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Tired of Begging:

Picturing Private Devotion to Santa Muerte

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract:
Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint, canonized by no one—but a Saint still. She emerged as a popular figure in Mexico City at the beginning of the twenty-first century and became mainstream during the security crisis in Mexico that started in 2007. She rapidly became a patron for people living on the edges of a monstrous city: sexual workers, soldiers, policemen, smugglers, and uninsured cancer patients. Represented as a white female skeleton dressed in colorful fabrics, her image appears suddenly on street corners, shops, and homes. *Tired of Begging* portrays Santa Muerte devotees and their private altars.

Keywords:
Santa Muerte; folk saints; Mexico City; Zumpango; Niña Blanca; Tultitlán; popular religion; photo-ethnography; film.

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Rodrigo Salido Moulinié writes, photographs, and is a doctoral student in History at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is a Fulbright-García Robles Scholar and a Contex Doctoral Fellow. In 2018, *nexos* awarded his essay "Testigo (in)voluntario: la muerte de Kevin Carter" the Carlos Pereyra Essay Prize. His work explores the interconnections between the histories of photography, science, and anthropology. His first book, *Desamparo: etnografía cinemática de la Santa Muerte* (Mexico City: Bonilla Artigas, in press), explores the politics and poetics of ethnographic representations of religious beliefs with the case of Santa Muerte.

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Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint, canonized by no one—but a Saint still. She emerged as a popular figure in Mexico City at the beginning of the twenty-first century and became mainstream during the security crisis in Mexico that started in 2007. Santa Muerte, or "Saint Death," rapidly became a patron for people living on the edge of life and death in violent contexts—a protector of the dispossessed and marginalized groups: sexual workers, soldiers, policemen, smugglers, drug traffickers, uninsured cancer patients. In a world where violence and shameless inequality are the norm, Santa Muerte is seen as an equalizer. "It doesn't matter how rich or powerful you are," a devotee told me, "She will take us anyway." Represented as a white female skeleton dressed in fabrics of different colors, her image appears suddenly in many corners of Mexico City: street altars, small figures, tattooed skins, home-made shrines, she appears printed on handguns and candles.

But her troubling image and the lifestyles of some infamous believers (such as high-profile drug-traffickers and criminals) contributed to the stigmatization of her devotees: they are all seen as narcos. The Mexican government's tendency to dehumanize all people involved in drug-trafficking remains evident in speeches and announcements decrying victims of the Drug War as traitors, cockroaches, and animals. This national narrative has propelled stigma towards Santa Muerte devotees, instilling fear and discrimination.

Tired of Begging portrays believers of Santa Muerte. It depicts this poorly understood constellation of people, objects, and spaces of devotion: the statuettes, the ink on their skins, the public shrines and paintings. *Tired of Begging* uses Santa Muerte as a common thread to connect a diverse set of stories of insecurity, displacement, poverty, urban marginalization but also love, family, affection. Rather than framing her as merely a saint for the underworld, these intimate portraits highlight the wide range of uncertainties, dreams, and promises that give Santa Muerte her power and allure.

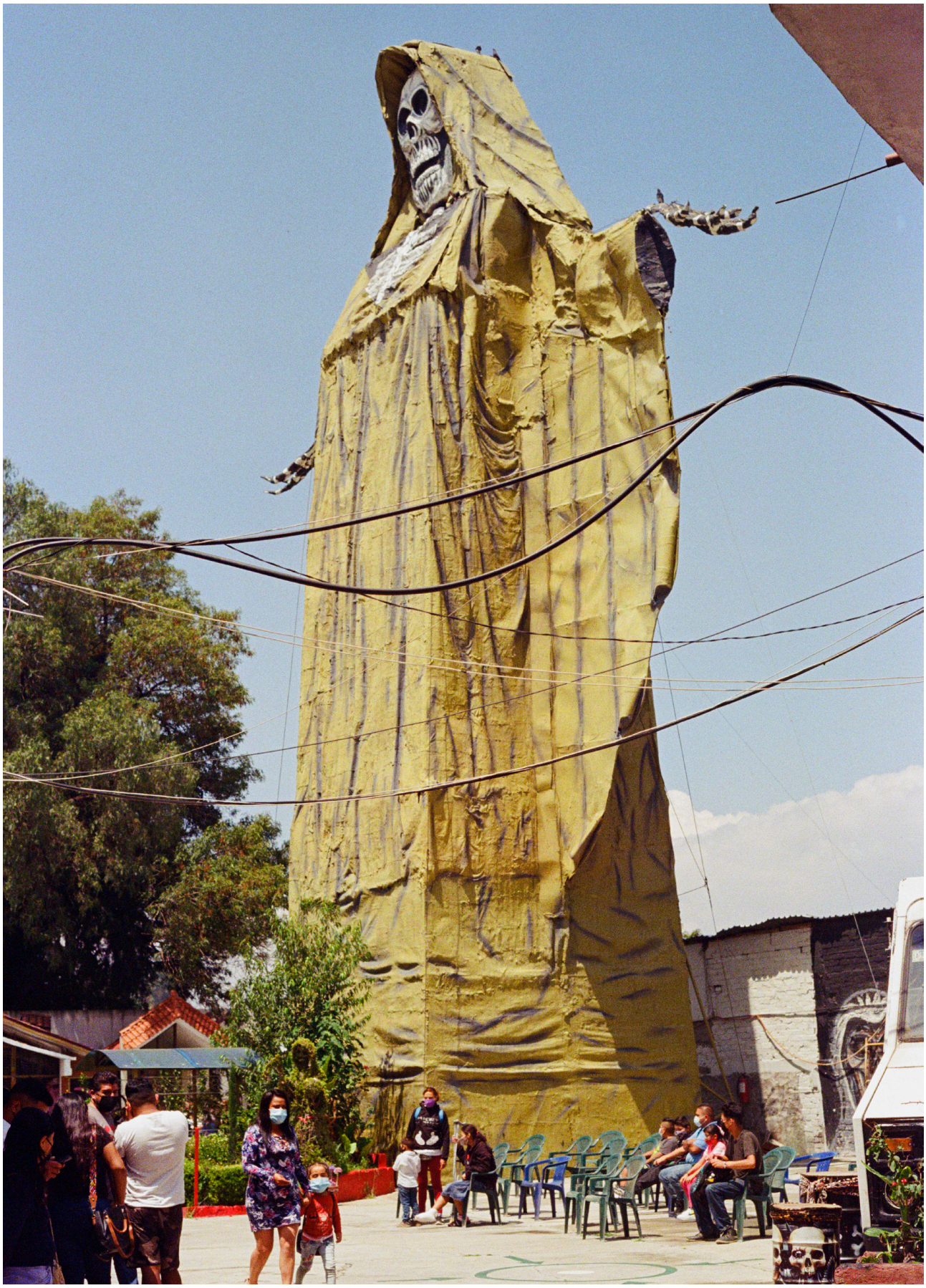

Image 1 The giant Santa Muerte figure at the Templo Mayo in Tultitlán, Estado de México, overlooks devotees preparing for mass.

1. Queens, New York

"Look, Rodrigo! This is the song I'm dedicating to mi Santa this year," said Arely as I was taking off my wet jacket. It was a rainy day in 2017 in Queens, New York, and I could see the drops of water crawling over the windows of her new apartment just a few blocks from Roosevelt Avenue. She told me she had invited some *creyentes* over so I could "talk to them." The smell of *tortas de carne* and baked potatoes in the kitchen, with a slight scent of dog food and urine, reminded me of the beautiful chaos of a sort of Mexican way of life. I sat down in the kitchen at a plastic table with Martín and Andrea.

Arely, a Mexican-American transgender woman, immigrant, and activist, found the song on YouTube and played it on a pair of small speakers over the microwave. She started singing and making dramatic gestures with her hands, addressing an imaginary audience around her:

¿Cómo te pago todas las noches?
¿Todas las veces que me has hecho taaaan feliz?
Tú te entregas totalmente, y me demuestras que eres sólo
Paaaara mí

Martín was looking at his phone in the other corner of the room, holding a silver Santa Muerte charm in his other hand. I couldn't see his face, just a big Santa Muerte tattoo covering most of his neck.

When he heard that the chorus was coming, he left the phone on the table and started singing along:

Te metiste completamente en mi vida
No hay un momento que no esté pensando en ti
Te metiste como el agua entre mis manos
Para quedarte siempre siempre junto a mí
Y te metiste así como no queriendo
Me ilusionaste, me enamoraste
Y hoy soy sólo para ti

A musical interlude continued and Arely went back to the stove to move the potatoes. She was wearing a light grey shirt with a small hole under her right arm, tight jeans, and black boots. As I started talking to Martín, she realized she had forgotten to explain to her friends who I was and why I was there. She came back running and said, "This is Rodrigo. He is a journalist and he wanted to talk to you about la Santa, he is writing an article."

Andrea, a woman in her forties wearing a red sweatshirt seemed relieved for a moment when I spoke in Spanish, but then she realized her hair wasn't "pretty" and told Arely pointing at her own head, "Well, Arely, then maybe we shouldn't do my hair today." Arely answered, "Oh! Don't worry, he is not taking pictures today. Just his little notebook, right?"

Image 2 Arely, a Mexican American transgender woman, immigrant, activist, and Santa Muerte leader, showing her golden ring after breakfast in Queens, New York.

2. Mexico City

I opened the Facebook page: Santa Muerte Internacional (SMI), an organization based in Tultitlán, Mexico, an assemblage of hundreds of local shrines across the country. I picked up the phone and called. It's been four years since Arely sang Ariel Camacho's famous song "Te Metiste" in her kitchen, three years since I finished the Santa Muerte project I was writing in Queens. Most of my *santamuertero* friends and contacts had changed their numbers, deleted their social media accounts (or deleted me), or died. Enriqueta Vargas, the Santa Muerte leader who I interviewed and helped me back in 2017, died of cancer a year later—three days after my grandfather died. There was no other way but to start from scratch.

Yet a familiar voice answered the phone: it was Arely. After Enriqueta Vargas died, she took over the social media accounts of the organization. We remained in touch after my time in Queens and I was delighted to talk to her again: unexpected, but useful. From New York, she put me in touch with some of the young rising leaders of SMI, and once again told them about my project. They happily accepted, welcomed me to their homes, their private shrines, and introduced me to their families and friends: an undeserved embrace.

Every portrait in this series entails a story. I decided to put some of them in writing. In most cases, I use titles and brief captions in useless attempts of anchoring their meaning, to regain context. As if I had a say, I let other photographs speak for themselves: it is our job to listen.

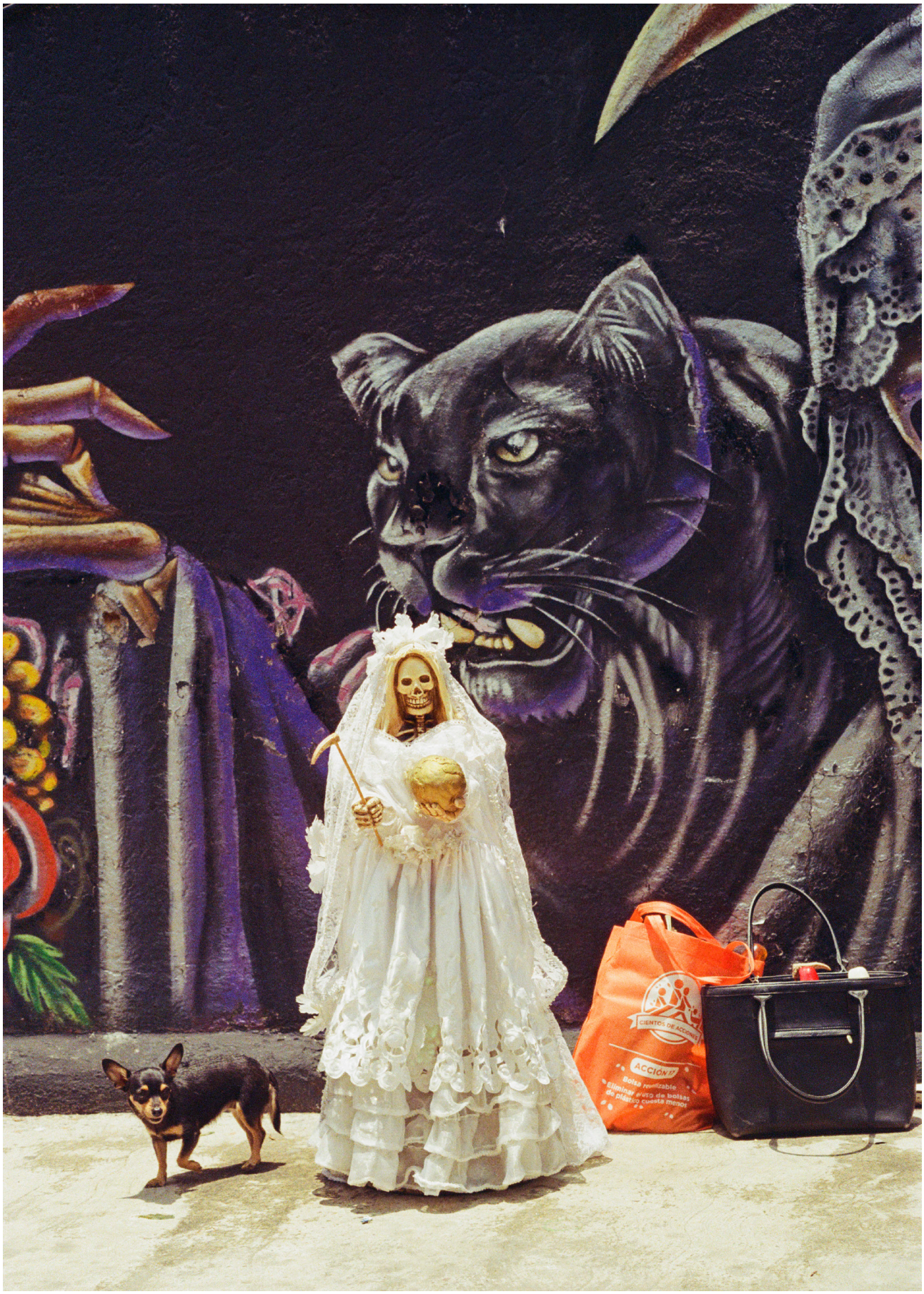

Image 3 A Santa Muerte figure *vestida de novia* (wearing a wedding gown) stands next to a small dog at the Templo Mayor.

3. Zumpango

It was almost ten o'clock when we finally arrived in Zumpango, a couple of hours away from downtown Mexico City. Jonathan's hair and eyes suggested he woke up a few minutes before our arrival. He opened the door and met us outside his house—a place that is now an official Santa Muerte temple: Santa Muerte Internacional Zumpango. His little brothers and sisters bursted out the door immediately, excited that we were finally going to interview their eldest brother: a 23-year-old Mexican who bowls shoes on the streets for a living. His mother told him to dress up and comb his hair. The son complied.

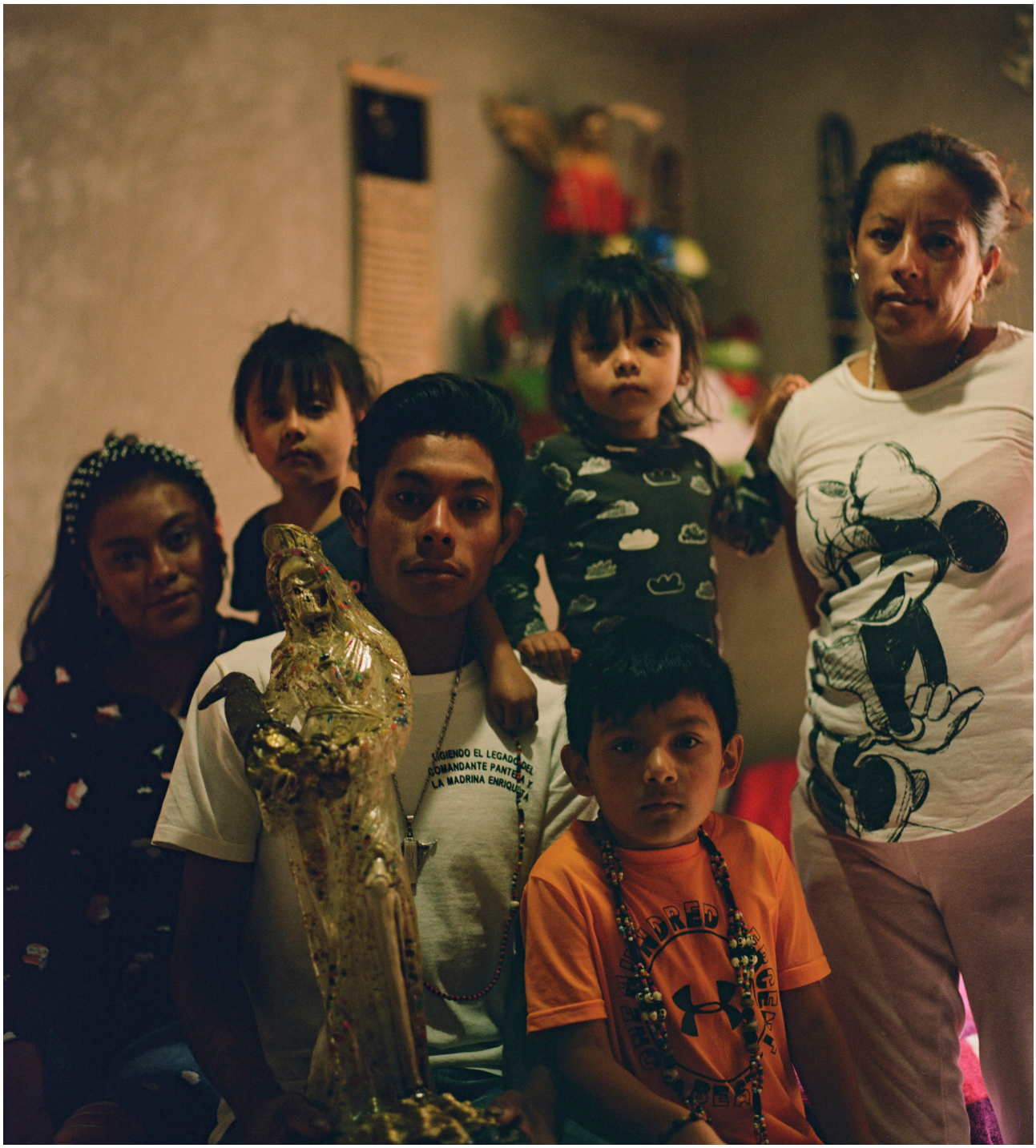

Image 4 The Flores pose for a family portrait. Jonathan, the eldest brother, is holding his personal Santa Muerte figure next to his little brother wearing a *mazo* (Santa Muerte necklace). A seven-color Santa Muerte figure stands at the top-corner of the bedroom, behind them.

Jonathan showed me the shrine and then posed next to it. I didn't need that picture, but I took it anyway. He gave me the speech: a set of phrases and slogans most Santa Muerte devotees give me when they work for, or are close to, SMI. "I don't do it for the money," "She is wise yet ruthless, caring but jealous," "She takes care of you, of everyone, even if you don't believe in her," "People think we're criminals, mafiosos, but we're not: we're just regular people trying to overcome adversities (*salir adelante*)."

Jonathan jumped on his motorcycle and took off. His mother caught up to him and sat behind him. We followed them closely through the narrow streets of Zumpango, through the fields of unpaved roads, and arrived at the homes of their friends. One by one, they opened their doors and shared their stories with me. They showed me their private shrines and revealed some of the secrets they conceal: his mother's photo, a business card, some fruit, her favorite drink, a police badge.

Image 5 Jonathan's motorcycle, protected by a Santa Muerte *mazo*.

Far from criminals, *narcos*, or snapshots of the underworld, I portrayed people going about their business. A grandmother cooking for the family, a policeman enjoying his rest day, a bunch of kids watching cartoons, a woman attending her chicken store. Their stories were not of violent deeds but of surviving on the margins of a deadly city: of almost missing loved ones in a public hospital, of unjust imprisonment, of undesired pregnancies, of getting mugged on the bus—not breaking news or scandalous events, yet stories worth telling.

Image 6 Jonathan's naked chest. A Santa Muerte tattoo with the "Flores" family name lies behind a silver necklace, a miniature version of the giant figure at Templo Mayor.

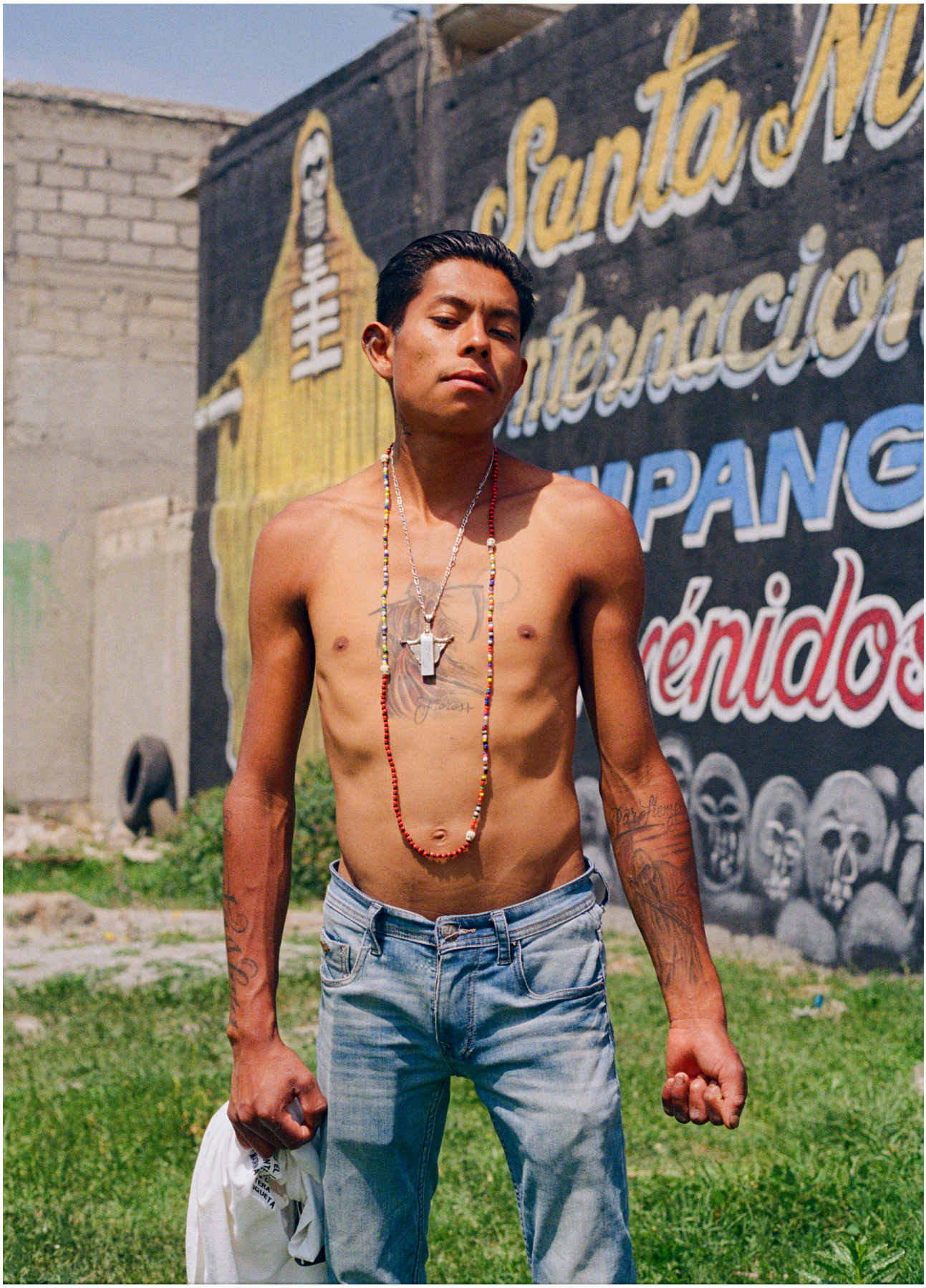

Image 7 Jonathan showing the rest of his tattoos. Behind him, a sign of the official Santa Muerte temple outside his house: Santa Muerte Internacional Zumpango.

4. Tultitlán

She asked me not to take any pictures of her. China doesn't like to be portrayed, even when she's performing *la oración* at the temple. She reads the prayers and works at the store outside; she arranges the ceremonies and directs the volunteers on Sunday Mass at Templo Mayor (the main Santa Muerte temple)—but hates to take credit for it. "Come to my house," she told me. "I'll take you to a few shrines and then to my place and show you mine."

Her partner, Chino, has a massive scar on his skull. He was mugged a few years ago. The perpetrators beat him to the ground and then dropped a huge rock on his head and cracked it open. He was declared dead on the scene—but his devotion saved him. His heart restarted on its own in the ambulance. "She saved me," he said. Santa Muerte doesn't shy away from taking credit.

Her daughter showed up wearing the same shirt as Chino. She was holding a tiny puppy. She came to me and told me she wrote the letter standing at the center of the family shrine: "My mother is a hero," the essay begins. "She has black curly hair and big brown shiny eyes. She has a small mouth with defined lips, a thin nose, and a strong character. She is a hero because she helps people."

She sat next to Chino and smiled for her portrait. Later that day, she played the drums and sang during the ritual for waking up Santa Muerte at the temple. China asked me if I would like to take a picture of one of their Santa Muerte images: she chose a small red replica of the 20-meter statue standing at Templo Mayor. She took it from the shrine and put it down next to Chino and her daughter.

They quickly hopped into the green van with a big Santa Muerte sticker on the windshield. We followed them through the López Portillo Avenue and arrived at a friend's gordita's joint. We had a few beers, a couple of gorditas, and then more beers. I came back the next Sunday and asked China how did she meet Santa Muerte—instead of "starting to believe," devotees refer to initiation as "meeting Her." She refused: "that story needs a few more drinks." Just like she did four years ago.

Image 8 Chino and China's daughter posing at their home. A miniature red version of the giant figure at Tultitlán stands in front of them.

Image 9 A Santa Muerte figure wearing a **penacho** and other Native American motifs rests at the corner of China's private altar. Two tequila shots lie at the edge of the table.

5. On Photographic Violence

Pick up the camera. Aim, kneel, shoot. He hides his face behind a pair of hands. Somehow, taking that photograph revealed the power dynamics—and the violence—immersed in the asymmetrical act of representing others in complicated contexts: the politics of representation. You let the camera hang on your neck again. Engage. You are told only half of the story, perhaps because of fear. He walks away and you take another photograph. The scar on his back might know the other side of the story.

The photographs of Santa Muerte devotees—their shrines, the ink on their bodies, their scars—suggest that violence is a contested, multidimensional concept. It can encompass the physical harm inflicted with a sword or a bomb as well as the bureaucratic structure preventing certain individuals from meeting their basic needs. There is inherent violence in dictatorships, crime, and revolutions, of course, but also in giving gifts, taking pictures, asking questions, or making people remember; it can be inflicted, suffered, amplified, and reproduced.

The act of representing is political, violent, asymmetrical. As with any projection of reality, the photograph omits, regulates, simplifies. The images or texts that emerge are the product of a historically situated event. They reflect, reinforce, and sometimes distort power relations between operators, the portrayed, and their context.

The photographer chooses where, how, and—most importantly—when to take the picture, giving each image structure and meaning and revealing deliberate political choices. The place where she is standing—the physical location of her body in the scene and in the world—, the target she is pointing at, and the format she is using, are all clues leading toward both aesthetic and political decisions. Was she portraying victims or aggressors, sufferers or witnesses, faces or bodies, landscapes or bedrooms?

The spectator looks at the image, consumes it, and gives it new meanings. The same picture of a man with a tattooed neck can work as an illustration of the violence produced by a corrupt regime, as a symbol for others to resist, or as an excuse to send in more troops to catch them. One could even print it out and hang it on the wall because it looks good—the distance, our security, and political asymmetries allow us to make that choice—or keep the newspaper where it appeared to remind yourself that the struggles were real. It is not the image but the situation in which it was produced that reveals its content and the politics of representing others. The fight to regain context, to keep the represented and their stories together (and alive), may be one of the only legitimate reasons to be a voluntary witness of othered lives. Holding a camera is a way of acknowledging life and death, time and distance, joy, and suffering.

Image 10-11 E. and I aiming at each other with a camera, having a photographic conversation.

Images take a life of their own. They escape their original meaning, their initial intent. And photography implies reduction. It simplifies, omits, hides, and blurs to show something. In this case, representing conflict situations reproduces and multiplies the violence of the photographic moment because it shows a partial truth. And that is why their meanings are always changing, contested, and unstable. Their meaning fades. And the penalty of projection is not only a concern for objectivity and aesthetics, but also for human lives. In the end, the form is part of the content, and these photographs reflect a politics—we should begin by acknowledging it.

Image 12 The face of Santa Muerte protects Jonathan's right ear and neck.

Image 13 A Santa Muerte figure and a postcard with a prayer behind the wheel of a car, keeping the driver safe.

Image 14 A *torta* joint in Tultitlán, Estado de México, with a Santa Muerte altar and a reproduction of *The Last Supper* in the back. A photograph of a police officer indicates who is the altar protecting.

Image 15 Rosy at the door of her beauty salon holding a Santa Muerte figure with a picture of herself attached to its neck. The figure holds the world in her hands. An owl representing wisdom lies at her feet.

Image 16 Several caravans of Santa Muerte devotees from various regions across the country arrive at the Templo Mayor, Tultitlán, Mexico. They come to participate in the Santa Muerte annual party in August. The photograph shows the arrival of a caravan from Coacalco, Estado de México.

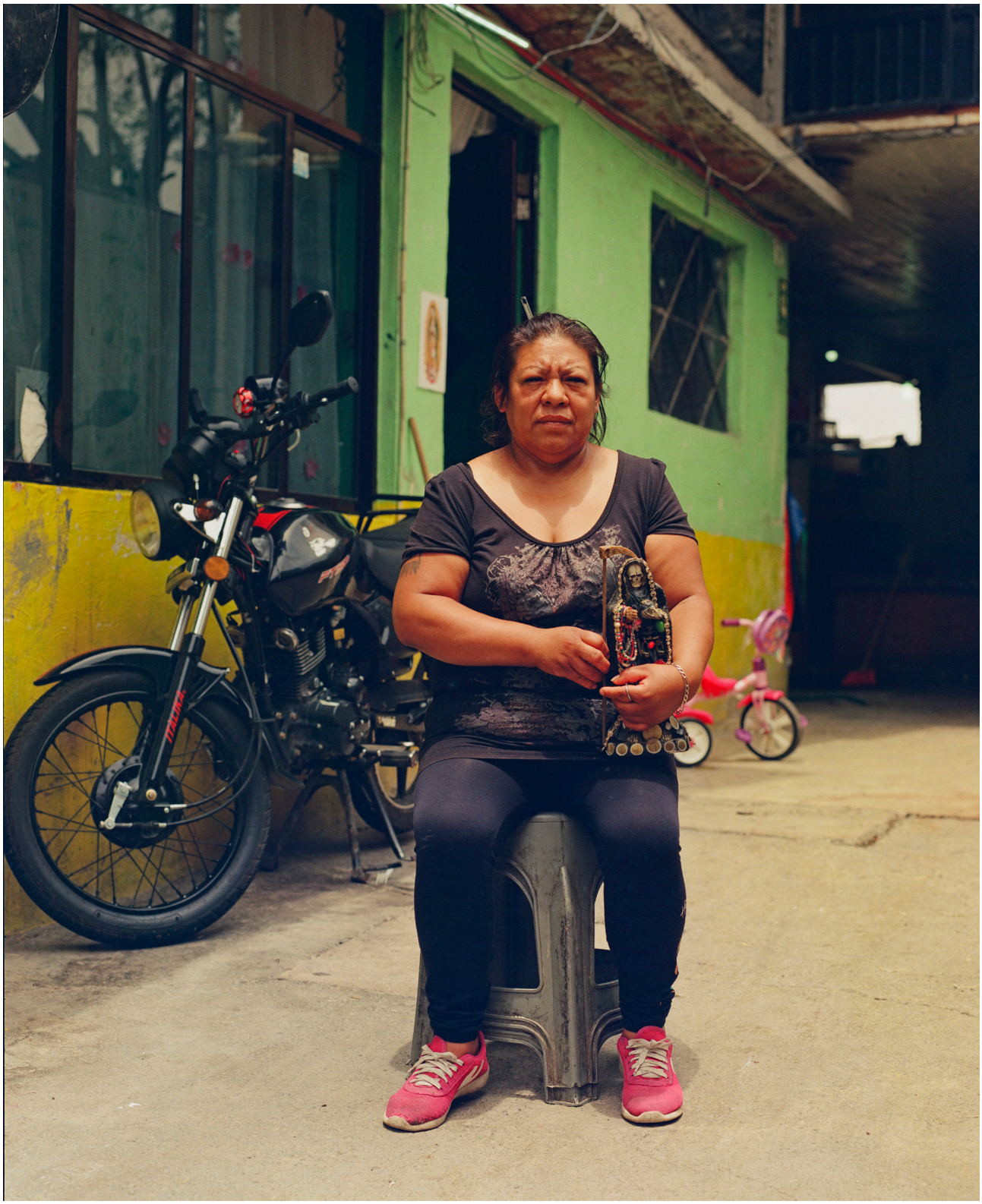

Image 17 Maritza, the owner of a chicken store, poses with the Santa Muerte figure that hides behind the desk to stay out of the costumers' sight. A Virgen de Guadalupe image welcomes them at the door.

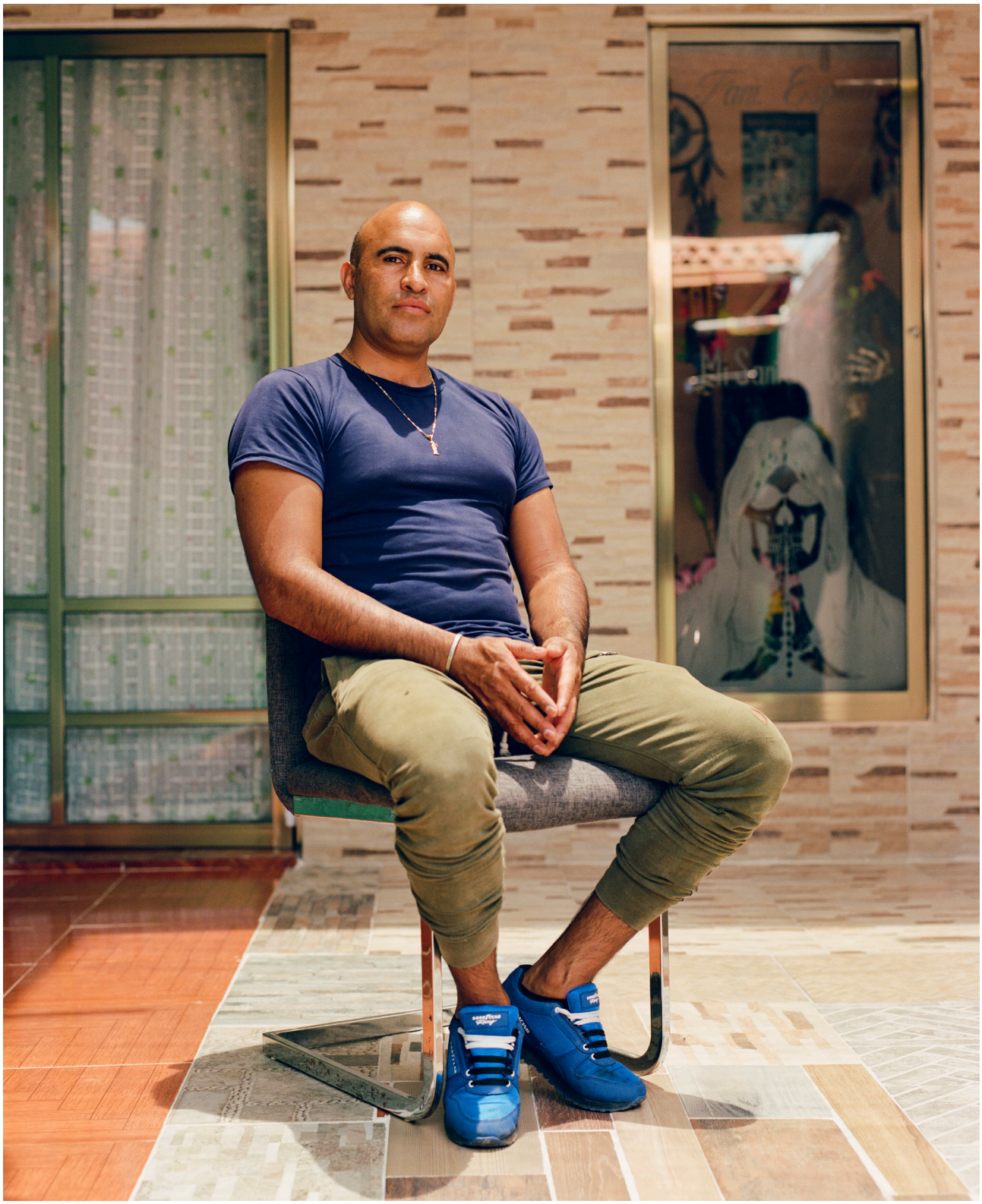

Image 18 España, a retired police officer of Zumpango, sits in front of his private altar in his home's garage. Behind the glass door, a life-sized Santa Muerte looks at his guests. A small speaker blasts music into the little room 24 hours.

Image 19 The Pérez pose for a family portrait with their grandmother, doña Petra, who introduced them to Santa Muerte. Doña Petra holds the first statuette she ever owned, while her grandchildren show their miniature figures.

Image 20 E. And J. pose with their grandmother's statuette in Zumpango, Estado de México.

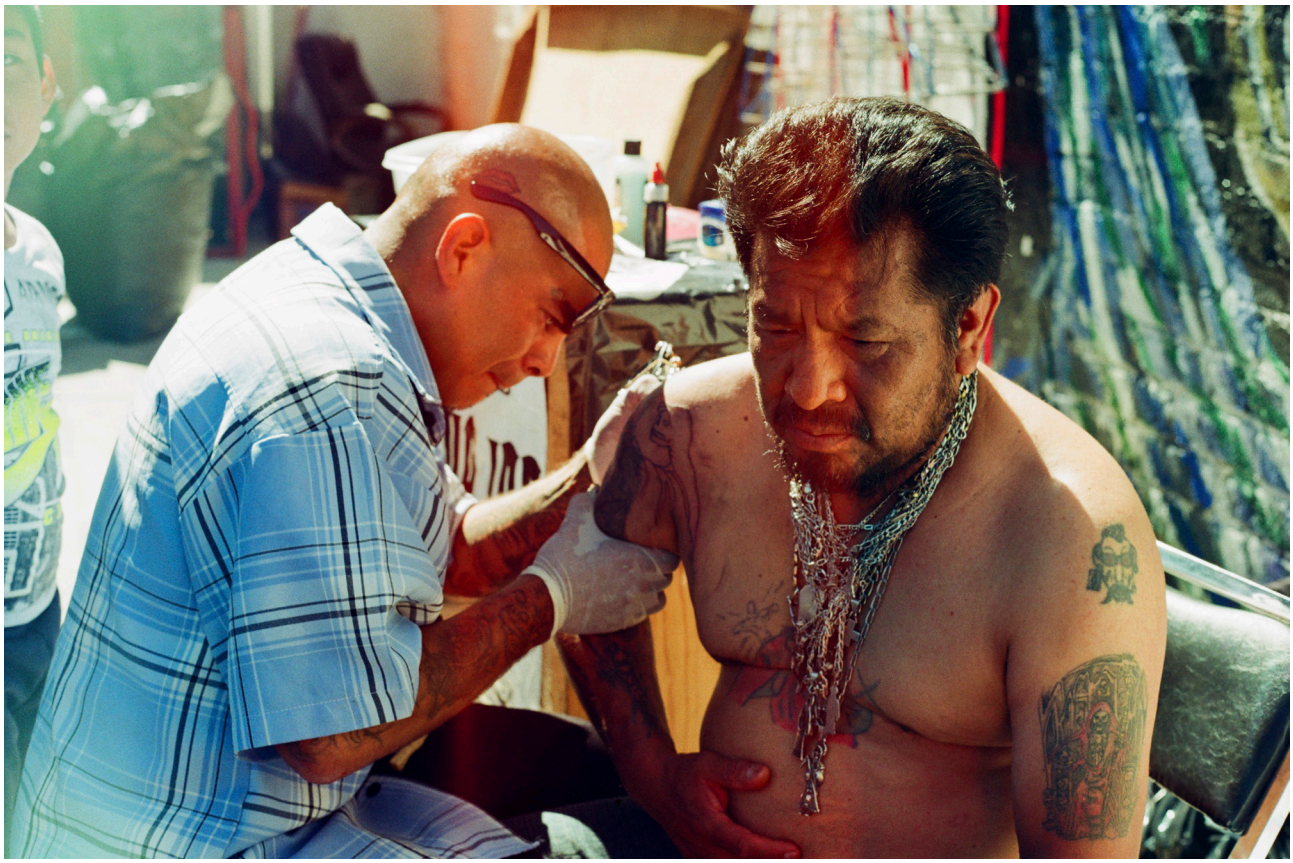

Image 21 A devotee decides to get a new Santa Muerte tattoo on-site.