

A HUNGER FOR FREEDOM, A WALL OF SEPARATION  
MIGRANT VOTIVE IMAGES

by

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## **Abstract**

Recent studies have examined the importance of the aesthetic qualities of border ex votos; nonetheless they represent much more than tradition, they are lived narratives of the day-to-day happenings during migrants' perilously journey north. This study explores the potential of popular religious art as a category to investigate diversity and dynamic representational strategies. Through border ex votos I expand the sociological study of migration depicted on border ex votos to encompass religious variables. Moreover, this research deepens the inquiry into migrants and religion through contemporary border research of which this thesis focuses on two related issues: one is that much of the religious practices in regions of Mexico from where migrants originate, in particular San Juan de los Lagos, can be traced through migrants who have brought or sent back religious and symbolic ex votos. The other issue is that the religious cartography of the borderlands (broadly and creatively defined) is largely a product of migration and migrating people. Furthermore, the extensive devotional piety of Mexican migrants includes diverse ritual and devotional practices. Therefore, I explore some possible relations that can be forged among visual piety portrayed in ex votos, movies and photographs. In addition I show how the narrative conventions of popular religion have become a fascinating subject in cinema and literature.

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## Dedication

To Antonio and Cecilia for your encouragement, for believing in me, for being you. To Tony and Luisa for your love, and for constantly reminding me that learning is a journey not a destination. To Walter for the walk to the beach and for standing by me every step of the way.

## Introduction

Greater attention to border culture with the social and economic underpinning has been developed in academic scholarship and publications in recent years. More and more studies focus on the people involved in the migration process. One of the most contested borders is the Mexico-U.S. border and its problems with permanent pollution and the constant wave of illegal migration. In this context I will study the role of painted border ex votos as mediators in the risky but necessary process of illegal migration of Mexicans across the U.S. border. The ex voto paintings serve as visual testimonies of miracles or as commemorations of blessings received. In the past, ignored by traditional art history, ex votos are examples of popular religiosity that has developed overtime in Mexico, but has, with migration, come to play an important psychological role not only for migrants facing dangers but also for the community as a whole.

Art historians have recently begun to pay more attention to popular art and have increasingly been turning their attention to forms of visual culture. This has caused art historians to open up to theories and methods used in the study of visual imagery and to turn from global and universal to local and particular. In this thesis I will demonstrate that popular religious art is best studied not only for their aesthetic qualities, but also from socio-economic, cultural, and historical perspectives. All the same, as we shall see, the visual in the discussion of Latin American visual culture, interventions of renowned critics such as Nestor Garcia Canclini (1995, 1999, 2001, 2002), Walter Mignolo (2000, 2003), and Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 1999) are noteworthy for their interrogation of this shift in art history to include Latin American cultural artefacts<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In the discussion of Latin American visual culture the interventions of Canclini, Mignolo and Pratt have developed intercultural discourses to expand the concept of popular art. They interrogate mainstream discourses in art history to challenge conceptual dichotomies, such as fine/popular arts. As a result it has become necessary to broaden the

In the 1960s Gloria Giffords pioneered the study of Mexican folk retablos. Since then, she has been recording their history and aesthetic qualities where she has shed light on the context of these paintings. Giffords has been the curator of many exhibitions across Mexico and the United States and is the author of *Mexican Folk Retablos* (University of New Mexico Press, 1998). As a result of her efforts, there has been a burgeoning interest in the diverse aspects of Mexican ex votos. Patricia Arias, (2002) in her book *La Enferma Eterna*, analyzes ex votos as historical products and as social devices submissive to the social exigencies and cultural restrictions of the time. The feminine ex voto is described as a public act, a social tool for rural women to express themselves and put forth the interests, principles, values, and priorities of the key aspects of feminine needs at particular historical moments. From this perspective, the votive offering emerges as a historical object, but an object that depicts a codified history. It assumes that there are subject matters that Mexican women have been able to speak about while others cannot be discussed, namely rural feminine existence. Furthermore, other relevant and innovative studies of ex votos have been conducted by Moises Gamez y Oresta Lopez (2002) in *Ex votos Painted in San Luis Potosi*, and Elin Luque and Mary Michele Beltran (2004) in *The Art of Giving Thanks: Ex votos at the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe*.

Of crucial interest is *Miracles on the Border* by Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey<sup>2</sup> in which these border specialists analyze 124 contemporary ex votos, scrutinizing the shifting subjects and themes that constitute a running record of the migrants' unique experience. The result is a vivid synthesis that connects the history of an art form and a people, links two very different cultures, and allows a deeper understanding of a major twentieth century theme — the drama of transnational migration. This study is innovative in two ways: First, it introduces

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scope to analyze Latin American artefacts questioning the social, economic, religious and psychological influences on those who produce visual images as well as on those who view them.

<sup>2</sup> *Miracles on the border* was first published in English in 1995 followed by a translation into Spanish in 2001.

classification of border ex votos by theme: making the trip, finding one's way, legal problems, medical problems, getting to the United States, and homecoming<sup>3</sup>. Durand and Massey, renowned scholars in the field of migration, also introduce a new methodology to the study of border ex votos. Namely, they study the social phenomena of Mexican migration from the migrants' perspective depicted in the ex votos<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the border where identities get refashioned (or not, as there are attempts to maintain identity) has become an important theoretical issue.

Second, in historical and sociological studies of Mexican migration to the U.S., some scholars have come to pay more attention to the role of religion. Examples of such studies are Daniel Groody's, *Border of Death, Valley of Life* (2002), *Horizons of the Sacred* (2002) edited by Brian R. Larkin, Timothy Motovina and Gary Riebe, and *Religion Across Borders* (2002), edited by Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, amongst others. Therefore, following Durand and Massey's methodology and classification, my thesis will bring together these strands, with a closer, in-depth analysis of the text and imagery of a few ex-votos dealing with making the trip from Mexico to the United States.

This thesis examines the impact of the migration experience on the religious cultural identity of people and symbolic goods, such as ex votos, as a frame to describe religious life and history, loyalty towards religion, and adherence to cultural identity in the community of origin. Through the ex votos, this study historicizes the evolution of transnational religious networks, expands the sociological study of migration to encompass religious variables, and deepens the inquiry into religious culture through contemporary border research. The thesis focuses on two related issues: One is that much of the religious practices in the traditional and newer migrant

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<sup>3</sup> Exceptions are maritime ex votos studied in depth by Marion Oettinger Jr. and European collective ex votos of penitents related to healing plagues and epidemics.

<sup>4</sup> The ex votos I will use as examples were taken from Durand, J. & Massey, D. (1995). *Miracles on the Border* and Durand, J & Arias, P. (2002). *La Enferma Eterna*.

sending regions of Mexico, in particular San Juan de los Lagos, can be traced through migrants who have brought or sent back religious and symbolic ex votos in addition to material goods. The other is that the religious cartography of the borderlands (broadly and creatively defined) is largely a product of migration and migrating people.

Chapter 1 discusses the importance of support offered by the diocese of San Juan de los Lagos in the migration process and decision making which underscores the human costs associated with contemporary undocumented migration to the United States. It also evaluates the role of religion in the migration process, particularly the role of the dioceses of San Juan de los Lagos and its relationship with undocumented migrants. At the same time, I look at how the presentation of the ex votos to the local home shrine creates bonds and ties to the community in spite of migration absences.

In Chapter 2, I will explore in depth the border ex votos that deal with the trip from Mexico to the U.S. which are dedicated to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos. I will emphasize the fact that ex votos use a combination of imagery and text to describe moments of great peril from which the migrants were saved. This is a relatively new genre of ex-votos, using visual imagery to address social, political and economic problems of the illegal migration of Mexican workers to the United States. The ex votos offer a poignant testimony of the powerlessness of migrants in face of the harsh realities and dangers of the border crossing, and consequent dependence on the hope of supernatural saintly intervention for protection and aid.

Chapter 3 explores some of the relationships within visual piety through ex votos, as portrayed in a novel and a film. I propose that one way of describing how popular religion is represented at the border and how it travels across borders is to effectively bring these visual manifestations together. In this discussion I will use a Mexican novel *Santitos* by Maria Amparo

Escandon as well as a film based on this same novel that came out in 1999. Both of these works demonstrate that traditional discourses of popular religion have recently become an intriguing subject for popular media forms.



## Chapter One

### Dying to leave: Migrants and Religion

The devotees of the San Juan de los Lagos shrine are spectators and participants of the migration process either through offering or observing the testimonies painted on the ex votos. Border ex votos from Mexican migrants function in specific, highly codified ways within a ritual domain at the shrine of San Juan de los Lagos. Within the complex network of migration, the border ex votos left at this religious institution denote status for the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos as a miraculous saint for migrants. At the same time, the presentation of the ex votos to the local home shrine creates bonds and ties to the community when migrants are away. The importance of the aesthetic and historical qualities of Mexican ex votos has been articulated in a number of recent publications. My investigation, however, focuses on the relevance of the border ex votos (specially the ones dealing with the trip) in the migration process, underscoring a dynamic process of the human costs associated with contemporary undocumented migration to the United States and the role of religion in the migration process, particularly the role of the dioceses of San Juan de los Lagos and its relationship with undocumented migrants. Furthermore, I am concerned not only with the ex votos, but also with the importance of the church in the decision-making of the journey to the United States.

The phenomenon of border ex votos is an interesting adaptation of devotional practices going back centuries especially in Catholic countries that influenced Latin America. Popular Catholic religiosity<sup>5</sup> permeated the beliefs, rites, and rituals, while celebrations that used to be pagan created a syncretism and the emergence of a colonial imaginary. Devotees may ask a saint

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<sup>5</sup> Popular religion of Mexico is popular Catholicism, of the working class, ritualistic, and practiced mainly by minorities. Popular Catholicism is a result of a syncretism between Spanish Catholicism that held in high regard ritual conversion and prehispanic beliefs.

to help cure an illness, bring consolation for a loss, avert a disaster, or otherwise provide for the physical and psychological well-being of themselves and their loved ones; a saint's power arises from his or her ability to perform requested favours or miracles. Devotees are responsible for keeping the saint satisfied through acts of devotion, and by acknowledging publicly any favour received. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century these devotional practices are adapted to a new historical need: the dangerous illegal crossing of the Mexican-U.S. border by Mexican migrants. With little support or power, migrants call on the supernatural for help and give thanks through votive offerings<sup>6</sup> whenever this occurs. In this chapter, I will consider the role of art within popular religion in the occident of Mexico throughout the migration process to the United States. However prior to analyzing the ex votos as a testimony of the Mexican popular religion, there is a need to talk about the relationship between the diocese of San Juan de los Lagos and the surrounding migrants communities in Mexico.

### **Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos<sup>7</sup>: Migrant Devotion**

Recent scholars such as Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey (1995, 2001), Helen Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz (2002), Daniel G. Groody (2002), and Jacqueline Hagen (2003) have taken into account the importance of religion and spiritual practices for Mexican and Central American migrants during the process of migration into the United States. I concur with Hagen and Ebaugh (2003), who argue that the role of religion in the decision-making and the journey of migration has been “generally overlooked by social scientists and policymakers alike. By relying on economic considerations in driving the decision to migrate and social explanations for sustaining

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<sup>6</sup> Votive offerings in Mexico, including ex votos, were placed in diverse churches, chapels, domestic altars, roadside chapels, workshops, shrines and pilgrimage sites, where they hang along with crutches, *milagros*, photographs, diplomas, amongst others, as testimonials of cures and answered prayers.

<sup>7</sup> There are many shrines where migrant devotees offer ex votos and other forms of votive objects: The shrine of The Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, the shrine of Our Lord of Saucito in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, the shrine of The Virgin of Zapopan in Guadalajara, Mexico.

the process, theories on international migration have overlooked the cultural context of migration. More specifically, they have not addressed the role of religion in the migration process” (2003, 1146). As the human costs associated with contemporary undocumented migration to the United States rise when increasing numbers of unauthorized migrants are exposed to a dangerous – sometimes fatal – journey, made all more difficult with recent law enforcement operations<sup>8</sup> along the Mexico – U.S. border, it is reasonable to expect that reliance on the church for spiritual counsel and protection may assume greater importance.

Religion plays a central role in the lives of legal and illegal immigrants to the United States. More than any other social institution, the church plays a crucial role in the spiritual realm of the immigrants and gives them a means of building networks to strengthen communal ties and legitimize personal desires. Immigrant Christianity, while assuming a vital role in the turbulent world of the border, covers many ideological and practical problems in the wake of the ongoing Mexican exodus.

Also, it is important to remember that saints have been helping Mexican migrants since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when permanent and temporal migration from the western states of Mexico (Michoacan, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas) to the U.S. began. Migrants have always had their own saints to pray to, taking their consoling images with them on their treacherous journey. The church recognizes some, while others only have the sanction of the people. Jorge Durand, a border specialist of the University of Guadalajara says, “When you are in a situation of risk and danger, you affirm yourself in that which gives you security; what gives you security are your customs, your religion” (1999, 2). Many border-bound migrants venerate San Toribio Romo of Santa Ana, Jalisco, while others carry laminated pictures of the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of the Americas, who appeared to an Indian (now San Juan Diego)

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<sup>8</sup> See Joseph Nevins, Mike Davis (2002) *Operation Gatekeeper*

almost 500 years ago. In Tijuana, hopeful crossers light candles to Juan Castillo Morales, popularly known as Juan Soldado<sup>9</sup>, a soldier killed by a mob in 1938 after being unjustly accused of the rape and murder of a little girl. In Patambán, Michoacán, Christ the King, who is credited with helping migrants, is worshiped. San Juan Toribio Romo<sup>10</sup> patron of the illegal migrants is often invoked to grant a solution at the U.S.-Mexican border. The beliefs depicted in religious images “are often somehow unorthodox” (Alberro 2000, 72). In Mexico, the needs of the people cause believers to mix traditions and sometimes even worship people who are not accepted by the Catholic Church as saints, but popular belief makes them unofficial saints. For example, there are two saints, which have special significance for migrants but are not accepted by the Church: Jesus Malverde (unofficial saint for drug dealers) and Juan Soldado (unofficial saint of illegal migrants) who many believers say have returned to help them face thirst, hunger and the U.S. Border Patrol in their arduous, illegal border crossing to find jobs in the United States.

Veronica Maza Bustamante, a writer for the Catholic-oriented magazine *Milenio* comments: “The new Mexican saints are giving a different twist to the phrase, crossing the border. They are no longer trying to help true believers on the brink of death, but instead they are literally helping illegal aliens cross the border into the United States. Times have changed, and even saintliness must adapt” (*Milenio*). Jorge Durand, a renowned expert on migration issues, doubts that any of the Catholic hierarchy will give any of these saints an endorsement to make them official migrant saints. Yet, the migrant devotees treat these saints with the splendour and respect of any other recognized saint. Each of these “saints” has his or her own shrine or church, is offered tokens, and also has the freedom of crossing national borders.

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<sup>9</sup> For a deeper study of Juan Soldado see Chapter 3 in this thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Toribio Romo was a priest martyred during Mexico’s Cristero Wars 1927-29, when an avengeful revolutionary government persecuted the Catholic Church after centuries of its collusion and cooperation with the Spanish to subjugate Indians and Mestizo. Pope John Paul IV canonized Toribio Romo in 2000.

Some migrants, most of whom are peasants, come from small highland towns located in the interior of Jalisco. These towns have been losing residents for years. Peasants have been leaving for the same reasons as many other Mexicans; in search of jobs and a better life. However, the Jalisco migrants have been returning to Mexico for the patron's saint festivities, Easter, and other holidays. Jalisco has also had a long tradition of venerating its Catholic roots. After all, its capital is Guadalajara, perhaps Mexico's most conservative and Catholic city. Near Guadalajara, in the town of San Juan de los Lagos, is the shrine of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos, known also as La Sanjuanita. Her ornate, two-spired colonial church in the plaza is the tallest building in town. Pilgrims and visitors come from all over the world to see her richly dressed image: in the gilt altar retablo.

The devotion to Our Lady of San Juan, the patron saint of the diocese of San Juan de los Lagos began in 1542 when Father Miguel de Bologna, a Spanish priest, brought an image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception to the village. According to the legend, some years later, in 1623, an Indian girl fell gravely ill. After her parents earnestly prayed to the Virgin, she was saved from imminent death. As a result of this miracle, there was a steady increase in the number of pilgrims who came to the Virgin. They were not only Indians, but Spanish and mestizo as well. The Virgin acquired her own local identity as Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos, separate from her original identity as the Immaculate Conception. This miraculous effigy is still a magnet that draws multitudes, and her cult remains a phenomenon for the masses that the most powerful institution would not dare to question. Nowadays, this image is highly venerated by the Mexican migrants who travel across the border into the United States (Durand and Massey, 1995 & Arias, 2001).

Both legal and illegal migrants leaving for and returning from Phoenix, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York credit her with safe passage, good health and good jobs. The walls of a staircase near the main altar of the church are full of ex votos<sup>11</sup>, folk paintings representing the virgin watching over them when they run into problems, often while crossing the border, offered as a testimony and thanks for help. The ex voto not only occupies a physical space in churches and chapels, but also has a psychological, spiritual, and emotional space in the psyche of the believers. Durand claims that although ex votos are a tradition in Mexico, no other Virgin receives as many as La Sanjuanita. Apart from ex votos, she receives a profusion of tokens of mementos such as wedding dresses, copies of university diplomas, baby clothes, and locks of hair. For the church this is good news because the number of ex votos and mementos are the affirmation of the power of faith, the strength of the church, and the miraculous power of the specific patron saint of that church. For the villages where such churches are located ex votos represent an economic benefit afforded by the high number of pilgrims or visitors, as well as serve a source of patriotic pride.

So popular is the Virgin de San Juan de Los Lagos that not only do migrants visit La Sanjuanita in her church but, her image comes to them. Between July and October 2002, local priests took a replica of la Sanjuanita's statue to Chicago, Milwaukee, Devine, Texas, and several cities in California, including Fresno, Palm Springs, Moreno Valley, Roseville and Los Baños<sup>12</sup>. Also, a reproduction of the image was transferred to the local parish church in San Juan, Texas. In this manner a substitute shrine was constructed in the United States near McAllen, Texas for Mexicans who found it difficult to travel all the way to Jalisco. The shrine became

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<sup>11</sup> I will talk about ex votos in Chapter 2

<sup>12</sup> For in depth study of United States shrines see Eileen Oktavek. 1995. *Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros Along the Border*, The University of Arizona Press; Edited by Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz. 2002, *Religion Across Borders*, Altamira Press.

known as the Virgin de San Juan del Valle. It represents an interesting exercise in cultural transfer. The priests promoted the shrine through radio and television appeals for support, in the best tradition of U.S. evangelicals. The appeals worked, and Mexicans living in the United States collected sufficient funds to construct a church and a shrine. The shrine, which is not the focus of many pilgrimages, is somewhat different from Mexican shrines. The pilgrims leave no ex votos at the shrine of the Virgin de San Juan del Valle. As the shrine became prosperous, however, surplus funds were used to construct a school, a pilgrim hotel, and a home for the aged in the vicinity (Durand 1995, 64-65). This type of expansion is in the U.S. tradition.

New Mexican immigrants coming into the United States and establishing ethnic congregations do not however, abandon religious ties to their home country. Rather, as they communicate with family and friends left behind in their homeland, they influence religious structures and practices there. Not only does this reciprocal pattern change religious customs in the immigrants' country of origin, but it also prepares future migrants for what awaits them in religious institutions in the United States. Religious festivities, processions, and rituals on sacred days reflect costumes brought from Mexico to the United States and spiritually unite immigrants with their home community engaged in the same religious activities. Furthermore, through these celebrations, migrants connect with their traditions back home. Some of these celebrations include Easter, the celebration of Mary's conception, and the Virgin of Guadalupe Day, among others.

In Mexico, according to Victor M. Espinosa (1993), the diocese of San Juan de los Lagos in Jalisco has elaborated a pastoral exclusively dedicated to the migrants and included their day, 8 January, amongst the calendar of patron saint's festivities. By incorporating migrant day into patron saint festivities, in some parishes social tensions between migrants and non-migrants were

eased. The cultural conflicts caused by the high number of emigrants' diffuses a political discourse by approaching the ritual as a space where the migrants annually negotiate and reaffirm their place in local and global communities. Through maintaining a connection with their homeland, migrants play out processes of assimilation and acculturation in communities on both sides of the border. Furthermore, daily lives of migrants and networks of churches across the border imply that religious beliefs and customs follow a circular path.

As an example of the circular path, I want to use Espinosa's letters from the Diocese of San Jose to the migrant communities, in which "the bishop told the migrants that despite their living and working in another country, they still belong to the diocese of San Juan de los Lagos, for that reason they still had the obligation to work for their salvation as well; therefore I [bishop] am at your service" (Espinosa 1998, 232). Apart from expressing the transnational nature of the congregation in the letter, the dioceses' main objective was to give recommendations and advice to migrants and to keep them away from temptation in the United States. In this letter, according to Espinosa (1995), migrants were addressed as beloved sons and daughters, unlike in the 1920s, when they were considered traitors for following the migration path. Far from condemning them, the bishop tells them "that for their just and Christian determination of searching in a faraway land and big sacrifices, they will find a job that will allow them to provide for their families happiness and prosperities" (Espinosa 1993, 1998; Durand, 1994). The bishop, in the letters, also encourages the migrants to travel to San Juan or San Jose regardless of personal circumstances, promising spiritual compensation. If the church backs an illegal activity even indirectly, it must be worth the risk; in addition migration also helps the prosperity of the community and insure greater offerings and support for the church, therefore, traveling to Jalisco is imperative for many migrants. This is why many Catholic



Mexicans feel obligated to their church and family; on the one hand, they work in the United States to support families in Mexico and send their kids to school, and on the other hand, they will continue to return to Mexico at least once a year during the patron saints' celebrations. They bring back money offerings as well as tokens or ex votos for received favours, pray for new ones, and carry religious objects across the border for ritual practices. Finally, they return with the earnings of their hard labour, get married, and strengthen the community bonds in their hometowns in Mexico.

The diocese of San Juan de los Lagos also created a devotional booklet available for sale in the gift shops of churches that belong to the diocese. It has prayers designed especially for migrants on the journey north, prayers for those about to cross illegally and prayers for those being deported. For example: "I recognize that I have defied human laws," one prayer says. "They arrested me for crossing a line that men have drawn as a frontier. I ask that You give me serenity to accept these conflicts of life and the necessary strength to overcome them" (Boletin Pastoral No. 69, 1988). Indeed, the booklet offers directives for migrants to stay connected to their beliefs while praying in the journey north.

Surprisingly, through the prayer printed in the devotional booklet, the church acts as partisan of illegal crossings. On the one hand, the booklet demonstrates an interest in the good will of the church for wanting the migrants to be close to God while traveling north. On the other hand, the church also has economical and political interests in maintaining a close connection with the migrants since their money benefits churches. In tiny villages of Jalisco, churches and shrines are getting facelifts, while migrants use the church to maintain their social status back home and abroad. Dirt roads are being paved and impoverished families are being fed thanks to the migrants' contributions.

Religious practices that were born as regional or national variants (such as San Juan de los Lagos) have truly transcended borders. Thus, new discourses have to be elaborated to accommodate these religion's practices in their diverse cultural and societal contexts and to account for their presence in countries where they previously did not exist. Contrary to public opinion, increasing numbers of migrants continue to participate in political, social, and economic lives of their home countries, even as they put down roots in the United States. Migration transforms family and work, challenges migrants' ideas about race and gender, and alters life for those who stay behind as much, if not more, than for those who migrate.

## Chapter Two

### Making the trip: Migrant Votive Images

"Lord, I don't know how to worship you like a  
poet, with complicated verses, but accept this crude and  
humble work that I have made with my mortal hands"  
Angel Zarraga Fernandez, 1983

This chapter will examine border ex votos and photographs<sup>13</sup> in order to highlight the significant place of those visual images in the mediation of sociological issues faced by migrants at the border. Specifically, it aims to address the question of religious visual piety in the context of the border and the trip from Mexico to the United States. The border ex votos are a relatively new genre of ex voto, using visual imagery, that addresses a critical social, political and economic problem: the illegal migration of Mexican workers to the United States, which is greatly impacting societies in both Mexico and the US today. With the ex votos we have a poignant testimony of the powerlessness of migrants in face of the harsh realities and dangers of the border crossing and consequent dependence on the hope of supernatural saintly intervention for protection and aid. We shall see that in the ex votos, the illegal migrants use a combination of imagery and text to describe moments of great peril from which they were saved.

Within this context, talking about border ex votos is, in a sense, talking from the migrants' site of mourning in a reflection on the locations where border crossings take place. While those stories might be incomplete and fragmented in the images, they would be reconstructed in the minds of the migrants. My objective in this chapter is to explore the role of border ex votos in the cultural process of contemporary illegal immigration. With the aim of

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<sup>13</sup> There have been recent studies of religion at both sides of the border: discussed by Durand and Massey, Patricia Arias and Lopez y Oresta among others. *Religion Across borders: Transnational immigrant networks* (2002), edited by Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz; *Horizons of the Sacred* (2002), edited by Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella, SVD; *El dilema del Retorno* (1998) by Victor M. Espinosa.

better understanding the migration dynamics and religious patterns of the Mexican migrants. In order to do this I will look at the ex votos that deal with the trip from Mexico to the United States and which are dedicated to Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos<sup>14</sup>. I specifically chose to deal with three particular ex votos because they represent the three most common routes migrants take to make their way across the border: Texas, California, and Arizona. The chosen ex votos, in their expressions of relief from peril, call to mind other -sadden-stories about people who drown in rivers, freeze in the mountains, dehydrate in the deserts and are threatened by border guards. Mediating between hope, fear and relief, this study will also demonstrate how ex votos help to maintain bonds between migrants and communities back home.

If the Mexican narrative produces a border caught between victims and victimizers, the US narrative produces the border as a no man's land, where illegal migrants crawl into the country in front of their very eyes. Nevertheless, the essentials of that experience involve physical separation - the uprooting from one's home, family, and past; the encounter with strangers and strangeness; the adaptation to change of one's sense of self and location; the tensions between unity and diversity. The ex votos also show that as individuals move on, physically and culturally, from the immigrant beachheads, the significant cultural practices that they or their parents bring with them or invent in America also change, some in unexpected ways.

By opening up the definition of art to include a greater variety of visual and material culture, this chapter will examine specific votive imagery, as mentioned above, particularly the migrant ex votos which were placed at the shrine of San Juan de los Lagos as an offering of thanks upon a safe return home. Those ex votos are in part a product of the physical mobility in

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<sup>14</sup> I chose the shrine of San Juan de los Lagos among the many in Mexico because the Virgin of San Juan is considered the patron saint of legal and illegal migrants and it offers a vast collection of ex votos left by the migrants themselves.

the global era, which brings with it a creation and redefinition of identities and beliefs. It follows that, within the frame of physical and cultural mobility, undocumented migration has opened the door for new socio-cultural and political dynamics. At the same time this chapter will explore the roots of the ex voto tradition in communal identity and ethnic origins, at times forcing them to function as expressions of culture more than those of faith. That is to say, people create and give ex votos out of a sense of loyalty to tradition rather than through a conscious religious choice.

Yet, it would be an oversimplification to deny religious meaning to such a tradition. This ritual forms the core of migrants' popular religiosity because it projects unarticulated premises of faith and religious commitment. The ex votos illustrate an expression of faith (today) unique to those marginalized by social forces. The complex votive imagery of ex votos makes these documents a rich source for understanding the popular mentality. They combine religious beliefs with the material culture of everyday life. Their content indicates a privileged supernatural order and its involvement with humankind. Every element in the votive process is rich in significance in its aesthetic, sociological, and devotional quality. With their images and textual testimony, the ex votos different from mere candles<sup>15</sup> can provide us with a better sense of the fears and problems faced by those who offered them and the hopes that are prayed for to the saints.

### **The History of the Ex Votos<sup>16</sup>**

The Latin term ex voto means "the promise of," "from a vow," "out of vow," or the "miracle of." It refers to the payment of a vow, made in a moment of distress, through the offering to the divine figure a painting or another objects related to the grace received in specific

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<sup>15</sup> Candles are lightened in front of saints, the Virgin and Christ in churches and shrines across Mexico when the devotee prays for a favour.

<sup>16</sup> See Gloria Gliffords (1974, 1995), Rosa Maria Sanchez Lara (1998), Patricia Arias (2001) For more detailed information on the History of ex votos.

pilgrimage centres. This concept of asking for favours and using art as payment and propaganda for received graces dates back to ancient times. Objects in the shape of domestic animals and entire human bodies or their parts definitely identified as votive offerings have been found in Babylon dating back more than 4000 years. They have also been discovered in Greek sites from the eighth century BC, and amongst Etruscan and Roman artifacts. Other examples of votive offerings were small anatomical figures of wax, wood, or clay left at sites of veneration in Europe and Mesoamerica. The tradition of giving thanks is a vigorous and significant aspect of all religious belief, and Christianity is no exception. The act of presenting a physical token of "thanks giving" became embedded in Christian ritual during the Medieval era, and it was during the 15th century that the more sophisticated practice of leaving painted ex votos in Catholic religious shrines developed. The Spanish word *retablo* was derived from the Latin term *retro tabula* or "behind the altar" (*retro* for back and *tabula* for board, tablet; the Latin *tabulum* means "table"). It was originally used to designate elaborate wooden screens displaying sculptures, paintings, or both of the main patron saints and other holy icons and narrative scenes. Retablos follow the canons of European art and Catholic iconography, leaving very limited freedom for individual creativity. The iconography of the retablos reflects historical, cultural, and religious links with the role of suffering in visual piety important since the late Medieval era in Roman Catholic Europe and later in the New World.

Spaniards first introduced retablos in Mexico as an art form, and as a tool of religious conversion for Indians. Later in the 19th century the word *retablo* was used for the small oil paintings on tin, zinc or copper, which venerate a multiplicity of Catholic saints, such as patron saints, Jesus Christ, and the many of the epithets of Virgin Mary and are displayed as part of home altars for private worship. With the small retablos emerged a form of spirituality that

emphasized the emotional involvement of the faithful. Reflecting the wealth and rank of the individual owner, they were produced in every medium, from paper, tin or gold. The rapport with the image was an intimate one: typically kneeling, the devout recited prayers while gazing at the image, and could light candles in front of it, caress it, and kiss it. An artisan's attention to detail and the corporeality of his figures increased the immediacy of the image as a focus of veneration.

Finally, the word *retablo* was given to the painted ex votos that were made so as to offer thanks to a particular saint in the form of a short narrative and are often referred to as *retablos* in Spanish. The use of the word *retablo* perhaps comes by association with the practitioners of those tin works that use the same medium. Perhaps it is also because they include narrative scenes and, often within the scene, a mini-icon of the Virgin to signify who is being prayed to/or who gave the miraculous help. Ex votos are meant to be displayed at major pilgrimage sites as public testimonies for graces received; the devotee grateful for a miracle dedicates a small painted testimonial to the respective patron saint.

The painted ex votos discussed here consist of three components: The upper section of the composition contains a painted scene depicting a miracle and higher in this same space the image of the invoked saint or deity. Often, there is a written testimony of how the miracle occurred at the bottom of the ex voto. The name of the artist is seldom included in the painting and they are rarely recognized as artists. Towards the end of the nineteenth century tin panels became the canvas of choice amongst the working class. Inexpensive and readily available on nearly every farm, tin revolutionized the production of religious art in lower class Mexican society. Artists such as Hermenegildo Bustos, Jose Maria Estrada and Jose Maria Mares captured not only the story of a miracle having taken place, but a piece of the spirit of the Mexican people

as well. They were not famous painters in their time, but rather fellow members of the community providing a service just as the blacksmith or woodcarver did.

For example, if a mother has prayed to the Virgin for the health of her child, she may, upon the restoration of the child's health, commission the *ex voto* from a specialized artist called a *retablero* (*retablo* maker) or *milagrero* (miracle maker). The painters may have reproduced the same images hundreds if not thousands of times in their career. The images of saints that the artisans use in the *ex votos* are either copies of the images exhibited in churches or images derived from lithographs or printed pieces themselves often derived from altar *retablos* or icons of the church. By trying to capture in images and words the powerful spirit of the original miraculous experience, the artisans are translators who seek to infuse their work with the haunting energy and sensibility conveyed by the primary experience conveyed to them by the donor. The artisans usually accomplish this difficult task for they consistently make the intricate conversions of translation with skill, discipline, and visionary force.

For instance, Durand and Massey (1995) trace the steps of a painter of San Juan de los Lagos, Don Vicente. He started as an artist's assistant and slowly learned the art of painting. To paint *ex votos* "he listens carefully to the details of the event. Then he determines the kind of *retablo* he needs to paint, charging different prices according to the amount of work and the size of the picture" (1995, 30-31). Mainly, the visual solutions follow the theme repertoire familiar to the artist. The dedication is written naming the event, the place, the date, and those involved in dedicating the *ex voto*. Don Vicente "often requests a written version of the text in order to transcribe it exactly. In cases in which clients are unable to supply the words, he must provide them himself, but warns the client he does not spell very well" (Durand 1995: 32). The text often



has spelling and grammar mistakes, which clearly indicates the low education level of both the makers and the devotees. The whole process is not institutionalized or controlled by the church.

It is interesting that often the contemporary protagonists, in other words the Mexican migrants themselves, enter into the tradition of holy scenes. Mexican migrants have a long established practice of making and visiting images in order to receive psychological satisfactions and strengths. The migrants' ex votos reveal continuity in visual piety. Since the early Christian era, people had to cope with an oppressive or indifferent world rather than resisting or subverting it (Morgan, 1998). In the course of this and the 20th centuries, it becomes clear that the great and almost exclusive manifestation of such strong acts of faith, as constitutes the practice of making ex votos, has basically been limited to the universe of the poor. For migrants, religious identity is especially highlighted while crossing the border. Migrants often use religious symbols, individually or collectively, for different purposes. The ex votos are, for Mexican migrants, a way to communicate not only cultural and religious beliefs, but also sociological claims.

### **Border History**

Since the last decade of the 20th century there has been a growing theoretical interest in borders, border regions, and cross-border studies and the Mexico-U.S. border should not be an exception, as it is the product of over 150 years of history<sup>17</sup>. In 1848, the Mexican and United States governments signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As a result, Mexico lost half of its territory, which included the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. At that time in history, borders crossed people and not the other way around. This particular historical

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<sup>17</sup> To study in depth the history of the border see: Victor Manuel Castillo Giron (1995), *Solo Dios y el Norte*; Ruben Martinez (2001), *Crossing Over*; Douglas S. Massey and Jorge Durand (1995, 2002, 2003), *Miracles at the Border, Beyond Smoke and Mirrors, Clandestinos*; Joseph Navines (2002), *Operation Gatekeeper*; Daniel G. Groody (2002), *Border of Death*.

development has made the border the planet's longest between a country characterized by economic practices and achievements sometimes known as 'first world' and a country whose economy is sometimes characterized as 'third world'. Many Mexicans and Central Americans perceive the Mexico-U.S. border (see Figure 1) as a fence or a wall, some sort of barrier erected to keep out the peoples from the south. Since 1995, when a more protectionist U.S. immigration policy was enacted and even further intensified in 2001 by fears of terrorism in a post 9-11 world, the border has seemed more like a barrier than ever before. However, the nature of the border has always reflected changes in U.S. attitudes toward Mexico and the outside world. The pendulum of U.S. immigration policy has swung back and forth from intolerance to greater leniency, from the bracero<sup>18</sup> program of the 1950s to the asylum given to Mexicans and Central Americans in the early 1980s (Immigration Reform Control Act<sup>19</sup>) back to today's more aggressively protectionist border stance<sup>20</sup>.

Current perceptions about the Mexico-U.S. border revolve around issues of the daily legal and illegal crossings. The border is perceived not only as a geopolitical space but also, as a conceptual and experiential space, a site re-produced via repetition. For the undocumented migrants the border is often a line between life and death<sup>21</sup>. Everyday practices produce and redefine space (in this sense, the border) as a site-specific space. Crossing the border, for the illegal migrants, is a unique but politicized experience that varies according to how when, why, and under which circumstances they have to cross. Mexican Migrants cross from south to north, and south to north, documented, undocumented, on foot, hidden in car trunks, running, jumping,

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<sup>18</sup> The bracero program was a temporal work agreement for Mexican peasants to work in American farms. The rights of the workers were often abused. To read more in depth see Durand, J. (2003). *Clandestinos*.

<sup>19</sup> During IRCA more than 2 million illegal migrants were legalized in the United States.

<sup>20</sup> See Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the Mexican-American Diaspora

<sup>21</sup> See Karl Eschbach and others, "Death at the Border," *International Migration Review* 33 (1999): 430-54 In the study, the authors note that while much energy has gone to analyze economic costs of migration, little effort has gone to study the human cost.

or contorted in a tube floating in the river (Jottar, 2000). The way in which the migrants cross the border establishes their relationship to it. To them, the border is about different and contradictory power relations, because the border is about access, transgression, passing, or not passing<sup>22</sup>.

For the migrants who cross and live on the Mexico-U.S. border, crossing is an issue of survival. Once they survive and experience a border crossing, they are never done with it. In fact, the border becomes re-constituted in repeated crossings and the lack of power in decision making at the precise moment of crossing. The border becomes a reiteration of all life's crossings, a continuous dangerous journey. It is a site constructed not only through nationalism, xenophobia, and control impulses, but also through the migrants' everyday embodiment and confrontation of them.<sup>23</sup>

### **Border Ex Votos**

Mexican immigration presents the United States with terrible ironies: Mexicans are prevented from coming across, yet they are needed to sustain the American economy; they are often denied jobs, yet often they do the work that no one else wants to do; many fear them, yet they can enrich American culture.

Daniel G. Groody (2002)

The thousands of Mexicans trying to get to the United States every day are desperate seekers of work, of the American dream to improve their life conditions and to escape from

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<sup>22</sup> After a four-year decline, illegal immigration from Mexico is spiking as several thousand migrants a day rush across the border in hopes of getting work visas under a program President Bush proposed last January. Many undocumented migrants also are trying to beat tighter security. This only highlights how with increasing unemployment migrants will keep going to the U.S. despite the dangers of the journey.

<sup>23</sup> Wages are approximately 12 to 15 times higher in the U.S. than in Mexico, depending on the value of the Mexican peso. The Mexican minimum wage is about \$0.47 cents per hour (\$0.37 cents per hour in the rural areas, 75% of Mexico), while the minimum wage in California is \$5.75 per hour. Even earnings of as little as \$1.00 a day are attractive to most rural Mexicans, who are the vast majority of illegal migrants to the U.S. Therefore, illegal migration is sure to continue. See Jorge Bustamante, Guillermina Jasso, J. Edward Taylor and Paz Trigueros Legarreta in "The Selectivity of International Labour Migration and Characteristics of Mexico-to-U.S. Migrants: Theoretical considerations," at <http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/uscir/binpapers/v2b-2bustamante.pdf> for more in depth details of wages and unemployment rate in Mexico and the direct relationship with migration to the U.S.

poverty. Mexicans rush across the border in hopes of getting work visas where they hoped to turn hunger and poverty into a distant memory; they were not migrating because they wanted to break the law, but out of necessity. The hardships of this experience are described in a migrant prayer cited by Monsivais:

Oh god...I have decided to leave my home to go and look for work in a foreign country. I feel heart broken, because I am going to leave my wife, sons, father, and mother behind. You very well know that I do it out of necessity and not because of searching a selfish adventure...Oh Jesus, I find myself at the border at this moment, determined to cross, despite knowing that it is against the law. I do not do it to challenge the law enforcement of the nation, but out of desperation...as a citizen of the world, as a church that has no barriers, I ask you God, to grant me my wish to reach my destination in the United States without inconveniences or obstacles (cited on Monsivais 1999: 3)

Therefore, for those who make it across the border safely, it is very important to leave a testimony to the moment when their prayer was heard. The migrants' choices of expression were limited by their financial and social circumstances, so for them the images were "regarded (and are seen to be) the effective and adequate vehicle for expressing and giving thanks" (Freedberg 1989, 136). This observation certainly applies to the necessity of Mexican Catholic migrants to achieve a psychological satisfaction by making or visiting images, and they respond to them on just this basis.

One example of such expression is the ex voto offered on 11 January 1986. Braulio Barrientos (see Figure 2) fulfilled the promise of offering an ex voto to Our Lady of San Juan and placed it in her shrine in San Juan de los Lagos. The representation is well executed and finely detailed. The painting presents a kind of compositional clarity not often found in other ex votos. In this image, I believe, composition is indeed so clear that it is likely that the artist has either been in the desert, or has seen photographic representations of it. The main earth tones in the composition affect the mood of the work and intensify the sense of anxiety of the men represented. The gaze of the viewer is directed to the radiant sunlight that dominates the upper

part of the image. In the clear sky, the sun illuminates the desert floor casting the shadows of four tired men in the lower part of the image. Around them is arid desert landscape full of cacti and scrub bushes, and mountains are in the background. Two of the men are holding water bottles (probably empty). One of them has his eyes closed, and the other is looking at the bottle, exhausted. The other two men are invoking Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos, who appears on top of the clouds. The clothes of the men, as well as the landscape, are clean, showing to the saint and the community that something extraordinary and important has occurred between the saint and her devotees. This image is invested with powerful emotions of faith, hope and relief. The inscription tells of the miraculous event. It announces the status of the ex voto as a token of thanks. It reads:

Rancho Placencia, San Diego de la Unión, Guanajuato. January 11, 1986. On this date I dedicate the present retablo to the Virgin of San Juan for the clear miracle she granted on the date of June 5, 1985. Re-emigrating to the United States with three friends, we ran out of water. Traveling in such great heat and with such thirst, without hope of drinking even a little water, we invoked the Virgin of San Juan and were able to arrive at our destination and return to our homeland in health. In eternal gratitude to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco, from wherever Braulio Barrientos might be.

Although it is difficult to know the age of the men, they are probably between 19 and 29 years old, the age of most migrants. It is also important to note that the dates of the ex voto are relevant in the history of migration in general. The period between 1965 and 1986 is known as the era of undocumented and temporal migration. It is thus most likely that Braulio Barrientos and his friends re-emigrated many times during this period as the last phrase in the quote suggests "from wherever Braulio Barrientos might be." From the inscription we know that these men illegally entered the United States during the summer to pick fruit in California. The year after they returned home, 1987, which was just a year before the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed, granting amnesty to more than 2.3 million undocumented immigrants

(Durand and Massey, 2003, Nevins, 2002). After this, the temporal migration made a radical shift to permanent migration, with whole families now trying to cross the border into the United States.

Another aspect that attracted my attention to this particular ex voto is its structural and effective mode of signification through the image and the inscription. The event, which caused the initial communication between the men and the divine person, becomes an homage to a successful venture. Yet, in a less than subtle way, the ex voto speaks to the oppression of the marginalized in contemporary Mexican society. Immigrants crossing the border illegally today understand the risks associated with their journey, as well as the hardships they will face as undocumented workers in the U.S. However, they continue to come in greater and greater numbers every year (in spite of increased border control strategies) because they do not see a future for themselves or their families in their own countries.

Thus, in contrast to this ex voto, one should consider a photograph that Alex Webb took of three illegal migrants attempting to cross the border through the Otay Mesa Mountains, California (see Figure 3). This photograph of the migrants shows explicit compassion and distant misery. The contrast between the ex voto and the picture lies in the evidence of physical violence of four tired bodies hiding underneath a rock in the desert depicted explicitly in the photograph. The clothes of the men appear very dirty and their faces show proof of exhaustion due to a difficult and long journey. One of them is sleeping, another one is smoking a cigarette, and the third one is just resting. Although we cannot see the migrant's feet, "[the immigrants] will be wearing cheap rubber shower sandals and ill-fitting baseball cleats to protect their feet from rocks, thorns, hot sand, and lava," (Annerino 1999, 40-42). They will carry food so bad that they will not even eat and will experience dangers every step of the way. This contrasts between the

photograph and the ex voto offered by Braulio Barrientos and makes evident how in visual piety something no less than Sunday-best clothing is required. In the ex voto the bright light and the presence of the Saint evoke heaven and a positive memory: no poverty or misery. With a devoted gaze, the viewer of the ex voto contemplates the miracle and the migrants under the canopy of protection of the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos. The ex voto continues to situate divine revelation and the exercise of grace in the midst of great bodily suffering, illustrated since medieval times, in the Passion of Christ. "In their suffering, the migrants reveal the hidden mystery of Christ today. Like Jesus many of these migrants sacrifice their comfort and risk their lives for the good of others" (Groody 2002, 33). This is relevant to the standards of the church and its understanding and accepting destiny and suffering with piety.

Another representative ex voto deals with a different problem of border crossings, namely la migra or "border patrol" (see Figure 4). The ex voto in figure 3 is also at the shrine of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos. The date is unknown, but the elements of the image indicate that it was made after 1995 in Leon, Guanajuato. The ex voto belongs to María Ester Tapia Picón, and the scene graphically represents the event for which the miraculous Virgin of San Juan provided relief. The inscription complements the image with relevant details. María Ester Picón and two other people (probably family members) give thanks to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos "for saving us from migration authorities on our way to Los Angeles" (Durand 2001: 153). The landscape and the reference to Los Angeles suggest that the crossing probably occurred on the border between Tijuana and San Diego. The image shows the people in the foreground, behind a small bush, hiding from two armed border patrol officers standing close by. A third officer is behind the wheel of a radio-equipped police van. A helicopter with a bright searchlight is above, and a dreamlike city is suspended in the clouds just above the horizon. This

spatial organization into layers allows for the dreamlike city to stand out in the viewers gaze. The city suspended by clouds, almost like Heavenly Jerusalem, is the iconographic representation of America as the land of opportunities, human rights, high wages, education, and housing, in other words, the migrant dream. In the upper left corner, Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos is surrounded by an aura of light, witnessing the dangers that Maria Ester faces in order to reach her destination.

Many elements in this scene command attention. For example, the police van has a Mexican flag on the side. This is unusual, because usually the border patrol is American, as Mexican migration officials rarely interfere or stop the flow of illegal migrants. Thus, it is likely that the person who painted the ex voto has never been at the border and bases the picture on Mrs. Tapia's narration of the story. Furthermore, the Mexican authorities do not have helicopters, patrolling the border, so the helicopter most likely belongs to the Americans. New technology such as the state of the art helicopters facilitates border patrol agents' search for migrants. Having the two police officers in close proximity must have made the time before crossing even more harrowing for the migrants. However, despite near confrontation with the immigration authorities, the people of the ex voto were safe at the end of the journey and expressed their gratitude to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos.

The image on this ex voto might appear to some like a naïve child's drawing. To understand the deep fear and relief that must have prompted this ex voto, however, it is important to be aware of the effects of new border policies instituted by the U.S. since 1995. The implementation of the costly Operations "Gatekeeper" and "Hold the Line," American Immigration policies aimed at closing off traditional migrant crossing points at Tijuana/San Diego and El Paso/Juarez, migrant deaths have risen dramatically. The interdiction programs



have led to the re-direction of migrant flows through more remote and dangerous and deathly desert regions. According to official statistics, between December 2002 and 2003 some 450 migrants died crossing in the desert of southwestern Arizona victims of thirst, exhaustion, or heat stroke despite the fact that many charitable and humanitarian (religious and secular) groups place water jugs at strategic locations. In addition, the desert border zone has become a paradise for bandits and vigilantes. In many ways, the risks of arrest, detention, and deportation are the least of the migrants' worries. Clearly, there are certain things that are not shown on the ex votos, such as, the risks of robbery, the high costs and squalid conditions of coyotes<sup>24</sup> gang crossings, rape by predatory gangs, or beatings by migrant-hunter associations (see Durand and Massey 1995, 2003). A very real concern, human trafficking is the result of extreme poverty and the promises held by the destination. Trafficking in people exploits the vulnerabilities of those whose basic human rights are not protected and thus often include additional violations such as sexual and commercial exploitation. Consequently, it is not unexpected that the migrants who survive the crossing express their gratitude for the miracle granted, even if these many dangers are not specifically mentioned.

Along the Mexico-U.S. border, the details of the crossings vary slightly, but the facts are essentially the same. There is no fence long enough, wide enough, or high enough to contain the will of the Mexican people to cross the border. For more than 1,000 miles, the Rio Grande River forms a watery boundary between the two countries. In contrast to the desert border areas, here is an obvious natural boundary that has become important in the iconography of many ex votos since

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<sup>24</sup> Gangs that smuggle people to the other side of the border for an excessive amount of money. Currently a coyote costs anywhere from \$800 to \$ 2,400. Because crossing is harder, hiring a human smuggler is more expensive. The \$1,500 average is a fortune for workers whose wages in Mexico average one-tenth of U.S. wages. And the shift to more remote routes makes the work of bandits easier. See *Migration News*, 2000. See Also Alberto Najar, "Nuevo Mapa de la Frontera de la Migracion: El Reino de la Migra y los Polleros" in *Masiosare*, 304: 2003 (suplement of La Jornada).

1920. Over the years, the Rio Grande has been the scene of many drowning and disappearances of illegal immigrants, especially in the early 1990s, when illegal immigrants used to pass through the area en masse. The Rio Bravo Del Norte on the Mexican side is a stark dividing line between a highly industrialized land of ample opportunity and a developing nation struggling to provide a better standard of living for its people. In rural areas especially, the stark contrast between the sides of the river comes into sharp focus. Furthermore, For the undocumented, a border crossing into the forbidding wastelands of Arizona can be as dangerous as crossing the river.

For example, in the ex voto illustrated in Figure 3, where 6 men are about to cross the river, one can see that the river looks large. Its lack of perspective only enhances this effect. The deficiency of technique indicates that the ex voto was probably painted by the donor, Amador de Lira. There is no perspective in the image as if resisting modernization. Context and content work together to constitute the social position of the ex votos' donor. The image shows six men carrying bags and water containers. Initials identify each of them. Amador de Lira figuratively shows the risk of crossing the Rio Grande painting the figure of six men crossing the river very close to the waterfall. Also, particular to this ex voto is the sense of fear and danger depicted by the dense and dark woods. The undated inscription, which is recent as illustrated by the baseball caps that the migrants are wearing, reads: "Amador de Lira gives the most infinite thanks for the miracle of saving them as they crossed the dangerous river in Texas." Durand and Massey (1995, 133) in *Miracles at the Border* give another example of a river crossing ex voto. In this example (see Figure 5) Domingo Segura, loosing his balance, falls into the water while attempting to cross the Rio Grande on May 28, 1929. At the risk of dying and in panic, he invoked Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos. The text reads: "At that moment my salvation came from a friend who, bravely fighting the fearful, waters was able to pull me to the river bank. In thanksgiving of so

apparent a miracle, I make public the present retablo.” As I mentioned before women and children also attempt to cross the border in order to re-unite with their love ones. Such is the ex voto dedicated to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos by Virginia Velazquez who crossed the Rio Grande with her four sons/daughters<sup>25</sup> (Figure 6). In this simple ex voto the painter does not represent any people, but paints the Rio Bravo with an excellent use of perspective. Here the river itself has become the symbol of the dream come true of Virginia Velazquez crossing, which “is especially risky for poor *campesinos* because many don’t know how to swim” (Durand 1995, 91). These powerful ex votos signify the river as international border and the precarious survival chances of the Mexican Migrants. These examples provide invaluable testimonies. Mexican migrants narrate how the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos answered their (and their friend’s) prayers while preventing them from drowning. She also made them invisible to the U.S. immigration officials.

Each of the borders ex votos studied in this chapter represents a different view of the U.S.-Mexican border depending on the geographical border zone where the people represented were attempting to cross. Each ex voto freezes the extreme situations that led the migrants to pray for help. Nevertheless, in the ex votos there is an illusion of open border spaces, where borders have many dimensions. The ex votos do not exactly describe the border as a fenced line or wall but rather seem to attempt to suggest the border as a kind of liminal space. For the painters the desert (and the river) is not only a scenario for the painting, but a political landscape that is recreated according to the specific stories of the illegal migrants crossing through it. In other words, for the migrants, the desert, the river, the checkpoint guards become the site where a particular view of the world is produced and assumed. The migrants trying to cross are in a vulnerable and weak position. Borders enforce exclusions, the state of being alien, foreign, and

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<sup>25</sup> Taken from *La Enferma Eterna* by Patricia Arias

homeless. The question in the ex votos is whether the artist, instead of representing the physical border, chose iconographical models which describe borders as distances. The migrants' ex votos illustrate the fact that physical fences do not define the border. The definition extends to the gaze and physiological control of the border patrol, the river, and the physical limitations of the migrants. Borders materialize the law, policing separations; but as such, they still can be crossed, transgressed, and subverted. Borders fix, they demarcate, but they are themselves imaginary, fluid, always in the process of changing. In these ex votos, the border becomes the sign of the danger to cross it, not really a specific fenced line or a gate with a threshold to cross (as it is photographed by Alex Webb (see Figure 7) and Sebastiao Salgado (see Figure 8)). As the action of crossing is still somewhat suspended, since the success of the venture is usually only indicated in the text, the image can express both fear and the dream of hope.

The border ex votos examined in this chapter are not only testimonies of faith, but they also compel the viewer to concentrate on the sociological dimension of the representation, in this case, migration. The border ex voto, as a votive offering, remains a fundamental part of ritualized exchange registered in the sacred and public setting of the shrine of San Juan de los Lagos. The movement is circular: migrants, like Virginia Velazquez, Armando de Lira, and Domingo Segura, meet the future by moving away but return to the past by going back to their hometown to stay or to visit. The ex votos then, becomes a symbol that creates inalienable and perpetual bonds between migrants and their home community. Migration is interwoven in the rituals of daily religious life and it has transformed them; border ex votos foster communities across borders since the impact of illegal immigration has established a pattern that is now an institutionalized feature of Mexico's culture and society as discussed in chapter one.

## ***Santitos at the Mexico-U.S. Border***

This chapter will explore some of the possible relations that can be forged among visual piety portrayed in ex votos, movies, and photographs. I propose that one way of describing how popular religion is represented at the border and how it travels across borders would be to effectively bring these visual manifestations together. An interesting case to add to this discussion is the Mexican novel, *Santitos*, by Maria Amparo Escandon<sup>26</sup>, and the film based on the novel, which came out in 1999.<sup>27</sup> These works demonstrate how the narrative conventions of popular religion have exited the church and have become an intriguing subject in recent popular media forms.

The extensive and ardent devotional piety of Mexican working classes and migrants, as we have seen, encompasses diverse ritual and devotional practices. If one wants to gauge the place saints have in Mexican border society one need look no further than the Tijuana market in the heart of the city. In the narrow passageways between the stalls there are statues of dozens of different saints. Saints like San Judas Tadeo, San Antonio de Padua, images of Christ and the Virgin, and of course, statues and scapularies (two small rectangles of woolen cloth joined by tapes or strings passing over the shoulders, worn under one's clothing as a form of devotion), of Juan Soldado, the unofficial saint for illegal migrants. For religious migrants, regardless of their ethnic background, saints and statues of saints are imbued with a live spirit that can be invoked through devotion and prayer. They are intermediaries between heaven and earth, which can communicate with God on behalf of their devotees. The art historian, Solange Alberro argues,

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<sup>26</sup> To see other border themes in Mexican films directed by women see *Sin dejar huella*, by Maria Novaro, 2000

<sup>27</sup> *Santitos* was published in Spanish by Plaza & Janes in 1998, the film under the same title *Santitos* was released in 1999 the script was written by Maria Amparo Escandon and was directed by Alejandro Springall. The movie won the prize for the best Latin American film at the Sundance Festival and for Best Film at the Los Angeles Latino Film Festival in 1999. The English version of the novel *Santitos* came out in 1999, entitled *Esperanza's Box of Saints*, published by Simon & Schuster inc. *Santitos* has been translated into 13 different languages.

“the imminent, existential, and daily presence of the supernatural, manifested through the intervention of fate, evil spirits and saints, might constitute the essence of popular religious experience (Alberro 2002: 74).” People are not ashamed of using saints’ images in blatantly opportunistic ways. This is the main theme of the novel and film, *Santitos*, based on the character of Esperanza Diaz, a pious young widow from the rural Mexican town of Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, who goes in search of her daughter. Moreover, significant for this study, migration is a central issue in this film and novel.

The wide variety of characters that Esperanza meets on her journey illustrates many different kinds of migration, while stressing the varying circumstances of each migrant. In addition, the term popular religion is used in the novel as a complex concept with diverse and contradictory associations such as extra-liturgical activities, tradition, superstition, ignorance, and worship. The author and filmmaker both highlight the use of popular imagery to illustrate the relationship between Esperanza and her saints. Esperanza works as a clerk in a hardware store and lives a quiet life with her friend Soledad and Blanca, her daughter. Her calm life is dramatically disrupted when Blanca, who is hospitalized for a routine tonsillectomy, dies of a rare virus and, to avoid infection, is buried without Esperanza having the chance to say goodbye. Soon after her daughter’s sudden death she sees the apparition of Judas Tadeo (see Figure 9), patron saint of hopeless causes, on the dirty glass of her oven. He tells her that Blanca is not dead and commands her to find the girl. After talking to the local priest and Soledad, Esperanza attempts to unearth her daughters coffin but is caught. The desperate mother vows to do anything to recover her lost daughter, whom she suspects of having been kidnapped and forced into prostitution. She begins a journey to find her, which will take her to the brothels of Tijuana and Los Angeles. What is key in this story is not just reliance on saints for hope and aid, but also the

way that horror stories of the misfortunes of poor young women in the border/migration context have entered popular imagination. So much so that Esperanza immediately conjures up this image of forced prostitution as her child's fate. At the same time, this is better than death, and there must be some general sense that Mexican women manage to get out of these dire situations, or Esperanza would not have hope of finding and rescuing her. It is much this same mixture of suffering, hope and salvation that we have identified as components of the border ex votos, feelings that the ex votos themselves have helped to propagate.

During Esperanza's stay in one of Tijuana brothels she set up an altar for her favorite saints and prays to them nightly: "My santitos, all my beloved little saints, I'm sure Blanca is now praying for well-being as much as I am. You've always been so good to us. Now that we are in real trouble, I know you won't disappoint us" (Escandon 1999, 133). The altar in her room allows her to cherish her hope and persevere in her search for her daughter. Esperanza's *Santitos* illuminates the rich and vibrant symbolic world of a Mexican woman. The novel both reproduces and contests the reality of popular devotion. Popular devotion is contested due to the dichotomy between the widow and the whore, purity against evil throughout the movie. Esperanza's commitment to her saints, allows her to create her own stories that provide for spiritual agency. Her altar becomes a devotional space, which gives birth to multiple, newly constructed beliefs. The objective of the popular imagery of the altar (see Figure 10) in Esperanza's room is to materialize the elusive transcendental experience. In other words, the relationship between Esperanza and the saints is made tangible through the use of the altar.

The altar for Esperanza is a space dedicated to divinity, even though its location in a bordello seems awkward and ironic. After all, Esperanza is following San Judas Tadeo, the saint

for desperate and hopeless causes. Escandon describes Esperanza's altar as cluttered with saints and virgin statues, portraits, votive candles, and other devotional objects.

Statuettes of San Judas Tadeo, San Ramon Nonato, San Pascual Bailon, San Panfucio, and San Martin de Porres were lit by novena candles featuring decals of the same saints, and around them three glass vases with red carnations, all carefully arranged on the chaise lounge, the larger saints in the back, the smaller ones in front. A beautiful glow-in-the-dark San Miguel Archangel. A virgin of Guadalupe surrounded by dusty silk roses and illuminated by a pink light bulb. A Sacred Heart with a receptacle for holy water. A crucifix mobile dangles over the entire altar. Pictures of more saints pinned to the wallpaper. And, of course, Blanca's photo right next to the statuette of San Judas Tadeo, whose tiny tongue of fire is lit up by itself in the evening, thanks to a mini-light sensor discreetly placed at the back of his neck (Escandon 1999, 129).<sup>28</sup>

Apart from materializing the intangible, the altar is an expression of the relationship between Esperanza and the divine. That is why, besides religious images, other objects, such as the picture of Blanca, that have to do specifically with the wants or desires of the devotee, are placed in the altar. In this way, the altar is the personal expression of Esperanza's transcendental experience and needs. The altar speaks to God, as well as to Esperanza; in other words, the altar is the materialization of the fears, desire, and hopes of Esperanza. Therefore, the altar represents a specific plastic language in which Esperanza is not only communicating with the sacred, but with herself as well. As the cultural historian Celeste Olalquiaga observes,

Triangular in analogy to the Holy Trinity, *altars* are characterized by a cluttered juxtaposition of all types of paraphernalia; they are personal pastiche. Illustrating a history of wishes, laments, and prayers, they are built over time, each personal incident leaving its own mark. *Altars* embody familiar or individual histories in the way photo albums are for some people (Olalquiaga 1992: 39).

Furthermore, the altars are emblems of Mexican popular piety, since the devotee, in this case Esperanza, experiences a close spiritual connection with the sacred by building up the altar with cherished remnants of her life and her personal spiritual universe. Esperanza, like other devoted women, "journey[s] on paths previously prohibited by patriarchal religions... and define and

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<sup>28</sup> The translations were taken from the English version of *Santitos, Esperanza's Box of Saints*



decide from themselves what images, rituals, myths, and deities nourish and give expression to their deepest values” (Medina 189 quoted in Maldonado 2004). Esperanza’s altar forms a spirituality that relies on her own authority and her personal experiences with different cultures and sexuality. Ultimately, the altar is narrative in nature. As the devotee’s story changes, so do the objects on the altar. Because Esperanza’s altar tells the story so vividly it serves to radiate Esperanza’s innocence to the men visiting her in the brothel, which moves them.

The role of the *ex votos* and their nature rooted in the collective consciousness of Mexican society is evident in the film. In the novel, the effect of the *ex votos* is even more pronounced. While the film omits this fact, in the novel Esperanza keeps a journal where she has wishfully written two prayers for the *ex voto* she plans to paint when she finds Blanca, as was customary. These she will offer to San Judas Tadeo at his famous shrine in Mexico City when she finds her daughter. These promises become reciprocal contracts between Esperanza and San Judas Tadeo. The prayers in the *ex voto* options read as follows:

Option 1: “Esperanza and Blanca Diaz give infinite thanks to San Judas Tadeo for helping us come together again in good health after a horrible incident in which the child Blanca was kidnapped and sold by a doctor and held against her will as a girl of easy virtue. The misfortune happened to Esperanza and Blanca Diaz last August. After a frightful search throughout the country of Mexico, ending up in the faraway city of Tijuana, the girl was rescued by her own mother from a Secret Scarlet room<sup>29</sup> along with other girls, victims of the same torment. In thanksgiving for this evident miracle, we post this retablo on the walls of San Juditas temple.”

Set in Tijuana—the border city where young prostitutes are regular residents—these prayers explore a border consciousness and a woman’s identity, in particular her religious and sexual identity, within borders. Inside the Pink Palace, Esperanza begins her sexual

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<sup>29</sup> At this point in the novel Esperanza did not know what the mysterious Scarlet Room in the Pink Palace was. She thought her daughter was in the interior of that room, but when she finally entered the room, she discovered that the only thing hidden inside the Scarlet Room was Felicitas, the Sixth, a big cow that Mrs. Trini, the pimp, adore. No locked-up girls. No Blanca. The authors suggest that Esperanza will find herself not her daughter. But the reader will discover that further on the film.

odyssey<sup>30</sup> as a means to find Blanca. Armed with her box of Saint's she imagines a happy ending despite her fear of prostitution and slavery. In each version Esperanza narrates with more or less description the guidance she imagines she would receive from San Judas Tadeo as well as the help offered by her faithful client Judge Haynes.

Option 2: "I make this miracle public. My twelve year-old daughter, Blanca, was taken away from me by an evil doctor last August after a simple surgery from which she came out well, but from which the doctor said she had died. San Judas Tadeo appeared before me and asked me to find her. Because the authorities were incapable of helping me, I had to invoke my saint with true heart and look for her with the miraculous and timely guidance of my saint. With the invaluable help of a good-hearted American man, she managed to escape with other girls from the Pink Palace. I entrusted her safe return to San Judas Tadeo, and today we are together thanks to him. Esperanza Diaz. Tlacotalpan, Veracruz" (Escandon 1999: 131).

In the novel, *Santitos*, the drafts in Esperanza's notebook reveal the need to make a testimony of the (hoped for) intervention of the sacred in a moment of extreme need. As we noted with the border ex votos discussed above, there is expression of both hope and testimony. Even though the event has not taken place, Esperanza promises that,

she'd write the real ending (of the text of the ex voto) at the ending to her search as soon as she found Blanca and took her back home. She would have to get a sheet of tin and some paint to illustrate the scene of the very moment when she was notified that her daughter was dead...Or perhaps she'd depict the scene at the morgue" (Escandon 1999, 132).

This description of the thought process with its seemingly illogical choice of image for the making of the ex voto, shows how the devotee chooses to picture the moment of worst suffering and plans the text with greater detailed description of the miraculous return- all to leave a faithful testimony of her complete ordeal and supports her spirit during her journey. Escandon describes, in a very innovative way, a situation where a desperate mother has to endure the extreme hardship of prostituting her body in order to find her daughter. Her prayers confirm how the relationship between Esperanza and her saints gives her hope, solace, and guidance. Esperanza's

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<sup>30</sup> Esperanza's sexual drive is transformed throughout the movie. First as a Widow keeping the memory of her husband, later, as a sexual liberated women who re-discovers herself through sexuality.

devotional practices form an important part of the concrete activities that constitute social behaviour, strengthened even more by her peculiar circumstances. Her rituals and devotion offer insights into the dynamics of religion, culture and personhood.

To find her daughter, Esperanza has to travel to the border and eventually cross it. This makes a parallel between her and the migrants crossing the border illegally to find work in the United States. Tijuana is the most crossed and conflicted border not just on the American continent, but also in the world. Tijuana is itself a transit city, with inhabitants from all over the world. It has extremely high poverty due to lack of urban planning and the booming crime scene. As mentioned before, Esperanza supports herself by working in a brothel, which is very common for migrant women. When she finally decides to move on and cross the border, her situation once again echoes that of migrant workers. She has no passport, but this is not going to stop her. After all "since when is that a problem" (Edscandon 1999, 155). Through Esperanza's experience on the border, Escandon illustrates that the border crossing depends on the circumstances of each individual. For example, the respectable Judge Haynes comes and goes as he pleases, traveling across the border to seek comfort in Tijuana brothels. Esperanza's mobility, on the other hand, is conditioned by her undocumented status and her lack of money. Due to her unusual reason for traveling to the United States, Esperanza's insistence on not being an immigrant to the country separates her from the other migrants. She does not leave Tlacotalpan, her hometown, in order to escape poverty, find better prospects, or because of a fascination with the American way of life; her only aim is to find her kidnapped daughter. This acts as remainder to consider individual circumstances instead of lumping all immigrants together and labelling them. Maria Amparo Escandon is herself a Chicana, and in a way she has experienced the labels of a North American society for "being Mexican."

Before her journey, Esperanza stocks up on the figurines of her “most beloved saints and, of course, a couple of statues of the protector of migrants, Juan Soldado<sup>31</sup> (see Figure 10). He is new to Esperanza, but she likes the stiff figure of a poor young Mexican dressed in military uniform. Juan Soldado enjoys a large following among persons in danger of abuse by authorities, especially immigrants who need extra spiritual help.<sup>32</sup> He is not popular in southern Mexico, but the success of the migrants’ journey depends on his favour. This is why the shrine of this saint located in a graveyard near the border, is visited by hundreds of people, especially migrants, either in thanksgiving or supplication for a miracle. Photographs, photocopies of passports, graffiti, candles, and flowers cover the tomb (see figure 11). Esperanza, ready to cross the border illegally in the trunk of Judge Haynes car,<sup>33</sup> clasps Juan Soldado’s scapulary over her heart. She prays to this statue, which is in her other hand (see Figure 12):

Dear Juanito, I know the man driving this car is not a Mexican, but he could well be. Please help him cross the border. I haven’t known you for long, but I understand you have helped thousands of immigrants reach a better life. I am not an immigrant, but I do want a better life with my daughter back in my own town. If I find her, I’ll come back with her. If she’s not there, I’ll look for her elsewhere. So, don’t count on me as an immigrant, but help me as one” (Escandon 1998: 162).

For the migrants, the affinity with the appropriate saint allows them to have the security of a holy image. Juan Soldado becomes a new saint in Esperanza’s life because this was dictated by the circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Juan Soldado is an unrecognized saint according to the Catholic definition of saints, but he is recognized as such by the people. For more information see David Ungerleider in “La religiosidad Popular en Tijuana” (1999) and Solange Alberro in “Ex votos Mexicanos del S. XIX” (2000).

<sup>32</sup> To find out more about Juan Soldado link to <http://www.sdnewsnotes.com/ed/articles/1998/0298pm.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> The major types of violations during border crossings are document fraud and concealment in trunks, hoods, and specially built compartments inside vehicles. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, in the San Diego County in 2001 12,000 smuggling cases were documented where individuals were found concealed in vehicles. This represents a nearly 50 percent increase from the previous year. [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov).

<sup>34</sup> The authors’ disclaim Esperanza’s non-migrant status in order to justify the plot of the film. Yet, at the end Esperanza becomes a migrant to the U.S.

Esperanza's devotion and assimilation of new devotions according to her new needs represents how the socio-economic reality of the border region manifests itself in cultural expressions. In other words, Esperanza's faith shows continuity with traditional beliefs, which are fused with new manifestations of popular devotion associated with new historical conditions. Esperanza, like many other successful migrants, worships and visits the tomb of Juan Soldado and will leave an image of Christ (see Figure 13) on the site of the border where she successfully crossed. The changes that Esperanza's journey triggers both in her and in those around her illustrate how innovation may not necessarily mean breaking with tradition. In fact, innovation can provide a way to actualize and prolong traditions by breathing new life into them and thus, ensuring their continued survival.

The film incorporates a complex religious iconographic repertoire, playing with it, transforming it and adopting it to the context of migration. Despite the fact that Esperanza is a created character she stands as an invaluable testimony to the lives of countless human beings whose ordeals remain unsung. Escandon exposes the quotidian life situation of many migrant women, a reality that many of us cannot imagine, but the book and film are certainly helping. Esperanza's deep faith is similar to that of many migrants and, like many others, she plans of painting an *ex voto* to leave as testimony of the miracles carried out by her beloved saints. The extent of her love and humanity evokes deep sympathy in the viewers. Esperanza endures the trip across the border with the intention of saving her daughter, and in so doing gives hope to other migrants.

When she returns home, she finds that her friend Soledad has cleaned her oven. She is outraged that she will not be able to see an apparition of San Judas Tadeo in the grease of the oven glass. She hides herself in the bathroom, cries, but through her tears hears the voice of her

daughter telling her that they will always be together. It is then she realizes what the vision in the stove means: "I finally know what San Judas Tadeo meant. Blanca is not dead. Blanca is not alive. She is in that little space in between. That's where I was supposed to look for her" (Escandon 1999, 245). She tells this to the local priest, who asks her if she is going to notify the Vatican, but Esperanza states, "Blanca's apparitions are not important to the rest of the world.... This is just between the two of us. She's my own little saint, my little santita. So, please don't start any paperwork" (Escandon 1999, 45). She finds her daughter in the space in between, in between life and death and finds herself in the borderlands, in between Mexico and the United States where she becomes a different Esperanza, a liberated independent woman who is also sexually uninhibited. The novel ends with Angel, her soul mate and lover whom she met in Los Angeles, coming to Mexico and taking her across the border to live with him in Los Angeles. Esperanza becomes a migrant after all. She packs up her saints and takes them with her; she will need them for continued ceremonial acts.

Both for Maria Amparo Escandon and for Alejandro Springall this story touches magic realism, but for them the story of Esperanza is a magical reality, a quotidian reality that is altered and transformed through faith. Both, the author and director of *Santitos*, believe in the guidance of saints and are fascinated by the fervent popular religiosity in Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Each of them have their favorite saints to whom they pray, Maria Amparo dedicates *Santitos* to San Judas Tadeo for the miracle granted in creating the success of the novel.

## Conclusion

The patterns of illegal immigration in pursuit of the American dream have been mediated in the painted ex votos. The attention to the iconography of border ex votos is relevant because it portrays the effects of social and cultural acts of illegal migration involved in abandoning one's homeland to cross the desert or the Rio Grande and how they are now an institutionalized feature of Mexico's culture and society. The ex votos are not intended to provide visual representations of the worst-case scenario of people dying, being harmed, being deported, etc. Yet, despite their positive nature, in the ex votos the danger lurks in the background, making success seem miraculous. This subtle danger is deeply investigated through historical and factual information about the threats Mexican migrants face while attempting to cross the border.

Migrants have not only become economically essential to the communities left behind but their religiosity helps keep these communities together. This study of border ex votos also points to ways in which the confluence of migratory and religious cultural streams offer rich sediments for scholarly examination of multi-layered religious histories and transnational cultural identities within ever-expanding and diversifying Mexican migration. While study focuses on the ex votos offered in San Juan de los Lagos, there is a diversity of shrines from which the history of Mexican migration can be traced. Another interesting aspect of the thesis is the fact that the ex votos are not only part of religious iconography, but the ex votos have transcended the church and have become part of the popular imagery of Mexicans expressed in cinema and literature. The ex votos have also become interwoven into the rituals of daily religious life and are transformed to fit modern realities.

An ethnographic study of San Jaun de los Lagos might contribute to the research body on the ex votos. In addition interviews as well as examinations of migrant communities established

in the United States would help to identify how deeply the practice of making and offering ex votos is rooted in their lives. It would also be interesting to contrast border ex votos in different shrines and study the needs of the migrants in each community as well as their involvement with the local diocese or church. One could then identify how much the church participates in the continuation of the ex voto tradition and how much new dioceses founded in the States promote it.

Despite its widespread popularity, the ex voto tradition may be at risk. The replacement of the painted ex votos with photographs or moulded wax *milagros* in many shrines is a sign of a transformation taking place all over Mexico. The mass culture, the deconsecrating of society, the lack of information and understanding of these manifestations on the part of the clergy, the continued migration, the disarticulation of the social networks, providers of identity—all these elements have been contributing to the disappearance of the painted ex voto. In addition, although in the religious landscape more than two thirds of Mexican migrants claim to be Roman Catholic, Roman Catholics represent the most significant drain once they reach the United States. On the one hand, the ex votos and continued veneration of local saints helps to keep the Mexican communities together, on the other hand if migrants adopt American ways of life and convert to other forms of Christianity, the ex voto tradition will continue to weaken. At the same time, many Mexican traditions are being imported to the U.S. by the migrants and are sometimes even taken up by non-Mexicans (i.e. Cinco de Mayo celebrations in California, or the Day of the Dead celebrations in Arizona and California). This continuation of traditions might in a few years, when migrating becomes even more difficult, continue to take part in the U.S. shrines created in Texas, such as San Juan del Valle.



Throughout this new revision of border ex votos I explored how these convey a materialized transcendental expression, not just about their relationship with the divinity, but also are an expression of reality. The migrants, in order to leave a testimony, the evidence of their journey for a better life, have appropriated the Catholic iconography of the ex votos. The ex votos have, not only for their aesthetic qualities, but also for the historical information they portray, re-articulated the history and Mexican religious iconographic tradition to some extent.

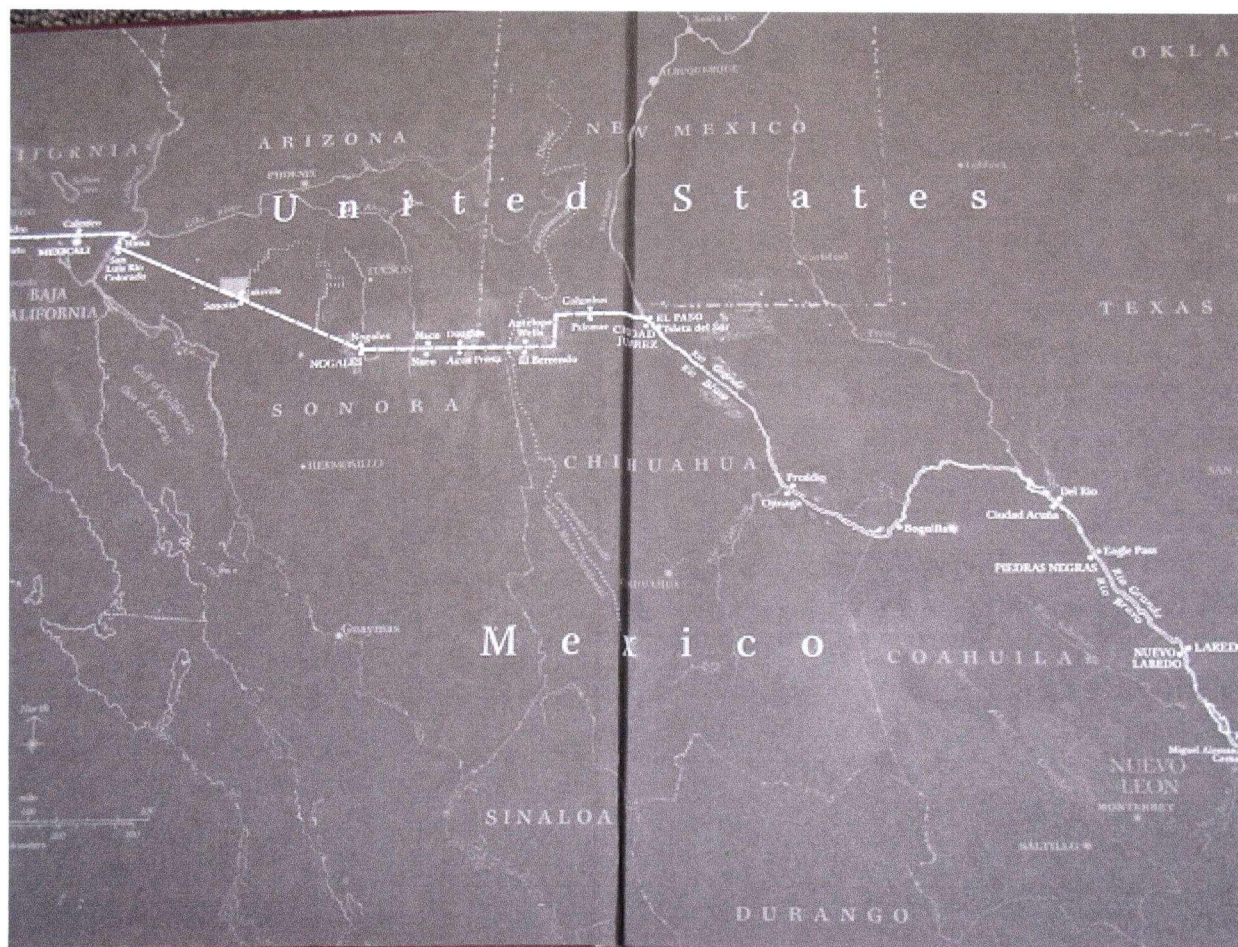


Figure 1







**Figure 3**





Figure 4



Figure 5





Figure 6



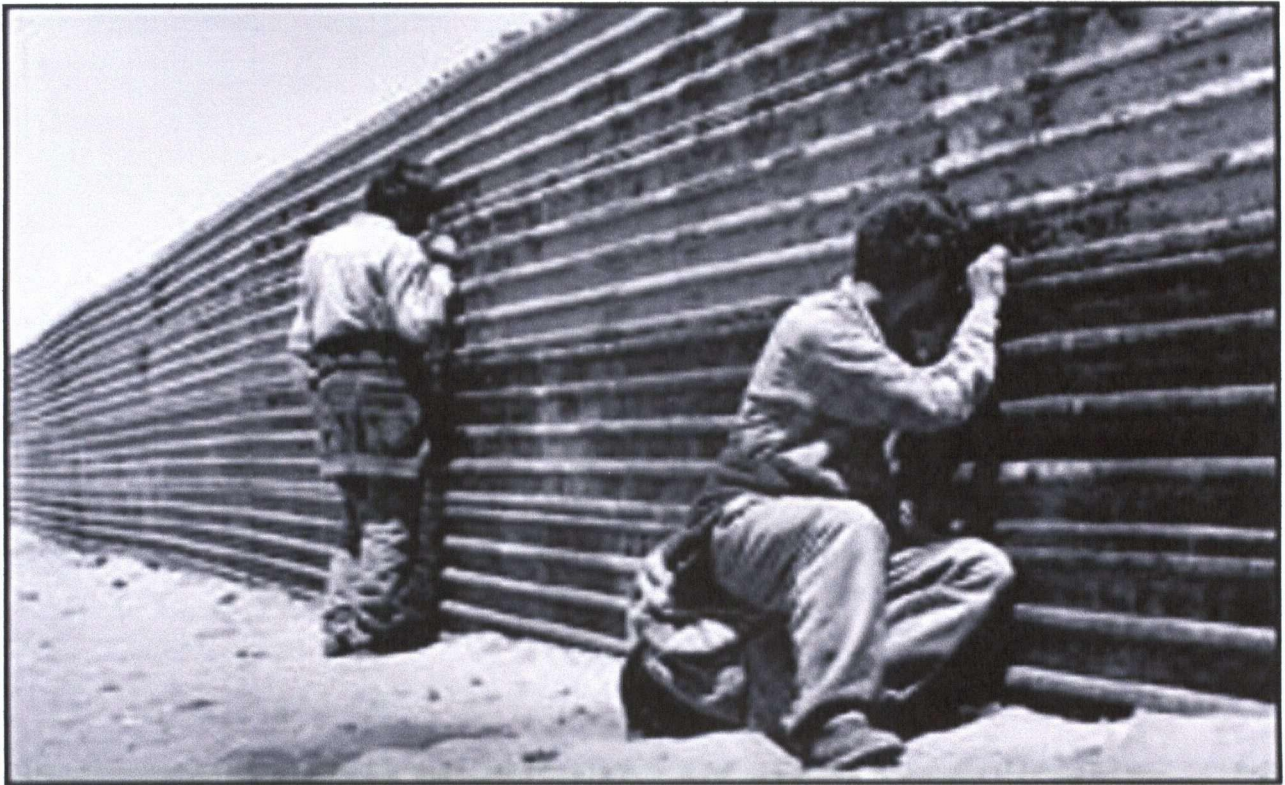


Figure 7



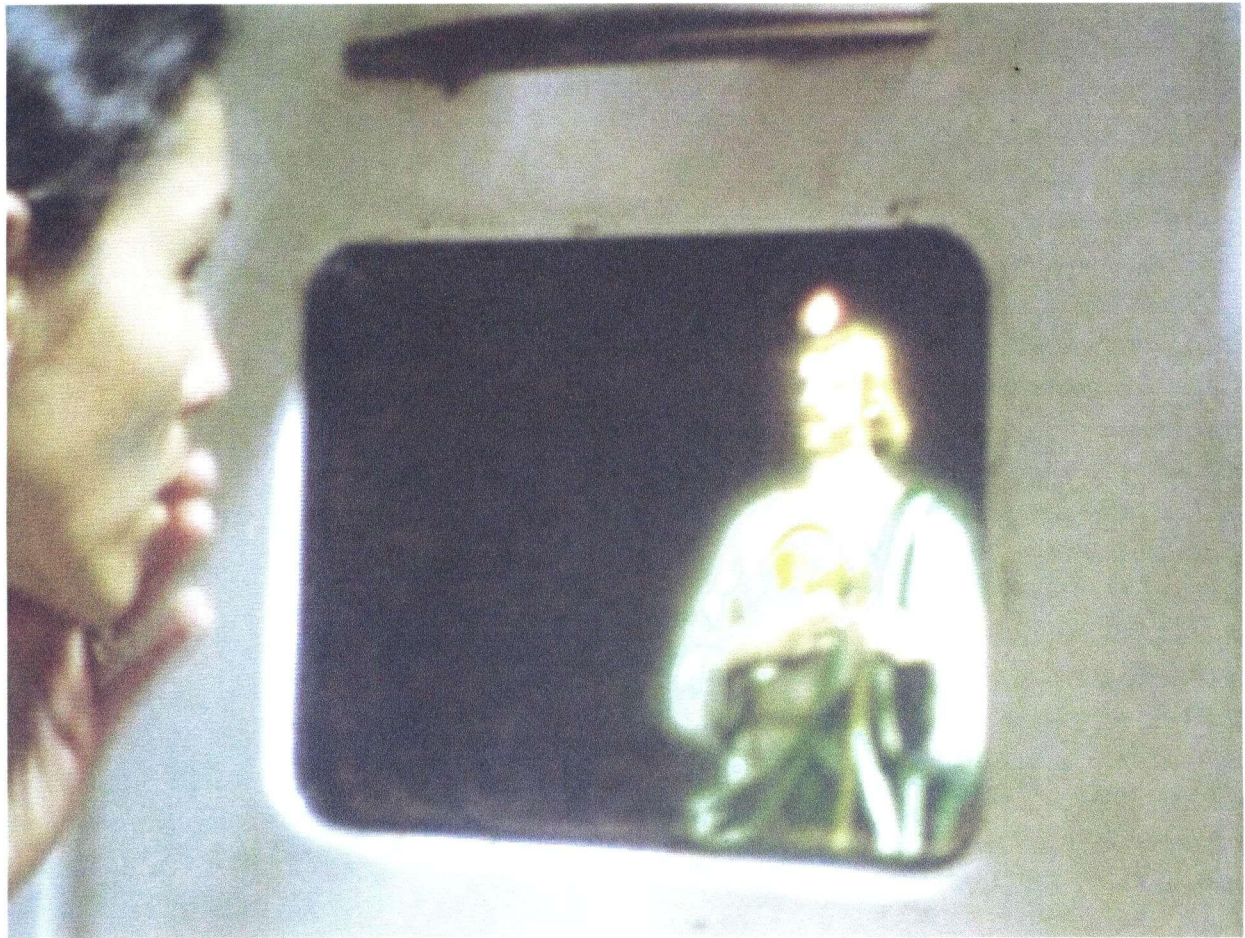


**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**





**Figure 10**





**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**





**Figure 13**





**Figure 14**

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