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POPULAR DEVOTION AND BORDER CROSSINGS: MEXICAN *EX-VOTO* PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Ex-voto paintings are the visual manifestation of popular religion and are objects offered as votives of thanks to Christ or Virgin Mary. These paintings provide art historical, ethnographical and literary evidence of socio-economic circumstances of those who commission them. As such, both production and reception of *ex-votos* testify to the role of art in transnational social processes, such as immigration. The painful process of immigration produces poignant visual manifestations that address dislocation and oppression. In this paper I especially analyze the *ex-votos* of the Mexican immigrants and argue that the border crossings from Mexico to United States are materialized in the *ex-votos* of the Mexican immigrants who seek divine assistance during this dangerous endeavor and further life in the United States.

KEYWORDS

Popular devotion. *Ex-voto*. Immigration. Border-crossing. Popular art.

Devotional religious practices are very common in the everyday lives of people all over the world. Popular devotions arise in response to the spiritual needs of the particular culture, hence the degree to which any particular devotion is practiced vary over time and according to that culture. A basis of the popular devotion includes votive offerings of gratitude for a divine favor granted after a terrible event or condition. In this study I examine the contemporary *ex-voto* painting practice, as a part of the continuous votive ritual among the Mexi-

can immigrants to the U.S. and I will base my argument on the premises that these devotional objects provide a more complete and tangible data of the immigration phenomenon than mere statistics by testifying to the experiences and feelings of people that migrate back and forward[1].

For the undocumented immigrants, making the dangerous crossing on the U.S.-Mexican border is not a matter of choice. Intense poverty, due to Mexican economic conditions compels many poor peasants and workers to seek work "*el oltro lado*" on the other side of the border. Without rural credit, training, and reeducation programs, or health, nutrition, and family planning aid in their local environment, many will continue to assemble in Mexico's northern states to seek low-paying, dead-end jobs and/or look for work in the U.S., taking life threatening risks. Undocumented immigrants, when crossing the border, are not only easy prey for immoral human smugglers, dishonest policemen, sadistic U.S. Border Patrol officers, thieves, rapists and once on the other side, they are abused by shady lawyers, crooked bureaucrats and oppressive employers. In addition, many ethnographic research concerning the undocumented immigrants entering the U.S. from the U.S.-Mexican border show that the desert, the river, the fence, and the Border Patrol is nothing compared to the racism that they encounter once they pass "to the other side." Thus, faith and spirituality of Mexican immigrants play an intrinsic part in their socio-economic and political struggle in the U.S.

During his recent talk at the University of San Diego, Daniel G. Groody, from the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, identified the situation of the Mexican immigrants with the metaphor "crucifixion" and their survival with "resurrection"[2]. For Groody, those immi-

[1] Many immigrants are essentially economic refugees. One of the consequences of globalization is that public subsidies for food and agriculture are being cut or eliminated, and small-scale farmers have been forced to compete with huge international agribusinesses. In the developing countries like Mexico, without access to credit or markets, small farmers cannot survive on the land. The researches demonstrate that the bulk of worker immigrants, whether undocumented or documented, come from the traditional rural interior communities of Mexico.

[2] "One border, one body: immigration and the eucharist with Daniel G. Groody, CSC, PhD." *Mother Rosalie Hill Hall, Warren Auditorium*, University of San Diego, March 8, 2014.

grants endure economic crucifixion that renders them marginal; political crucifixion that is unlawful; psychological crucifixion that leaves them lonely; and social crucifixion that causes alienation. Father Groody told a significant anecdote: One day he asks one of the immigrant women in a poor community in El Paso, what she would say to God if she had a moment with him. The women replies smiling: "I always talk to him, I talk to him right now" Groody insists: "But what if you had a chance to be with him face to face?" Women answers: "I would say: Thank you." That is what the *ex-votos* are. They are special thanksgivings of the people who are being crucified by the economic and political system and by the society. They are physical objects that reflect the channel between the divine and the people. With that, they deconstruct the dogma of the church and create a "direct" relationship with the divine. They are the material reflection of emotions, fears, hopes, dreams, and gratitude. They are evidence of a social and psychological drama. And they are the cultural networks that tie the communities together.

Ex-voto is a Latin term, which means "from a vow" suggesting that those paintings are votive gifts for payment of divine favors. *Ex-voto* is a votive painting hung on a church wall or placed near a particular image of veneration. In those folk objects, the written text accompanies the painting, which tells the story of the miracle that happened or the wish that is granted[3]. Once at the shrine or sacred place, the saint or a divine being whose aid one seeks is evoked. A vow is then spoken which will be carried out if the prayer is granted and the votive object will be offered to the spirit of the shrine as a token of the vow and will be hung there for all to see.

The urge to express, the ignorance of proportions and rules of perspective and the remarkable religious beliefs give those paintings an extraordinary style. Until today, the artists retained their *naiveté*. They produced, and continue to produce

[3] *Ex-votos* belong to the *retablo* tradition and are often called as such by the people of west and central Mexico. The term retablo comes from the Latin *retro-tabuala*, which means: "behind the alter table." According to Gloria F. Giffords (1992), the origins of the *retablo* can be traced to the early Christian reliquary boxes that were placed at the rear of the altar and later in the 13th century, to the altar frontals and apse murals in Spain. *Ex-votos*, although they share the style and the medium with *retablos*, serve different purposes.

these works with a simple artistic vision, an ingenuous sense of perspective, and a bold color palette. The paints used for *ex-votos* are similar to those of oil paintings on canvas. In order to prevent rusting and to help the paint adhere better priming coat is applied. Usually, a dark reddish-brown paint is used for this purpose (MILLS, 1991, p. 28). Attention is given to costumes and to interior spaces. Usually, a dramatic effect is achieved by the manipulation of the space and figures in terms of scale and proportion. Thus, different scenes and times occupy the same painting; for example, a border crossing scene and a scene of the devotee praying before the Virgin in a church in the following year, are painted together.

One of the few anthropologists who examined the *ex-votos* in the context of Mexico, Gloria Giffords argues that a surge in the *ex-voto* painting practice began after the independence from Spain in 1821 and came to a climax in the 1880s (GIFFORDS, 1992, p. 8). Spanish colonialism created structural changes in the ecological and social relations of production that diverted local labor from essential subsistence tasks and shrank the resource base on which Native communities relied for their autonomous economic structure[4]. The period of transition between colonial and national rule witnessed the continuation of impoverishment of indigenous peoples, leading to economic dependency and change in their household and community-based systems. As Solange Alberro (2001, p. 71) argues, during that era, the church played a radically different role than it had during previous centuries; moreover, the rapid change in the means of production turned poverty-stricken peasants in the countryside into poverty-stricken members of the proletariat. Naturally, these changes created a diversification within the previously established power structure of the Mexican society. This may have caused the masses to absorb multiple layers of messages and representations in their daily life. Within this context, there arose a need to satisfy the relationship between the devotees and the spiritual world without the intermediary like catholic clergy[5].

[4] See Radding (1997).

[5] Note that indigenous religions of Mesoamerica did not have such intermediary in their religious practices pre-conquest times.

A movement rooted in popular religiosity emerged alongside the shift of power of the political and theological elite. Consequently, worship practices moved from the church toward the household altars.

Before the 20th century, these paintings were always anonymous, perhaps because this work was simply a trade object and was not conceived as a work of art or even a craft object. Creators of such works were simply doing their jobs (MILLS, 1991, p. 50). Scholars continue to debate wheatear or not they are produced in workshops in a production line, or by groups of individuals. However, most importantly, those works were executed for the commemoration of a miracle, not for glorification of the artist. Nonetheless, because each *ex-voto* depicted a unique event and because the scenes depicted were not required to follow a standard, predetermined iconographic scheme, the *ex-voto* painting tradition survived the mass influx of cheap prints throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. In the late 20th century, *ex-votos* became favorite objects of collectors of Mexican folk art and began to be bought and sold in the galleries and exhibited in the blockbuster shows and museums.

Although since the 19th century, certain changes occurred in the format their main characteristics have remained constant. The *ex-voto* uses both pictorial and verbal language creating a double narrative, with the story composed along horizontal bands. In general, the image that is invoked appears in the upper part, the action or miracle is portrayed in the middle section, while the written text is found in the lower part. In some 20th century pieces, the text shifts to the middle, to the corner or to the upper part of the *ex-voto*. Regardless of its position in the work, the text describes the situation and briefly gives thanks to the saint. They are objective testimonies to the reality of a specific time and place, as well as subjective religious connotations of the person who commissions the *ex-voto.*

The *ex-voto* attempts to contextualize the devotional acts of thanksgiving through both graphic rendition and the narrative accounts. Although constructed as an artistic tradition, complex literary, and narrative elements make the *ex-voto* tradition a unique and authentic Mexican literary, as

well as artistic practice. Moreover, the "act of reading" the *ex-voto* in the shrine by other devotees is a spiritual experience and results in a generative power of the process of participation in the community. Therefore, *ex-votos* render a collective cultural experience. The notion of shared life experiences as shared cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews stimulate a community's existence as a social group. Thus, the *ex-voto* may affirm or augment a sense of power and belonging within the community.

Since the 18th century, most important shrines that house *ex-votes* are concentrated in the west-central Mexico[6]. The states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, San Luis Potosi, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas are also the regions where the greatest number of immigrants comes from (DURAND; MASSEY, 1995, p. 46). The shrine to Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos in the town of San Juan de los Lagos (Our Lady of St. John of the Lakes) in Jalisco is one of the principal pilgrimage sites in Mexico. Other two major shrines that are popular for votive offerings are those of el Señor de Villaseca (or the black Christ) on the outskirts of Guadalajara and el Señor de la Conquista (Lord of the Conquest) – also known as el Señor de los Milagros (Our Lord of Miracles) in San Felipe, Guanajuato (DURAND; MASSEY, 1995, p. 46).

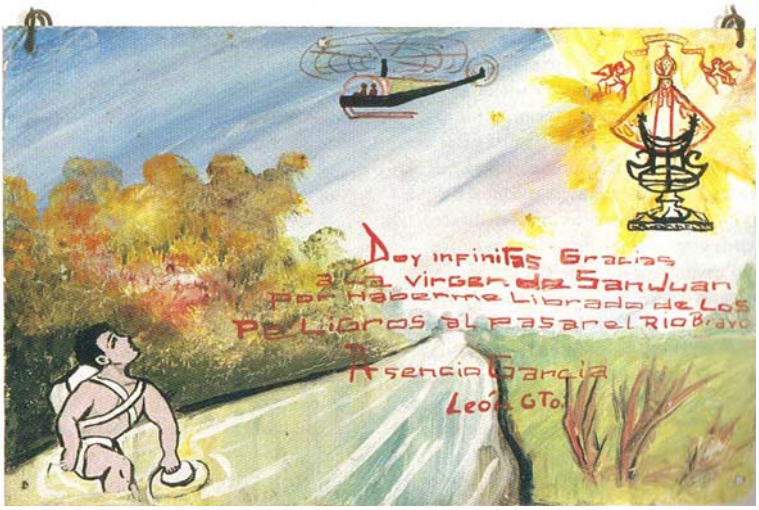
Ethnographers Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey, who have written prominent works on U.S. – Mexican immigration between 1988 and 1993, examined more than 124 *ex-votos* painted or commissioned by Mexican immigrants and they argued that the most frequent subject of the *ex-votos* of Mexican immigrants are the dangers of the border crossings. In their experience of crossing the border, immigrants encounter considerable risks and various dangers that result from the measures taken by U.S. authorities and lawmakers to restrict those crossings. Additionally, thieves, drug smugglers, and vigilantes, as well as coyotes themselves, prey on vulnerable people who often carry the money they need to cross the border. Often, the immigrants who die on the border end

[6] Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this thesis to identify the ethnic or cultural identity of the groups and individuals who make the pilgrimage and offer thanks and *ex-votos* to the saints in those shrines.

up with no names on the police reports and are described as "unidentified." Their families in Mexico and Central America never know what happened to them.

Since the undocumented immigrants are peasants from the inlands of Mexico they cannot swim. Two thirds of deaths occur while passing the Rio Grande River. An *ex-voto* depicting the dangers of crossing the Rio Grande is by Asencio Garcia (Figure 1). It reads: "I give thanks to the Virgin of San Juan for having me saved from the dangers of crossing the Rio Bravo. Asencio Garcia" (BELTRAN; LUQUE, 2001, p. 322). Unusually, the narrative is not organized in three horizontal lines, but more like three vertical lines. The protagonist of the event, who is about to cross the water, is placed on the left side of the composition. In the middle is the river as the border and there is a Border Patrol helicopter in the sky over it. The text starts in the middle and crosses both sides of the border, while the Virgin occupies the far right corner. Not only the Rio Grande but the terrain separates the two countries.

Figure 1 – Leon Gto. *Ex-voto* of Asencio Garcia (1932). Oil on tin.16 x 25 cm



Source: Sanctuary of San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco.

The panoramic view and the diagonal strokes in the sky create a pictorial drama. Although there is no incident of a life threatening danger that occurs in that moment, the young athletic Mexican invokes the Virgin of San Juan imagining the

dangers of border crossing. The image of the Virgin is just a drawing in red and black pencil, but she is easily recognized with her crown held between two angels, her bell shaped embroidered gown, and her long dark hair. Her importance is literally high-lightened with bright yellow paint that has an effect of a halo surrounding the entire image.

For undocumented men and women, crossing the border on foot is a test of their physical endurance, their character, ingenuity, desperation, and belief. In this *ex-voto*, the immigrant is depicted as physically strong to overcome the dangers of harsh terrain or the Rio Grande but is deeply concerned with the psychological trauma of getting caught by the U.S. Border Patrol helicopter and being labeled as a criminal, and getting deported.

The group *ex-voto* dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe dates 1920, which is a significant time in Mexican history and the history of the Mexican-U.S. border (MILLS, 1991, p. 32). Although the Virgin of Guadalupe is the "Queen of Mexico," and the basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City is the largest shrine in Mexico, it is not a very popular image to be invoked by the immigrants. The reason is probably because as the researchers demonstrate, the bulk of worker immigrants, whether undocumented or documented, come from the traditional rural interior communities of Mexico, and the immigrants choose the most popular shrine close to their hometown to make the pilgrimage and give thanks to the Virgin or Christ.

In this next example there are four people fighting with the dangerous waters of the Rio Grande (Figure 2). Their names are written in the beginning of the text, as opposed to the end with the date and the place where the event occurred:

> Feliciano Llanes, Alfonso Guerrero, Daniel Leon, and Bernardino Leon dedicate this *retablo* as thanksgiving to Our Lady of Guadalupe for having us saved from dangerous event that occurred in 25 August 1920 crossing over to Laredo, Texas.

Figure 2 – Anonymous. *Ex-voto* of Feliciano Llanes, Alfonso Guerrero, Daniel Leon, and Bernardino. Leon, 25 August 1920. 24.1 x 35,5 cm

Source: Ron and Chris Tracy Collection.

In this particular *ex-voto*, the story is given the most importance and occupies most of the pictorial plane where the Virgin of Guadalupe is depicted on the left corner smaller than usual in proportion to the size of the painting. The text is squeezed on the right corner without disrupting the wholeness of the paining. The unusual detailing of the men's expressions, the precision of perspective with the town and the bridge on the horizon, the precise miniature depiction of the Virgin and multiple tone color palettes suggest that the painter was probably a trained artist. Another unusual detail is that the four men's clothing does not suggest that they are humble peasants, but rather well dressed men. The four men that commissioned this *ex-voto* do not look like peasants and probably wanted no part in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). For them the choice became to whether hide or to leave the country or perhaps they were among the Mexican revolutionaries and federals that migrated to the United States when conditions made it impossible to operate in Mexico.

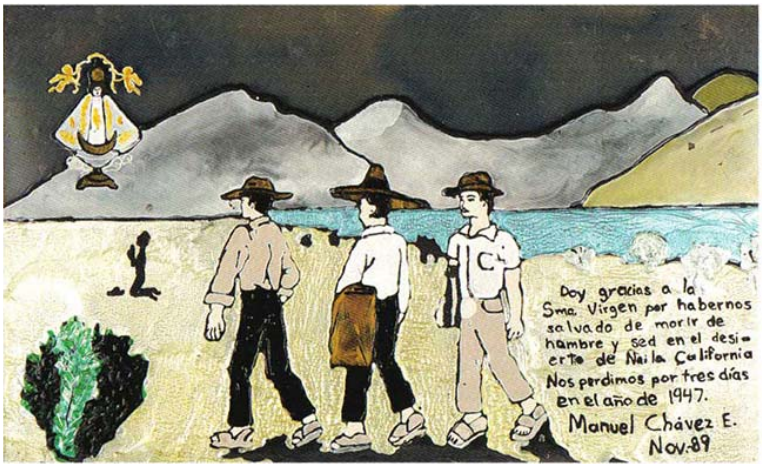
Another *ex-voto* with a composition of a group of people trying to cross the border is commissioned by Manuel Chávez (Figure 3) (MILLS, 1991, p. 32). Three young men

are walking the desert under the night sky while far away under the image of Virgin of San Juan a miniscule black figure prays and makes a vow. The text reads:

> I give thanks to the Holy Virgin for having saved us from dying of hunger and thirst in the desert close to California. We were lost for three days in the year of 1947. Manuel Chávez November 1989.

As understood from the text, the incident has taken place 42 years before execution of this *ex-voto* was painted on a glass. There could be several explanations for this kind of delay. Some illegal immigrants settle in the U.S. for many years in order not to take the risk of an illegal crossing and also in many cases to wait for an opportunity that will grant them legal rights and eventual citizenship. In such conditions, if one does not have a family member who could make the pilgrimage in the name of the immigrant and place the *ex-voto* in the shrine where the vow was made, the act could be retarded many years.

Figure 3 – Anonymous. *Ex-voto* of Manuel Chávez (1989). Painted glass. 23 x 36 cm



Source: Sanctuary of San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco.

Apart from this aspect, this *ex-voto* makes an explicit statement of the hardships of crossing the desert. A report of a Border Patrol agent written in 1994, as quoted in *Hard Line*,

describes the inevitable death of a migrant who was lost in a desert for days.

> Their skin had been burned to a furious, stop-sign red by the sun. The extreme loss of body moisture had peeled back their lips, giving them a sickly grin, and left darkened pits where they eyes should have been (ELLINGWOOD, 2004, p. 59).

All Dave Phagan [the INS agent] could think of was documentary films about the survivors of the Holocaust. "These men had the same sunken look, like skin draped over a skeleton" (ELLINGWOOD, 2004, p. 59).

The same year, Border Patrol's national blueprint says:

> The prediction is that with traditional entry and smuggling routes disrupted, illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more hostile terrain, less suitable for crossing and more suited for enforcement (ELLINGWOOD, 2004, p. 70).

Probably, no other issue has raised more passion or controversy than the U.S. Border Patrol strategies presently being used on the U.S.-Mexico border. In California, it is called Operation Gatekeeper; in Arizona, it is called Operation Safeguard; another in El Paso is called Operation Hold the Line; and in South Texas called Operation Rio Grande in McAllen and Laredo, Texas (ANDREAS, 1998, p. 345). These strategies were specifically and deliberately designed to funnel northbound immigration through open areas, such as mountains and deserts where immigrants can be more easily apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol; however, exposing them to "mortal danger"[7].

In the next *ex-voto* a family, including mother, father and children are trying to cross the border and are hiding from the Border Patrol (Figure 4) (DURAND; MASSEY, 1995,

[7] According to the estimates, deaths along the border have increased 600% since Gatekeeper Operation went into effect. Almost all these deaths were result of environmental factors such as heat stroke, hypodermia and drowning. Since 1994 an estimated 2,600 undocumented immigrants have died crossing the border, according to figures from California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF).

p. 137). The vast desert encompasses the entire picture plane. The family hides behind a small bush while in the distance a Border Patrol helicopter and three agents; two outside and one in the van are alarmed seeking for the immigrants. Behind the helicopter's searchlight a surreal city is shown as if it is a mirage in the desert. The text reads: "We give thanks to the Virgin of San Juan for saving us from the immigration authorities on our way to Los Angeles. Maria Esther Tapia Picón." The name of the *retablo* artist is signed as Leon Gto on the bottom left corner of the text, providing no disturbance to the narrative.

Figure 4 – Anonymous. *Ex-voto* of M. Esther Tapia Picon. Undated. Oil on metal. Dimensions unknown

Source: Sanctuary of San Juan de Los Lagos.

When looking carefully at the Border Patrol car, one notices that it indeed belongs to the Mexican police. Although this seems odd at first, it gives us the idea that immigrants are not only being abused by the U.S.' border officials but also by the Mexican border patrol. Especially on their return home, they are a target for extortion by corrupt custom officials and border police who know that immigrants return home with gifts and cash for relatives. For the family who gives thanks to the Virgin of San Juan, with the U.S. helicopter and the Mexican police car, the pressure of being caught is doubled.

As demonstrated in the hundreds of *ex-votos* of immigrants, which Durand and Massey (1995) examined, but also in the research of border anthropologists such as Pablo Vila and Oscar J. Martinez show that abuse by Border Patrol agents is a highly emotional issue; especially during 1980's and 1990's shooting incidents led to deaths of the immigrants (MARTINEZ, 1994, p. 146). Crossing the desert and mountains, and evading the U.S. Border Patrol are not the only challenges illegal immigrants have to face. Finding work that pays "under the table" and making enough money to live, not getting sick or injured at the work place, tolerating xenophobia of some communities of the host country are some of other challenges confronted constantly by undocumented people. For women, problems occur in a different scale. Crossing the border, especially in the urban areas, women have to first get through the abusive men who hang around the riverbank. In addition, getting caught by the Border Patrol cause multiple humiliation and indignities. If they could avoid the dangers of crossing the river, Border Patrol, and these men, they have to find a secure employment. Most of the times, right after crossing, they fall prey to local pimps or employers of domestic work who are willing to employ them paying next-to-nothing[8]. On the job, domestic or agricultural, they are often victims of exploitation and sexual harassment. Employers frequently threaten to deport undocumented domestic workers if they refuse to do more work, reject sexual advances, or attempt to return home (VELLOS, 1997, p. 407). The immigrants do not report the harassments or run away because they feel alone and isolated, with no place to go. They also usually lack language skills and fear that the law enforcement officers would not believe them.

If those immigrants entering the U.S. from the U.S.-Mexican border do not obtain papers, they must choose to come illegally and face apprehension by the U.S. authorities. Many use fake social security cards or the same card is used by multiple workers. This way, they pay their taxes but cannot claim any social security benefits. They live a clandestine life with the pressing worry of being caught and deported. If they manage to cross the border, the fear of U.S. authorities follows

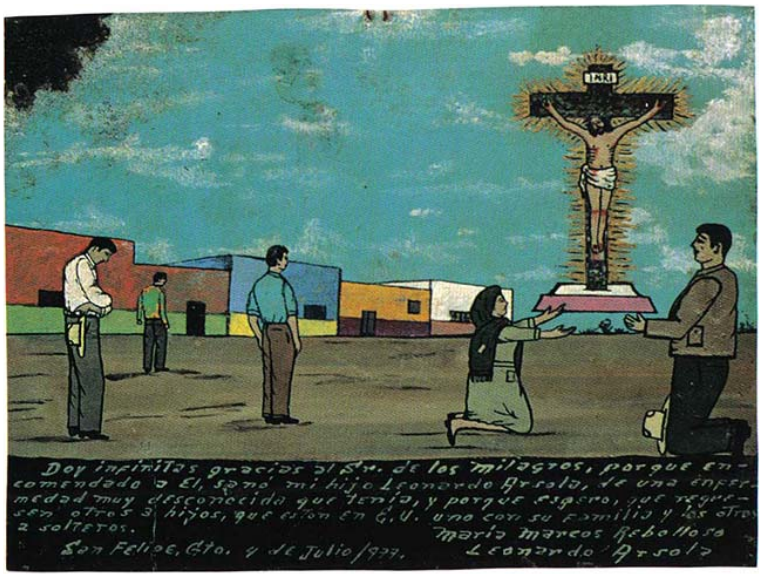
[8] For more information on conditions of the women passing the border and afterwards, see Martinez (1994).

them everywhere in their everyday life. In social and professional life, undocumented workers are at a disadvantage because of their lack of documentation. They cannot seek legal help on the sexism, racism, and exploitation that they experience at the work place or in their daily life. Those kinds of abuses are underreported because of the criminalization of their immigration status, as well as the lack of adequate services to record their presence.

The *ex-voto* of Señora Rebolloso is particularly intriguing because it is a thanksgiving and a plea at the same time (Figure 5):

> I give thanks to the Lord of Miracles because, entrusted him, he healed my son Leonardo Arsola, from unknown sickness. I also hope for the return of my other three sons who are in the U.S., one with his family and the other two bachelors. San Felipe, Guanajuato, July 4, 1977. Maria Marcos Rebolloso. Leonardo Arsola (DURAND; MASSEY, 1995, p. 119).

Figure 5 – Anonymous. *Ex-voto* of Maria Marcos Rebolloso and Leonardo Arsola. 1977. Oil on metal. 25 x 18,5 cm



Source: Durand-Arias collection.

Immigration is not only hard for the one who leaves but also for those who are left behind. Señora Rebolloso wants her

husband back home to take care of his eye disease. Not only they have to endure the hardships of the voyage, but they are also easy prey for thieves who know that they are coming home with money and gifts. Nevertheless, "coming home" is a happy event especially during holidays like Christmas. The scene is depicted outdoors. Blue sky and the colorful façades of the adobe houses have an immediate appeal to the eye. Señora is kneeling with her arms extended forward towards the Lord of Miracles. One of her sons, probably the one that lives with her, is the closest figure to her. His hands extend towards the cross. In the first glance it almost seems like they are about to embrace each other. The other three sons are placed away from the mother, but also from each other. They are all looking in different directions, suggesting that they are not in each other's sight. This also gives the picture an almost surrealist quality (DURAND; MASSEY, 1995, p. 119). This *ex-voto* depicts a communal place, perhaps the main plaza of the town. It is a testimony that U.S. immigration is the core collective experience of not only individuals and families, but the entire community. The immigrants are the backbone of both the U.S.' and Mexico's economy. Señora Rebolloso' hope for the happy return of the loved ones is shared by millions of people in Mexico every day. In Mexico, an immigration phenomenon does not only affect certain individuals or groups, but also constitutes a large place in the collective experience of the Mexican society.

Contemporary *ex-votos* in Mexico are often vowed, commissioned and offered by immigrants themselves or their immediate relatives. Ethnographers Durand and Massy argue that: "Through faith and devotion to familiar icons, people are able to make sense of the alienating and disjointed experiences of life in a foreign society" (DURAND; MASSEY, 1995, p. 212). Votive objects, such as the *ex-voto* paintings I discussed here, are very important in playing a part of the migrant's daily life aiding him/her in his survival in terrible economic and social conditions, thus providing a spiritual connection and cultural anchor with their homelands and their community they left behind.

DEVOÇÃO POPULAR E PASSAGENS DE FRONTEIRA: PINTURAS *EX-VOTO* MEXICANAS

RESUMO

Pinturas *ex-voto* são a manifestação visual da religião popular e objetos oferecidos como ação de graças a Cristo ou à Virgem Maria. Essas pinturas fornecem evidências de arte histórica, etnográfica e literária de circunstâncias socioeconômicas daqueles que as encomendam. Como tal, a produção e a recepção de *ex-votos* testemunham o papel da arte em processos sociais transnacionais, como a imigração. O doloroso processo de imigração produz manifestações visuais comoventes que tratam de deslocamento e de opressão. Neste artigo, analiso especialmente os *ex-votos* dos imigrantes mexicanos e discuto que as passagens de fronteira entre México e Estados Unidos são materializadas nos *ex-votos* dos imigrantes mexicanos que procuram assistência divina durante essa empreitada perigosa e mais vida nos estados-membros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Devoção popular. *Ex-voto*. Imigração. Cruzamento de fronteiras. Arte popular.

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Recebido em abril de 2015.
Aprovado em abril de 2015.