, not necessarily one of sexual behavior or preference, though strict categorizations can often obscure more than they reveal. While transgender identity and gay identity or behavior are not one and the same, it is still critical to recognize that on the street these distinctions may become irrelevant. That is, many of the women whose voices are represented here find themselves marginalized by society because of their gender transgressions and by the sexual labor they do that is seen as “sex for sale”—and that is often coupled with homophobia.

In many cultures there is variability in how individuals enact their gender identity. Anthropologists have found much variation across the spectrum of what individual societies accept in regard to gender behavior (Howe 2002; Herdt 1996; Rosco 1991; Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Ramírez 1999). However, in most of the United States and in Latin America, both gender and sexuality are generally understood in binary terms (men/women and homosexual/heterosexual).<sup>5</sup> In Latin America since the beginning of the twentieth century men who behaved in an effeminate way or women who wore masculine attire or comported themselves in a masculine manner became symbols of “perverse sexual transgression” (Green and Babb 2002, 6). Research with transgender, MTF persons in Mexico (Higgins and Coen 2000) suggests that social condemnation of gender crossing continues into the present, but at the same time transgender sex workers have also found strategies to protect themselves both on the street and from social stigma by, for example, creating shared households (Prieur 1998). As we will demonstrate here, transgender people have also found spiritual solutions to social opprobrium through their devotional practices.

Becoming a part of the *ambiente gay* also meant, for some of the women interviewed, that they were shunned by their families and forced to leave their family homes. Typically they began their transformation from men to women as teenagers. They began spending time at gay clubs and incrementally shifted their social networks. Through meeting others who were curious about changing their gender orientation, they learned about hormones and surgeries and everything else that would be required to transform one’s self, physically and emotionally, to become a woman. Hormones and surgeries are expensive, and because these women’s transgender identity prevented them from working regular jobs, they turned to work in gay clubs as drag performers lip-syncing to pop anthems and dancing into the night bedecked in elaborate, feminine cos-

tumes. Working in the clubs was one of the few options for employment open to transgender women in Mexico, but this work also lent a certain glamour, sometimes regional fame, and an opportunity to dress publicly and literally perform as a woman—an opportunity that for many was a first. Prostitution, or sex work, was a convenient way to earn money quickly and steadily. The sex workers in this study hoped to leave sex work eventually and open their own beauty salon or seamstress business.

Despite the often-difficult situations that the sex workers have with their families due to their sexual orientation, gender transformation, or their chosen profession, their ties to their families are usually very strong. Mexican culture places great value on the family, family networks, and collective life (Carrillo 2002). About one quarter of the women interviewed in Mexico continued to live with their natal families or were in close contact with them, visiting regularly. Others had limited contact with their families of origin, only seeing them from time to time. While everyone spoke of the difficulties they had with family relationships as they become more open about their desire to transition genders, some women were able to reestablish the bonds with their natal families more effectively than others. However, regardless of whether they were in the “good graces” of their families or in regular contact with them, all of the sex workers explained that one of the reasons they wanted to earn money in the United States was to help their families back home in Mexico.

For many of the women, leaving their family homes coincided with leaving the Church or attending services less and less frequently. Many of the women had gone to church every week with their families, for mass or confession, and weekly church attendance was essentially a family ritual. Over time as they were drawn in different directions, away from family, to the North, and into sex work, this ritual became more and more remote. However, what transgender sex workers did not leave behind was a sense of themselves as spiritual people able to reinvent iconographies that would fit their new lives as women, as sex workers, and as highly mobile, border-crossing individuals.

Embracing one’s transgender identity and choosing to live out one’s gender desires disrupts many of the assumptions taken for granted about the relationship between sex and gender and the gender norms that exist in both Mexico and the United States. Distancing one’s self from the Church and in some cases from family suggests a further shift away from “tradition.” However, the transgender women who lent their voices and thoughts to this study stated that they continued to want to help their families financially, and in fact they have created new kinds of spiritual links with each other based in many ways on reinterpretations of Catholic traditions. Although it may appear as though

transgender sex workers are asserting radical difference, they are at the same time creating new forms of ritual practice, communities, and spiritual solidarities vis-à-vis their alterity or difference.

#### BORDER MOVEMENT AND SEXUAL MIGRATION: TIES THAT BIND GUADALAJARA, JALISCO, AND SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

The Mexican transgender sex workers who travel across the border to work in San Francisco, often facing dangerous conditions along the way, come to the United States with very specific goals in mind. Overwhelmingly, the women in this study came to make money for gender-transformative surgeries and to earn start-up capital for businesses they hoped to begin in Mexico. Most stayed in San Francisco for at least a year, traveling back to Mexico to visit their families when they had the funds and freedom to do so. After paying a coyote approximately \$2,500 each time they cross the border from Mexico to the United States, they make their way to San Francisco by bus or are picked up at the border by friends. Sometimes sex workers lend money to fellow workers who hope to cross into the United States, and by using inexpensive phone cards they are never far out of contact with their friends who remain in Guadalajara.

Theirs is a circuitous process of traversing the border, which like many crossings is transformative. A shift in status (documented vs. undocumented) and a shift in support mechanisms (language barriers, family networks, social services, and political agency) must be weighed against the net gain of earning dollars in place of pesos. It is partially in response to border crossing, we argue, that transgender sex workers craft the devotional lives that they do; it is not simply their identification as transgender or as sex workers that engenders their interest in unorthodox saints but also their transitions across the border.

In much the same way that gender categories serve to determine one's status as inside or outside of any particular gender system, so too do geopolitical boundaries and borders serve in "the ordering" of identities and citizenship (Kearney 2004, 134–35). The border between Mexico and the United States, while only one of thousands of borders, has become the paradigmatic border. It is here that a "third world" economy and contemporary global military and economic dominance by the United States abut one another and meet at colonial-era lines in the sand. It is this geopolitical barrier, among all others, that signals inequality most readily. At the same time, the U.S.-Mexican border is also the site of multiple possibilities for the exchange and movement of people, capital, and cultural phenomena. The literal geopolitical border between the United States and Mexico demonstrates a host of human interactions

including labor and migration (Bustamonte 1983; Chavez 1985; Fernandez-Kelley 1983; Heyman 1990, 1991; Kearney 1991, 1996; Pedraza-Bailey 1985; Salzinger 2003; Villar 1992) where the productive, mobile engagement with wage work becomes visible in a transnational framework. Border policies (Heyman 1995; Weaver 1988) and settlement patterns (Alvarez 1995; Chavez 1989, 1994; Chavez, Flores, and Lopez-Garza 1990; Davis 2001; Rouse 1992; Villar 1990) also demonstrate the multiple ways in which the border conditions the lives of migrants, immigrants, and long-term residents. Environmental and health phenomena (Chavez 1986; Herrera-Sobek 1984; Heyman 1995; Nalven 1982, 1984; Romano 1965; Rubel 1969; Trotter and Chavira 1981) also play a role in the larger border region. What has been less examined are the sexuality and gender dynamics that emerge from border crossing (cf. Gonzalez-Lopez 2003; Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

The border is a geopolitical marker and a highly regulated state boundary. But the Mexico-U.S. border can also be understood in less literal terms as a site of shifting identities, conflict, cooperation, and creative responses to a hierarchically organized world. As many authors have demonstrated, the border in many ways magnifies contradictions as well as human accommodation. And “borderlands” as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 1990) describes, cannot be simply territorialized in a literal sense but must be understood as an experiential phenomenon for those marginalized by their border-crossing status. The border, more broadly conceived, is both a conceptual and concrete place where identity, practice, and cultural forms are reconfigured. The border crosser is understood to comfortably straddle both worlds, on either side of the border. Feeling completely “at home,” though, may be more elusive (Alonso 1995; Calderon and Saldivar 1991; Vila 2000). For transgender sex workers who move back and forth between Mexico and the United States there are complexities of gender, sexuality, illegal work, and lack of documented presence in the United States that impact, in very real terms, their mobility. In more abstract terms, as “so called border people” they “are constantly shifting and renegotiating identities with maneuvers of power and submission” (Alvarez 1995, 452).

The concept of “sexual migration” (Cantú 1999; Parker 1997) is one that draws attention away from strict economic interpretations of migratory motivations. Instead it focuses on international migration that is partially or fully inspired by the sexuality of those who migrate and their understanding of the role of their sexuality vis-à-vis their future goals. Sexual migration may evolve from the desire to continue a romantic relationship with a foreign national, or it may be connected to hopes of exploring sexual desires or, in some cases, gender identity transformation. Sexual migration may also be necessary to avoid per-

secution, or simply as a search for more hospitable environs and a higher degree of sexuality equality. In the case of Mexican transgender sex workers, there is a very clear combined dynamic at work that includes economic migration, or crossing the border in order to earn dollars, but also the more subtle sexuality migration, or crossing the border for sexual reasons. In addition to understanding the situation in migrants' home countries—the particular laws and social conventions that may or may not allow for sexual and gender difference, it is also critical to examine the processes that sexual migrants undergo en route, how their perceptions may be transformed, and finally, how they establish their sexuality and identity, in some cases, once they have arrived and then return home once again.

While neither Guadalajara nor San Francisco are literally on the border between the United States and Mexico, the border looms large in the lives of the transgender sex workers with whom we spoke by shaping their sense of who they are, depending on which side of the line they may stand at any given time. Understanding the border as a dialectical entity that influences the lives of those who traverse it allows us to see that the border, as a metaphorical and geopolitical marker, influences the unique spiritual practices developed by those who cross, accommodate, and cross again.

Underscoring the dialectics of the border is the unique relationship between the “sending” and “receiving” states of Jalisco and California, as many of the immigrants and migrants to California come from Jalisco. The cities of San Francisco and Guadalajara also share attributes that distinguish them within their own nation-states. Guadalajara is Mexico's second-largest city (with a population of 3.5 million), and like San Francisco it has a reputation for being a relatively expensive place to live yet also industrious and productive. Guadalajara is also known for its dichotomy and conflicted cultural politics. The Catholic Church heavily influences the city, the capital of Jalisco state. It is known on the one hand for its conservatism and on the other hand as being Mexico's “gay mecca.” There are numerous gay bars and nightclubs in the city, many of which are in the Aranzazu area near Plaza San Francisco in central Guadalajara. Gay bars catering to middle-class and upper-middle-class clientele are plentiful; there is even a gay radio station operated out of the University of Guadalajara.

In *The Night Is Young* (2002) Hector Carrillo describes how new generations of Mexicans in Guadalajara negotiate between tradition and changing times vis-à-vis sexuality, in particular heterosexuality and homosexuality. He argues that new public health approaches are required to staunch the spread of AIDS because valuing spontaneity, collective life, and intimacy often clash with

the carefully calculated negotiations and planning indicative of global public health policies and epidemiological interventions. Carrillo also described that people in the Guadalajara gay scene romanticize San Francisco because of San Francisco's reputation as an "open" city.<sup>6</sup>

Guadalajara can be understood on one level as a city that lies at the center of sexual politics in Mexico, traversing the line between social and religious conservatism and the liberal ideals of sexual freedom and sexual identity. The city is known to embody the ideal of *mexicanidad*, which valorizes beautiful and attentive women and the strong, *machista* men who protect their virtue. But these notions of nation are being refigured as new generations face new complexities of gender and sexuality in a transnational setting. Guadalajara may be the epicenter of Mexico's version of the "culture wars," if such a thing were to be demarcated in time and space.

In the Guadalajara "gay scene" San Francisco is seen as an ideal city in which to live because of its international reputation for being welcoming to gays, lesbians, and transgender people. Veronica states that it was always her "dream to live in the gay mecca of San Francisco." San Francisco came to be known in the 1950s for its culturally transgressive environment—the beat poets paved the way for the flower children of the next decade. But San Francisco had already seen approximately one hundred years of forging new traditions rather than relying on older, established ones; not the least of which were sexually radical (Boyd 2003; Howe 2001). The University of California at San Francisco was one of the first institutions to undertake transgender (transsexual) surgeries. And the Castro District is globally known as a hub for gay male activity, residences, cafés, and nightlife.

#### SOCIAL CONTRACTS AND SEX WORKING IN GUADALAJARA AND SAN FRANCISCO

While San Francisco and Guadalajara share the quality of relative tolerance for sexual and gender difference, the structural conditions that shape the lives of transgender sex workers in the two cities are quite different. While San Francisco provides more state-based services—for example, funding a variety of transgender health and wellness clinics—it is clear that the social networks and sense of "belonging" that these women feel in Guadalajara, along with the community-based support they also receive, effectively outweighs the state-sponsored benefits found in the North.

In Guadalajara, the women worked in three brothels owned and operated by a transgender woman named Patti. All three were located in a lower-middle-

class area of the city known for prostitution. Near Patti's brothels or "houses" were other brothels frequented by transgender women and their clients, as well as heterosexual brothels. Every night Patti or her assistant collected a fee for the use of the space—a room in the house where sex workers can see clients. With three brothels total, Patti makes her living from these "use fees." Patti has strict requirements, which she pays an employee to enforce, including a rule that all sex workers must use condoms with their clients. To insure that the rule is enforced she sells condoms onsite. Patti prohibits the use of drugs and alcohol on the premises, though more than a few times women came to work already drunk or high. Only a fraction of the sex workers actually live in Patti's houses; most either live with their families or have their own homes, using the brothels only for work. This proximity to family does not hold true in San Francisco.

Patti is more than simply a bordello madam; she is also the primary community organizer for transgender women in Jalisco. She operates an organization called *Contraste* (contrast, or difference), which politically represents the transgender community in Jalisco. Patti also described her ties to Mexico's new political party *Mexico Posible*, which during the time of this research was advocating a political platform based on the decriminalization of abortion, equal pay for women, and gay rights. Patti's position in the community is a powerful one—she is at the center of much of the transgender sexual commerce as well as a major architect of its political profile.

In 1995, Patti described that she was inspired to open the brothels so that "the girls" would have a safe place to work and be able to save money to buy hormones and surgeries. Before her intervention, sex workers were forced to look for clients on the street where they were often assaulted by the police, clients, or ill wishers. As Patti explained,

In Mexico, like in the United States, prostitution is illegal. So, we have created our own source of funds by opening houses of prostitution where the laws governing prostitution are not valid, because these are private houses. Since these are private houses, the police cannot intercede. They can only arrest someone if they catch someone in the act. We have special accords with the government to allow prostitution. I got my neighbors to agree to allow the brothels to function as long as I didn't bother them. They signed a petition. The brothels are only open from 10 PM to 6 AM when neither children nor old people are on the street. This way, we are not bothering the neighbors. The women are instructed to wear clothes that are not too provocative from 10 PM to 12 AM. After 12 AM, there should not be too many people in the streets and the women can be more scantily clad.<sup>7</sup>

Patti's description shows a complex analysis of the situation: negotiating with legal limits on prostitution by "getting special accords" while at the same time assuaging the neighbors by limiting the working hours and dress of the sex workers. However, Patti's well-considered plans did not always function properly. During the time of this research the police raided two of the houses and hit and arrested some of the sex workers. Later, the police closed one of Patti's houses, and she had to work with police to get it reopened for business.

Patti views her efforts on behalf of the sex workers as a kind of social work for the larger community. By providing a safe place for men to pay for sex with transgender sex workers, Patti explained that she was, in fact, doing a service.

Our primary job is to fight the discrimination against, and the stigmatization of, transsexuals. *Contraste* is an organization that works for the transgender, transsexual, and transvestite population. Being a sex worker is a very well-known and valued job. (Here we say "sex worker" and not "prostitute" like in the U.S.) The transsexual sex workers promote health and they are in charge of caring for the health of their clients and couples. They have been invited by the University of Guadalajara to give workshops on HIV/AIDS. And we have been invited to participate in the radio station from the University of Guadalajara. For the first time the University of Guadalajara took interest in the discrimination against sex workers and transgenders. It's important for transgenders and transsexuals not to feel rejected or cut off from society especially when people that are not part of the community look at them.

As Patti notes, she and the members of *Contraste* spoke on the University of Guadalajara's Internet gay radio station and Patti made presentations to the local municipality and to the political party *Mexico Posible* about her work. Patti also planned for members of *Contraste* to march in Mexico City's International Labor Day parade (May 1) and in Guadalajara's Gay Pride Parade in the summer. None of the sex workers, however, mentioned anything about doing HIV/AIDS presentations at the university.

Patti's successes and those of her colleagues in fighting discrimination and establishing a viable professional presence in Guadalajara suggest that through community-based efforts change happens, even if at a slower pace and more unevenly than Patti might hope for. However, what is critical is the way that Patti and others articulate the work as social service work that serves a greater good. Patti's houses and her investment in the cause of transgender sex workers creates a network of community support, shared struggle, and, importantly, a

way of validating the work done by transgender sex workers—who rarely find such validation in the larger society.

While Patti, activist and brothel owner, speaks of social work being performed (and social contracts with the neighbors and the police), the sex workers themselves did not describe their work in this way. In both San Francisco and Guadalajara, interviewees never spoke of their professions as “social work” but rather only as remunerative. Perhaps Patti’s description is strategic and legitimizing in a way that does not resonate with those who actually perform the sexual services. Perhaps the transgender sex workers have not been able to conceive of their work in such positive terms. Nonetheless, while in Guadalajara these women do work in a brothel that collects money for political work in favor of the transgender and sex worker community. This is not the case in San Francisco.

Finally, it is notable that during the interviews, none of the sex workers used the Spanish word *bordello* (whorehouse) to describe their places of work in Guadalajara. Rather, they always used the term *casas* (houses), suggesting that they are trying to establish a modicum of respect around their places of work, if not yet around the work itself.

For numerous reasons, in San Francisco the conditions for transgender sex workers are very different from those in Guadalajara. At the beginning of this study (fall 2002) all of the transgender sex workers participating in this project were living in a single residential occupancy (or SRO) hotel in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District—a neighborhood known for drugs and prostitution and where most transgender sex workers from Mexico reside. At the Grand Polk Hotel residents are not given a key to the door; rather, both residents and visitors must ring the buzzer downstairs in order to be let in. In a small room at the crest of the dilapidated and dirty staircase, the doorman monitors all of the comings and goings. Visitors must tell the doorman whom they are visiting and they are asked to leave a picture ID at the front desk, a requirement that would make many wary. In the evening, visitors must pay \$10 to visit any of the residents. Evidently, the building managers are profiting from every client who walks through the door, either to buy drugs or sex. Whereas Patti may have made her living, and perhaps some profit, from the fees she charged for the use of her houses, the taxing of \$10 at the SRO speaks to a more blatant profiteering. It is doubtful that any of this money goes to bettering the political and social lives of the women on whose backs these profits are made.

Screaming matches punctuate the hallways of the Grand Polk Hotel as residents and clients unleash some of the effects of amphetamines and alcohol. In the Grand Polk Hotel all of the units share a common bathroom on each floor,

but each room has a sink. Many of the sex workers had microwave ovens and refrigerators that they used to prepare food in their room. Over time, some of them were able to move to better residence hotels in the neighborhood,<sup>8</sup> and some even found units with their own kitchenette or bathroom. However, because the women are illegally in the United States and without credit histories, they cannot rent a regular apartment in the city. In most cases, sex workers use their own bedrooms to entertain clients, but some have occasional out-calls.

In San Francisco there is no madam who claims to take care of the transgender community or who acts as a direct political representative for Mexican transgender sex workers. Further, life in the SRO hotels can be isolating. However, there are gathering places such as the Tenderloin's transgender strip club, Divas, where some of the women seek out clients or pass time on the street outside. In the Mission District, where the majority of San Francisco's Latino population lives, the bar *Esta Noche* (Tonight) hosts transvestite performances by Latinas who lip-sync to pop songs while appreciative fans look on.

There are also political groups in San Francisco who advocate for the rights of sex workers, though they are primarily composed of U.S. nationals or of Latinos and Latinas who have lived in the United States and speak English. The city provides services for sex workers on Wednesday nights at the San Francisco City Clinic in the south of Market Street (SOMA) area. In addition to the Transgender Tuesdays offered by the San Francisco Department of Public Health, the Ark of Refuge provides support services. However, only a small minority of Latina immigrant transgender sex workers actually uses the services. The women involved in this project stayed in the Tenderloin District, worked a lot, and did not take advantage of the free services offered by the city. Transgender outreach workers from the University of California, San Francisco's TRANS program, Proyecto Contra Sida por Vida, City of Refuge Ministries, and the Instituto Familiar de la Raza often visit the sex workers in their places of residence to hand out free condoms and lubricant. They also provide referrals for free English classes, job training, legal help, drug and alcohol treatment, health care, and other services.

Chloe, a former sex worker, is a Latina bilingual transgender outreach worker at the City of Refuge Ministries. She explained why so few transgender sex workers actually go to the free clinics:

Some go [to the free clinics], but not very regularly. Some get their hormone treatment in the street. If they prostitute themselves during the night, it is hard for them to get up early in the morning. Drug addiction has a lot to do with this as well. I am speaking from my own experience. I don't know why,

I am not one to judge. I am speaking about when I was under the influence of drugs. It is because one doesn't take care of him/herself well. One's self esteem is low because of the prostitution and from taking drugs. Our self-esteem goes down due to the relationships we have and our experiences in life. Because of the type of life we lead, we look for an escape in drugs and alcohol. With this, we are able to medicate, a little bit, the pain we have.

Chloe's words speak to the effects of ostracism and the perpetual cycle of ever-lowering self-esteem that many transgender sex workers experience. Some explained that even in their attempts to "better themselves" they found barriers—like being mocked by other Latinos in their free English classes not because they couldn't speak well but because they dared to express their gender differently than their biological sex.

#### "I DON'T PRACTICE IT, BUT I'M A BELIEVER IN CATHOLICISM"

In addition to their decision to transition gender and their chosen work, one thing that all of the participants in this study shared was having been raised in what they described as "traditional Catholic Mexican families." They learned the "Ave Maria" (Hail Mary) and the "Padre Nuestro" (Our Father) as children while going to church each week with their families. They celebrated the Catholic holidays of Christmas and Easter in addition to the saints' Holy Days. Following the Mexican and larger Latin American tradition they were baptized, took communion, and confessed at church.

Mexican transgender sex workers often maintained the Catholic traditions they learned as children, despite their sense that they were, or would be, ostracized from the Church because of their gender and sexual identity. According to some interpretations of scripture, homosexual behavior is a sin, as is prostitution. Knowing this, young transgender people are wary of presenting themselves publicly as such, much less showing up at church services in gender-crossing clothes. Entering into the gay community in Guadalajara, they risked being ostracized from the Church, condemned by the priest, or at the very least being whispered about in the pews. Not surprisingly, these fears drive away many transgender people from church services. Instead, as Kristal explained, she would only go to church when there were no services being held in order to be alone and away from scrutiny.

Several women commented that the Church was hypocritical toward what they called "the gay population." Arianna, a transvestite, said that she originally wanted to be a priest but did not feel comfortable with the antihomosexual

sentiments of the Church. “I am Catholic because I grew up in the religion. I don’t practice it, but I’m a believer in Catholicism . . . but the religion prohibits me from being homosexual. I wanted to be a priest. And I knew that in the seminary there were homosexuals—but the Church wanted to show the outside world that they were against homosexuals. I prefer to get paid for my work. If I work in the seminary, I would be performing sex on others and I would not be paid.”

Guadalajara has a gay- and lesbian-supportive church, La Iglesia de Santa Cruz, which is part of the (international) Metropolitan Community Church (or MCC)—a Protestant church begun in the United States that welcomes people of all sexual orientations. However, none of the women interviewed had attended this church. Instead transgender sex workers in Mexico and the United States seem to have developed their own spiritual strategies rather than turning to the religious institutions that already exist, Catholic or otherwise.

Rodolfo Contreras, deacon of the Apostolic Reformed Catholic Church in Guadalajara, was a gay activist and a former Jesuit. Contreras’s work with the gay community had provided him with insights on the topic of religion in the transgender community.

Outreach to the transgender community will be a slow process because transsexuals feel dirty and unworthy and these feelings don’t go away with just one talk with them. When people in the community hear the word religion, they automatically close up.

The orthodoxy of the Catholic Church has made them feel like they are unworthy and that they do not have the right to be present at a religious service. The Church has generated guilt, embarrassment, and marginalization. So, it’s important to work on their self-esteem and relay the message that God loves them and God is also there for them, even though they are transvestites.<sup>9</sup>

A lack of interest in finding a welcoming church continues when the transgender sex workers migrate to San Francisco. Most explained that they went to mass very infrequently and usually only for the Virgin of Guadalupe holiday (December 12).<sup>10</sup> In addition to having a bilingual transgender outreach worker, the Ark of Refuge has transgender support group meetings on Fridays and a transgender gospel choir.<sup>11</sup> However, there were no transgender sex workers from Mexico who attended the support group meetings or who participated in the gospel choir. The support group meetings are held in English, and the Latinos who do attend the meetings have been in the United States for some time

and speak English. Whatever the combined reasons may be for their low usage of these spiritual and support venues, it is clear that transgender sex workers are continuing their spiritual lives by their own means. “All the church I need is with the ones la Santísima selects,” declares Blanca.

#### FINDING FAITH IN THE SROS

Transgender sex workers, who feel ostracized or unwelcome attending church, respond to their spiritual needs by crafting their own devotional practices among themselves. These religious rites are eminently portable, and knowledge about them is shared among friends. While not necessarily sanctioned by the Church, these practices are sacrosanct to those who perform them. Religious practices in Mexico, as in many places, rotate around the repetition of particular rites: going to church every week, saying prayers, making pilgrimages to significant churches, shrines, and sites, and performing specific rituals at celebrations and for the saints’ holy days. Likewise, sex workers say their daily prayers, wear pendants and religious symbols, and construct altars to the Virgin of Guadalupe, St. Jude, and Santísima Muerte. Though the objects of their devotion may differ from those found in the churches of their childhoods, they nonetheless continue the practice of worship by maintaining a spiritual element of their lives and looking to each other for guidance on prayer and devotion.

Praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe and going to a church devoted to Guadalupe on her saint’s day was important to many of the women in both Guadalajara and San Francisco. Norma, one of the youngest sex workers, described how she trekked to a Church near downtown San Francisco on December 12 to light candles and say a prayer for the Virgin. Since most sex workers rarely venture far from their residences, Norma showed a level of devotion, and fearlessness, in her aims to honor the Virgin.

These women stated that they prayed every day. Many pray before work and once they get home; some chose prayer after each client’s visit. Prayer, they explained, gave them strength to face their days and nights on the street. They pray for security and to avoid being harmed as they dodge the dangers of street sex work, including physical attacks by street thugs or abuse by clients. The most common risk to their lives, most agreed, is contracting a sexually transmitted disease because of a broken condom. But there are many threats. As Ninele explains, “I ask God to protect me from anything that can happen. From drugs and from violence.” Her prayers are not unwarranted, as trans-

gender sex workers, at least in San Francisco, face much higher rates of HIV, violent attacks, and drug addiction<sup>12</sup>

Sandy, who lives in one of Patti's casas, described her nightly practice of prayer: "Religion is against us, our way of being, our lifestyle. I don't have to be in a church to feel good. I am not very attached to religion. I pray and that's it. I believe in God. When things are not going well for me I speak to the cross that I have on my pendant and I say 'God please help me.'"

Several women wear crosses or pendants with the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Santísima Muerte around their necks. Some keep their jewelry on when they are with clients; others remove their pendants because they believe it is inappropriate, perhaps even sacrilegious, to wear religious symbols in a brothel. Whether fixed around their necks or stowed in a purse until work is finished, images of saints and icons, crosses, pendants, and figurines all figure heavily in the religiosity of transgender sex workers. Since they are forever on the move, the mobility of their faith symbols is fundamental.<sup>13</sup>

For transgender sex workers in San Francisco and Guadalajara, the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe signifies their origins, their culture, and their religious upbringing in Mexico. Many of the sex workers bring religious icons and pendants from Mexico to the United States; these items are chosen among the few things they are able to bring across the border. Both Leila and Maria explained that they were afraid to bring their altars and pendants across the border because they felt that the coyote might steal them. When they were safely settled in San Francisco, their families in Mexico sent to them their altars and pendants. Prizing pendants and fearing their loss suggest that these women place a high value on their religious artifacts, just as these stories underscore the way that border crossing impacts one's sense of vulnerability—down to the stealing of saints. In contrast to the dangers of border crossing is the support that some transgender sex workers received from their families. The transnational shipping of saints is meant to insure the safe passage of their loved ones in their dangerous travels abroad and in life.

In San Francisco, next to the Grand Polk Hotel, is a convenience store that many sex workers frequent to buy food. The store keeps a shelf full of candles and incense, as well as items related to Santísima Muerte and other Catholic saints. Santería or "Botánica" stores are easily found on the streets of the Mission District, where candles, incense, altar pieces, prayer books, herbs, oils, and other items related to Santísima Muerte as well as more traditional Catholic and non-Catholic items are sold. While some women did travel to the Mission District (a drive of only a few minutes) to find their religious iconography,

most did not. The convenience store owner, whose business depends on those who populate the Grand Polk Hotel, must realize, as do the transgender sex workers themselves, that commodities travel well, especially when there are eager buyers on the other side of the border or simply around the corner.

#### SAINT JUDE THADDEUS: PATRON SAINT OF DESPERATE CAUSES

In San Francisco, a shrine to St. Jude explains that “after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Saint Jude, the brother of James the Less and a cousin of Christ, traveled throughout Mesopotamia for a period of ten years preaching and converting many to Christianity. He died a martyr’s death as tradition tells us. He was clubbed to death and his head was then shattered with a broad ax. Sometime after his death, Jude’s body was brought to Rome and placed in a crypt in Saint Peter’s Basilica.” St. Jude, the martyr, is well known as the patron saint of “lost causes,” or he who advocates for the most desperate and downtrodden. According to Catholic Online, “His New Testament letter stresses that the faithful should persevere in the environment of harsh, difficult circumstances, just as their forefathers had done before them. Therefore, he is the patron saint of desperate cases.”<sup>14</sup> Seeing themselves marginalized in many ways, it is not surprising that transgender sex workers would turn to St. Jude. In San Francisco where they live in dangerous conditions and with no protections of citizenship, and in Mexico where, as in the United States, their work is illegal, transgender sex workers indeed would fit St. Jude’s profile of attempting to persevere in “harsh and difficult circumstances.”

The notion that St. Jude would help sex workers through their trials is one that spread through word of mouth in the transgender community. Jadira, a sex worker in Guadalajara, described St. Jude as a saint who “helps those who are sex workers. He is the saint of money and he protects people who work on the street.” Jadira’s faith in St. Jude was clear, as she recommended to many other sex workers that they pray to him. Joanna, a former sex worker in Mexico who visits St. Jude’s chapel devoutly once a week,<sup>15</sup> explained why he is so popular with sex workers: “People who are in danger pray to him. There is a lot of popularity for him among drug addicts, delinquents, and prostitutes. Wherever there are addicts, delinquents, and prostitutes, I see him.”

Sex workers who have left the trade, like Joanna, or those who still engage in the high-risk work, come to St. Jude in search of protection on the streets, luck with clients, and to pray for money. Joanna’s description of seeing St. Jude where there is desperation is telling. In fact many sex workers carried an image of St. Jude or kept one in their rooms readily available. Only three sex workers

out of twenty-nine described attending services or visiting church on a regular basis to pray to St. Jude; the emphasis instead was on praying to St. Jude on one's own.

Though some of the sex workers learned about St. Jude from their families, most of them learned about St. Jude from other transgender sex workers. Friends would give altars or icons of St. Jude as gifts—creating a reciprocal relationship between the giver and the recipient. Jadira originally learned about St. Jude from her grandmother. But when she felt comfortable with St. Jude she introduced him to Vanessa in San Francisco as well as to her roommate and fellow sex worker Barbie. Vanessa embraced St. Jude once he was introduced into her life, and even visited the St. Jude Chapel in San Francisco with a Mexican friend.

Some of the altars that sex workers kept were for individual saints, while others were composed of various saints including Jude, Guadalupe, and the Holy Death. Angelica prayed regularly to St. Jude and the altar she had crafted above her bed was devoted to all three figures: Santísima Muerte, St. Jude, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Her saintly protectors hovering over the bed where she entertained clients were, metaphorically, there to witness all that occurred as well as to oversee her safety. Though she could have, Angelica chose not to remove the altar when clients visited. In Guadalajara sex workers were more apt to have their altars to St. Jude in their homes, not in their workplaces. Because in San Francisco sex workers work and live in the same quarters, it is harder to separate one's devotional life from one's professional activities—a set of circumstances that draws attention to the different structural conditions faced by Mexican transgender sex workers in the United States as opposed to Mexico. This inability to easily separate work from worship also draws attention to the fact that many of the women interviewed felt uncomfortable exposing their saints to the conditions of their lives. There was a desire, overall, to protect their icons from some of the realities of their lives.

Many sex workers expressed that their faith in St. Jude was profound. However, they had little interest in learning about the saint's history, his deeds, and who he was in life during the biblical era. Joanna was the only one who had a prayer book specifically created for St. Jude. Several different types of prayers are included to invoke St. Jude to act as one's intermediary before God. Joanna explained her practice of prayer multiplication as follows: "I pray to him every day. There is a prayer book for St. Jude for a forty-day period. On the first day one has to pray one 'Padre Nuestro.' Every day in the forty-day period, one adds one more prayer. By the fortieth day, one has to recite the 'Padre Nuestro' forty times. I did this." Joanna also noted that a Mexican church had a piece of

St. Jude's bone in the chapel. Deacon Contreras, speculating on what he called a "blind faith," explained that "if people don't have anything sustaining them in their lives, they need to believe in something. They don't care about the history of the person or saint to whom they are praying, they just need to believe in something." While Deacon Contreras's insight underscores the challenges that transgender sex workers face in both Mexico and in the United States and their need to invest faith in "something," it also misses some of the agentive and creative response to marginalization that transgender sex workers appear to be crafting. As a group that is often relegated to the very fringes of social acceptability in both nation-states, the sharing of religious practices, devotions, and "tips" about the most effective ways to worship demonstrate a spiritual solidarity that is hard won among a population that is ever on the move and on the very edge of social and legal legitimacy.

#### LA SANTISIMA MUERTE: FEARLESS IN THE FACE OF DEATH

The prayer booklet for the Holy Death (*Novena a la Santisima Muerte*) has, on its pink cover, a drawing of the Holy Death. She holds a globe in one hand and a pendulum in the other. She wears a robe covering her arms down to her wrists; there her fingers are exposed as bone. Over her skeletal head rests a halo. The picture is complete with skulls in each corner of the frame. The prayer booklet contains a round of prayers meant to be spoken in a nine-day cycle. Appearing as she does, like the grim reaper, it is not surprising that the Holy Death is an unconventional icon whose presence is not welcome in the traditional Catholic pantheon.

Santisima Muerte, a symbolic representation of death blended with Catholic characteristics, surfaced in Mexico's religious landscape to much popular acclaim. Very little is known about the Holy Death's origins; her followers and scholars promote divergent theories.<sup>16</sup> Some claim that she first appeared to a healer in Veracruz in the nineteenth century and ordered him to create a cult (Quijano 2003, 7; Freese 2005, 10). According to her followers a flood of miracles that continue to the present followed her appearance. Others claim that the cult of death existed in Mexico for three millennia and that Santisima Muerte draws from pre-Hispanic beliefs and practices (Araujo et al. 2002; Freese 2005; Quijana 2003; Aridjis 2003). They point to death figures revered by Maya, Zapotecos, and Totonacas, but especially to the ritual practices of the Aztecs and the Mexicas. The Mexicas worshipped two gods, Miclantecuhli and Mictecacihuatl, who reigned over the region of the dead. According to these scholars and followers, the strong cult of death practiced among the ancient

Mexicas merged with Catholicism in the form of Santísima Muerte or the Holy Death. Other devotees claim that the Holy Death came from Yoruba traditions brought by African slaves to the Caribbean and passed to Mexico through the Cuban Santería, the Haitian Voodoo, or the Brazilian Palo Mayombe; these religions merged with Christian practices to create Santísima Muerte. Other Mexican anthropologists insist that the Holy Death's origins can be traced back to medieval Europe. During plagues and epidemics, European Christians made offerings to skeletal figures and these traditions were brought to the Americas (Freese 2005, 12; Castellanos 2004). Katia Perdigón Castañeda of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History claims that the Santísima Muerte figure is a European archetype of death commonly seen in religious art; statues of the Holy Death opened many Good Friday processions in Spain (cited in Vanguardia 2004; Castellanos 2004). Most scholars do agree however, that Santísima Muerte should not be confused with the Day of the Dead, although it is tempting to make the connection. Although the Holy Death may be venerated on that day, she "appears to be a distinct phenomenon emerging from a separate tradition" (Freese 2005, 4).

Although scholars may find the theoretical debates over Santísima Muerte's origins intriguing, the women in our study didn't know, or seem to care to know, the story behind their beloved saint; instead, her role in the precarious present is what matters. She is called the Holy Death because she looks like the incarnation of death and symbolizes its eventuality. Some of the sex workers explained that Santísima Muerte is the one who first saw Jesus Christ after his death and welcomed him into the world of the dead. Like St. Jude, Santísima Muerte has a following of those in risky professions and those who live on the cusp of danger and death.<sup>17</sup> The transgender sex workers explained how much they valued this "saint" as she helps them dodge death on the streets by evoking through her form the symbolism of death. As Artemia states: "She helps me in the street, to stay away from risks. . . . She exists, she exists, of course; we are all going to die. Death exists and she protects me from all of the dangers around me." In a kind of homeopathic way, Santísima Muerte injects just enough death to ward away its coming.

As with St. Jude, knowledge of Santísima Muerte, and recommendations about how to pray to her and construct an appropriate altar, come via referrals from other sex worker friends. They share with one another their successes and failures in imploring the Holy Death to protect them and, often, do favors for them. Vanessa, who had already been praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe and to St. Jude, began praying to Santísima Muerte in San Francisco on the recommendation of friends. "My friends told me that she does favors like other

saints do and that if you ask with faith, she will do the favor. When you ask her for a favor, there is a payment and that is that one has to pray to her.” The Holy Death gives, but she expects acknowledgment. She is “like other saints” in her benevolence, but her role in providing spiritual sustenance to transgender sex workers in particular is clear in her popularity and widespread devotion.

Devotees of the Holy Death must first be accepted by her. Pocahontas, who was living and working in Guadalajara at the time, learned about Santísima Muerte from her friend and fellow sex worker Arianna. Pocahontas emphasized that not everyone can enter into the realm of Santísima Muerte. “Sometimes people give statues of Santísima Muerte to their friends thinking that she will help them and it doesn’t always work. The candles die out when she doesn’t like somebody, she is very selective.”

If Santísima Muerte is indeed a fickle and demanding deity who will not allow just anyone to worship her, then it is clear that one must be an “insider” worthy and appropriate to approach her; the logic that Pocahontas puts forward is in stark contrast to what many of her friends and colleagues have experienced in the Church. Santísima Muerte not only accepts you as you are (transgender, sex worker, immigrant, and so on) but she may not even be interested in being worshipped by those who do not dare to live such challenging lives. In this sense, Santísima Muerte is only for the worthy, among a population that has historically been deemed unworthy by religious and social norms.

Those who venerate the Holy Death keep statues to be placed on their altars. They buy Holy Death figurines of different colors with herbs and rice at the bottom to signify good luck. The feminine figurines are draped in a robe, with a skull for a head. Each color signifies a particular desire to be manifested:

Red: destruction as well as passion and love

White: purification

Green: money and legal problems

Orange: protection

Yellow: healing and friendship

To prepare the altar for Santísima Muerte, the devotee lights candles while praying to her. The candles symbolize different effects—white candles for something good, red for love, and black candles for ill wishes.

On both the white and the black candles a prayer is written in both Spanish and English.

“Prayer to the Holy Death”

Oh conquering Jesus Christ, that in the cross were defeated, like you would

tame a ferocious animal, tame the soul of \_\_\_\_\_. Tame as a lamb and tame as a rosemary flower he shall come to kneel before me and obey my every command. Holy Death I plea of your immortal powers that God has given you towards mortals, place us in a Celestial Sphere where we'll enjoy days without nights for all eternity. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I plea for your protection. Grant all your wishes until the last day, hour and moment that your divine majesty orders us to appear before you. Amen.

With prayers that evoke Jesus and God, “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” it is not surprising that the transgender sex workers who pray to the Holy Death see her as simply another Catholic saint. They do not differentiate between the Holy Death and the more traditional Catholic saints. Rather, she is simply another possible intermediary between themselves and God. Valeria makes no distinction between the Holy Death and Saint Jude for, example, even though the church rejects *Santisima Muerte*. Artemia wears a pendant and has prayed to *Santisima Muerte* for nine years. She says, “I started praying to her like to any other normal saint, like to St. Jude or to God . . . I pray every day before I go to work on the street at night.” However the Holy Death is not considered by the Church to be a viable saint or divine intermediary; Catholic orthodoxy does not permit the veneration of death (although many symbols, including crucifixion imagery, do just that). Deacon Contreras was clear in his position that “the cult of the Holy Death is one of idolatry. In Catholicism, one is not supposed to adore death.”

In spite of this official opposition, devotion to the Holy Death has grown dramatically since 1965; *Santisima Muerte* now claims over four million followers in Mexico. The rapid growth of the movement over the last decades has led to conflict between devotees of the Holy Death and the official Roman Catholic Church. Although the Catholic Church condemns her veneration, her devotees have declared August 15 to be the *Día de Santísima Muerte*, her official day. The *Iglesia Católica Tradicional México–Estados Unidos* (Traditional Catholic Church, Mexico–United States) founded the Sanctuary of the Holy Death in Mexico City in 2002 and registered as a religious organization in 2003. In April 2005, the government revoked the church’s status as a religious organization in a twenty-five page resolution claiming that the group did not meet the qualifications of a religion, citing theological doctrine dating back to the Council of Trent in 1570. The legal action resulted in demonstrations throughout Mexico City and increased press attention, yet it had seemingly little effect on the numbers of people participating in Holy Death religious activities. Fol-

lowing the ruling, David Romo Guillén, founder and archbishop of the Traditional Catholic Church, Mexico–United States, stated, “To the people here, Death offers friendship, hope, and miracles. We’re the church of the people, down here among the people . . . and that’s why the Roman Catholic Church sees us as a threat” (quoted in Hawley 2004, n.p.).<sup>18</sup>

Most followers see no contradiction between their Catholic religion and worship of the Holy Death; indeed, they organize practices similar to Christian rituals, including processions, prayers, and altars. There are various rituals dedicated to the Holy Death; in a brochure provided by one of the sex workers, the instructions call for devotees to maintain a separate altar for the Holy Death rather than mixing it with altars for other saints or devotions. The Holy Death, it seems, is a demanding deity. Most of the sex workers gave offerings to the Holy Death in order to show their gratitude. Flowers, candles, food, water, and money were typically placed on her altar. Flowers or money were given when the Holy Death had fulfilled a specific wish.

Two sex workers, Donna and Paula, explained that for a month they tried to “work with” Santísima Muerte. They bestowed flowers on her altar every day and lit candles, yet with no results. None of their wishes were granted and so they decided not to pray to her any longer. Donna and her boyfriend both prayed to Santísima Muerte at the same time, but only her boyfriend was successful in having his wishes answered. Donna decided to stop praying to Santísima Muerte, but she did not know what to do with her statue. “I was told that I could not throw away my Santísima Muerte statue and that I could not abandon it, so I gave it away. I gave it as a gift to a spiritual cleanser. Because if you throw her away, it is bad. I was told that I had to give her away.” Proper conduct around the Holy Death must be maintained, including a respectful gifting of her image, not simply tossing her aside. Superstition is likely at work here, with Donna perhaps fearing that the Holy Death might have retribution in mind for those who devalue her. But beyond this the belief that Santísima Muerte must be shared, and exchanged in a reciprocal process, suggests that the Holy Death functions, in some small way, to network and knit together transgender sex workers through their shared devotional practices.

In none of the interviews did anyone explain, explicitly, why the Holy Death is so popular in the sex worker community. Her popularity among these transgender women can in the simplest terms be explained by the fact that the Holy Death is most useful and most revered by those in risky jobs or those who constantly operate close to death. The risk of death and violence on the streets, in SROS, and in the brothels of Mexico and the United States are readily clear to transgender sex workers, and they seek protection. Jajaira, a transgender sex

worker in San Francisco, explained that because Santísima Muerte has such proximity to what they most fear—death—she functions as a strong spiritual force in their lives. “For me, the Holy Death is about a preparation for death, to welcome death. You know that some people are homophobic. Some people are claustrophobic, others are afraid of spiders, closed rooms, darkness, etc. All of humanity is afraid of death. One hundred percent of people are afraid of death and this is a preparation for death. It’s about not being afraid of death, about not being so attached to the fear of death. More than anything, it’s about not being afraid, to know that there will be something after my spiritual release.” Vicky, a sex worker who worked in San Francisco and returned to Guadalajara, explained her faith in this way. “The majority of gay people are in danger and the Santísima Muerte takes care of people in danger, she helps us survive.”

Pocahontas and Arianna mirror this sentiment and are unswerving in their faith to Santísima Muerte because, they explained, she saved Arianna from a deadly fire. “One night, I dreamt that I was going to die in a fire. [The fire actually] happened to me after the dream repeated itself several times. And it really happened. I was in the hospital and I was doing really poorly. Pocahontas took the statue of Santísima Muerte to the hospital and that’s what saved me. With the help of Santísima Muerte, I recovered very quickly.”

Santísima Muerte, is even, for some, a marriageable partner. Vicky, a sex worker who had recently returned from San Francisco, explained that she had “married” the Holy Death because the Holy Death had performed so many miracles for her. And, she further explained, she was not happy with men anymore. Vicky’s marriage to the Holy Death appears to have altered the Church’s usual domain by transforming the traditional marriage between a nun and Jesus to one of different, though related, intentions. Moreover, Vicky’s marriage to the Holy Death is, from one perspective, a first “lesbian” marriage between a human and a deity.

The Holy Death is, according to these tales, a deity more demanding than most. For transgender sex workers in San Francisco and Guadalajara she functioned as any saint would, acting as an intermediary before God and providing favors “in exchange” for prayers. The relationship that each of the women had with St. Jude and the Virgin of Guadalupe clearly fed them, providing different levels of spiritual sustenance. But Santísima Muerte, for those who found her and were accepted by her, provided a very specific divinity to these women. St. Jude and the Virgin both reside in the accepted pantheon of viable saints; they are supported by years of tradition, and millions of mouths have uttered prayers to them. St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, would be an obvious choice for religious devotion among those, like the sex workers, who face dan-

gerous work and dangerous lives. The Virgin of Guadalupe, who appeared as a vision in Mexico, suggests one's devotion as specifically Mexican. Exchanging information and techniques of worship to both the Virgin of Guadalupe and St. Jude creates a spiritual community among transgender sex workers as they migrate between Guadalajara and San Francisco.

It is Santísima Muerte that provides the most critical meeting point for spiritual solidarity among Mexican transgender sex workers. She is the most marginal of the three "saints," though by most accounts she is no saint at all. She is closest to their experience and teetering on the edge between the here and the hereafter. Most importantly, Santísima Muerte is in many ways indigenous to the community of sex workers; word of her comes from friends and colleagues, images of her come as gifts from fellow sex workers, her secrets move among the members of a small network of those who struggle against many of the same odds on a daily basis. Santísima Muerte, because she is not easy to please and because she is particular about her devotees, is an icon that makes the chosen ones feel special, wanted, and worthy. Worship of the Holy Death is not a cultish obsession with this mortal coil; rather, devotions to Santísima Muerte reflect a highly mobile spiritual solidarity among the women who pray to her.

#### CONCLUSIONS: "MORE THAN ANYTHING, IT'S ABOUT NOT BEING AFRAID"

The ways in which people select, perform, and perform again their devotions provides insights into their views of the world and insights into their individual understanding of themselves. Rituals, in other words, "provide a metacommentary on the world" (Bruner 1986, 26) and shine a spotlight on the unique cultural and social dynamics that make up our rapidly shifting global landscape. Our work with Mexican transgender sex workers in Guadalajara and San Francisco has demonstrated that the devotional practices that are shared and circulated among this population are not renegade rituals to marginal icons. Instead the belief systems created and maintained by transgender sex workers as they cross geopolitical borders, as well as gendered borders, create spiritual solidarity among a group of people who often find themselves on the margins within a society that is often hostile toward sex work, transgender persons, and border-crossing individuals from the South.

Establishing alternative spiritual communities is not intended as a way to disavow the Catholic pantheon or the traditions that transgender sex workers learned as children. Rather these communities provide strategic ways to resist

marginalization through their faith practices. The novel forms of spirituality that these women create in resistance to their marginalization are drawn from their national and natal traditions, which are circulated among each other as a way of creating a sense of shared practice.<sup>19</sup> Altars to St. Jude and prayers to the Virgin of Guadalupe are key elements of these shared practices. However, their secret weapon against a hostile world is Santísima Muerte. She is a jealous deity who is prone to revenge and discriminating in her choice of devotees; these are precisely the reasons she is so valued. Santísima Muerte is, fundamentally, a shared deity who is not condoned by the Church but rather is legitimated through a reciprocal process among transgender sex workers themselves. The Holy Death effectively works to network and knit together transgender sex workers as they identify with her marginality and embrace her fearlessness in the face of death.

The devotional worldview created by people like Veronica, Chloe, Arianna, and Kristal is incomplete without an understanding of the larger structural, legal, and political economic circumstances that impact their daily lives. We have maintained that the border has many effects, not the least of which is the “ordering” of identities and citizenship. As a paradigmatic geopolitical boundary, the United States–Mexican border, and the larger “borderlands” it engenders, cannot be simply territorialized in a literal sense, but rather should be understood as experiential phenomena for those marginalized by their border-crossing status. While neither Guadalajara nor San Francisco are literally on the border between the United States and Mexico, the border plays a significant role in the lives of Mexican transgender sex workers, impacting them differently depending on which side of the line they may be located. The border, we have argued, is a dialectical entity that influences the lives of those who traverse it by mediating the unique spiritual practices developed by those who cross it. Part of what compels the spiritual solidarity that sex workers create is a “search for a location where one can feel at home, in spite of the obvious foreignness of the space” (George 1992, 79). But also as immigrants they must constantly “straddle competing cultural traditions, memories, and material conditions” (Manalansan 2003, x).

While they cross the border to work in the underground sex industry, thus making their migration a financial one, it is also not coincidental that these women come in particular to San Francisco—a place that they describe as “more open” to people such as themselves. Their migration is multiply motivated rather than simply a search for some gay or transgender nirvana in San Francisco, or purely a matter of an economic “pull” from the north. As Juana María Rodríguez describes in *Queer Latinidad*, “practices through which sub-

jects construct identity are never singular” (2003, 8). Instead these women cross the border, often with their *santos* in hand, with very complex goals and strategically laid migratory agendas. Sexual migration—the process of crossing nation-state divides in order to pursue a sexuality-related component of one’s life, whether a relationship or a search for more liberatory terrain—resonates with the experiences of Mexican transgender sex workers.

Enacting one’s gender identity is not, categorically, a practice of sexuality. But in some cases, of course, the two are interrelated. In the case of the transgender sex workers who participated in this study, some saw themselves as part of the *ambiente gay* or identified as homosexuals. At the very least, all of them had found support in gay communities in Guadalajara. The migratory history between California and Jalisco is a long one. It is also not coincidental that transgender sex workers would choose San Francisco as their destination, for in part theirs is a sexual migration. In both Mexico and the United States, each of the participants in this research found themselves socially marginalized because of their gender transgressions or by the sexual labor they do. In addition, they described that homophobia or discrimination against transgender people was also a part of what made their lives so dangerous on the street, and thus part of the reason they turned to Santísima Muerte, St. Jude, and the Virgin of Guadalupe for protection. At the same time, each of the women recognized the limitations of their sexual status and gender identity. The politics of citizenship, legitimacy, and social acceptance are, in both the United States and Mexico, certainly more challenging for those who are outwardly lesbians, gay men, and transgender people than it is for those whose sexuality suits the status quo (Phelan 2001).

In their work lives in both Mexico and the United States, transgender sex workers encountered various levels of state involvement. In Guadalajara, the state intervened with police protection on the one hand and police abuse on the other. In San Francisco, targeted transgender health programs, although underutilized by the women in this study, exist in an attempt to mitigate the political impotency of language barriers and fears of exposure as undocumented migrants. The social networks and political possibilities of the workplace were also quite different in the United States and in Mexico. In Guadalajara “social work” brothels were, according to Patti, owner and transgender activist, an attempt to establish legitimacy for transgender women and their work. In San Francisco’s Tenderloin District the women were effectively taxed by the doorman of the Grand Polk Hotel, a blatant act of profiteering from the work of a vulnerable population. Ironically, perhaps, it was in San Francisco with all of its social services and purported tolerance for difference that transgender sex



workers found, in reality, the least amount of social and psychic support. In Mexico they had home and family nearby, enjoyed status as citizens, and lived in a familiar cultural and social world.

The spiritual solidarity created by the women in this study echoes the idea expressed by Hamid Naficy that “rituals provide the terrain in which the consciousness of communal boundaries is heightened, thereby confirming and strengthening individual location and positionality as well as social identity” (1991, 295). The devotions described by transgender sex workers codify a sense of shared community that emerges from the highly mobile and uncertain circumstances in which they find themselves. By definition, they require religion that travels well. But Santísima Muerte, St. Jude, and the Virgin of Guadalupe are not simply santos easily stowed in luggage but concepts and spiritual ideals. Embracing “lost causes” or acknowledging the inevitability of death creates a spiritual grounding for the uprooted, a sense of solidarity among the ostracized, and a sense of stability for individuals who are always on the move.

#### NOTES

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1. Because the majority of the transgender individuals who participated in this study identified themselves as “women” rather than “men,” we follow their self-identification by using the “emic” or “insider” category, which resonates with the transgender sex workers themselves.
2. Alicia Calderon, “Fake Plastic Surgeon Accused of Harming Hundreds,” Associated Press, October 20, 2002. Available at <http://www.discussanything.com/forums/showthread.php?t=16839>.
3. The price for a breast implant operation in Mexico ranges from \$1,200 to \$2,000, whereas the same operation in the United States can cost between \$5,000 and \$6,000.
4. From this perspective not only is the homosexual/heterosexual binary ineffective and minoritizing for those who fall outside the norm at any given historical moment, but further, rigid distinctions around sexuality, sexual behavior, and identification has “a determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (Sedgwick 1990, 1).
5. An exception to the sexual binary of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” is usefully broken down in Lancaster’s book, *Life Is Hard* (1992), which considers the Nicaraguan case.
6. Carillo, personal communication with Susanna Zaraysky, December 4, 2002.

7. The ethnographic and interview material here is based on the extended fieldwork and interviews conducted by Susanna Zaraysky over the course of two years in both San Francisco and Guadalajara, and it reflects her excellent rapport with interviewees and her careful observational insights. All names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities. Interviews with twenty-nine transgender sex workers in both the United States and Mexico were conducted in Spanish and audio-taped unless the interviewee requested that she not be recorded. This research was sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts and administered through the University of San Francisco's Religion and Immigration Project (TRIP), under the direction of Lois Lorentzen in the Theology and Religious Studies Department. A key area of investigation in the Religion and Immigration Project was to analyze the role of religion in the lives of recent Mexican immigrants in San Francisco, California.
8. The average rent for SROs in this neighborhood ranged from \$800 to \$1,000 a month.
9. Contreras interchanges the words "transvestite, transsexual and transgender," but he is referring to the same population.
10. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the well-known and widely revered patron saint of Mexico; according to legend she first appeared to the indigenous peasant, Juan Diego, atop a hill in 1531.
11. The Ark of Refuge developed its "Transcending Program" in 1997 to provide services to transgender individuals. According to their program description posted online, "Transcending provides Practical support, Peer and Treatment Advocacy services for Transgenders of color in San Francisco who are impacted by HIV/AIDS or at risk for HIV infection" (<http://www.arkofrefuge.org>; visited on September 14, 2004). The Transcending Program is financially supported by the CDC Section of the San Francisco Department of Public Health, AIDS Office.
12. See for example, Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, and Katz 2001; and Lombardi 2001.
13. Deacon Contreras explained the portability of religious icons as a national phenomenon: "Mexican immigrants bring their religion with them. Their Catholicism is very much based in rites, traditions, and customs that are not questioned. In the U.S., there are Mexicans who wear the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe even though they are outside of Mexico."
14. Catholic Online, <http://www.catholic.org> (site visited December 10, 2003).
15. In Guadalajara there is a special chapel devoted to St. Jude, who is quite popular among Mexicans generally. A special service is held every Wednesday for those who are sick and poor. On hot days the doors of the church are opened wide so that people outside may watch and hear the sermon. Often, all of the pews are full.
16. Surprisingly little academic literature exists in English about the Holy Death movement. The religion and its followers have received attention in the popular press in Mexico, Latin America, and even in the United States, yet scholarly treatments in either English or Spanish are sparse.
17. Santísima Muerte is particularly popular in Mexico among police, drug traffickers,

gang members, prison inmates, and sex workers; in short, those who live close to death. Her larger social base, however, is among very poor people who may be excluded from the formal economy. Although she is popular among some artists, intellectuals, politicians, and actors, the Holy Death's primary constituency is among the marginalized.

18. Archbishop David Romo Guillén and the Traditional Catholic Church, Mexico–United States also promote condom use for men and women, as well as the day-after pill. The doors of the church are open to gays, lesbians, transvestites, and transgendered. Priests are allowed to marry (Romo himself is married with five children), women can become ordained, and divorce is not censured. These practices, in addition to the worship of the Holy Death, place them in opposition with the Mexican Roman Catholic Church.
19. Similarly, Martin Manalansan describes new iterations of a traditional Filipino religious tradition, the Santacruzán, as it has changed in its transnational form: “The combination of secular, profane, and religious imagery as well as the combination of Filipino and American gay/mainstream icons provided an arena where symbols from the two countries were contested, dismantled, and reassembled in a dazzling series of cross-contestatory statements” (2003, 133).