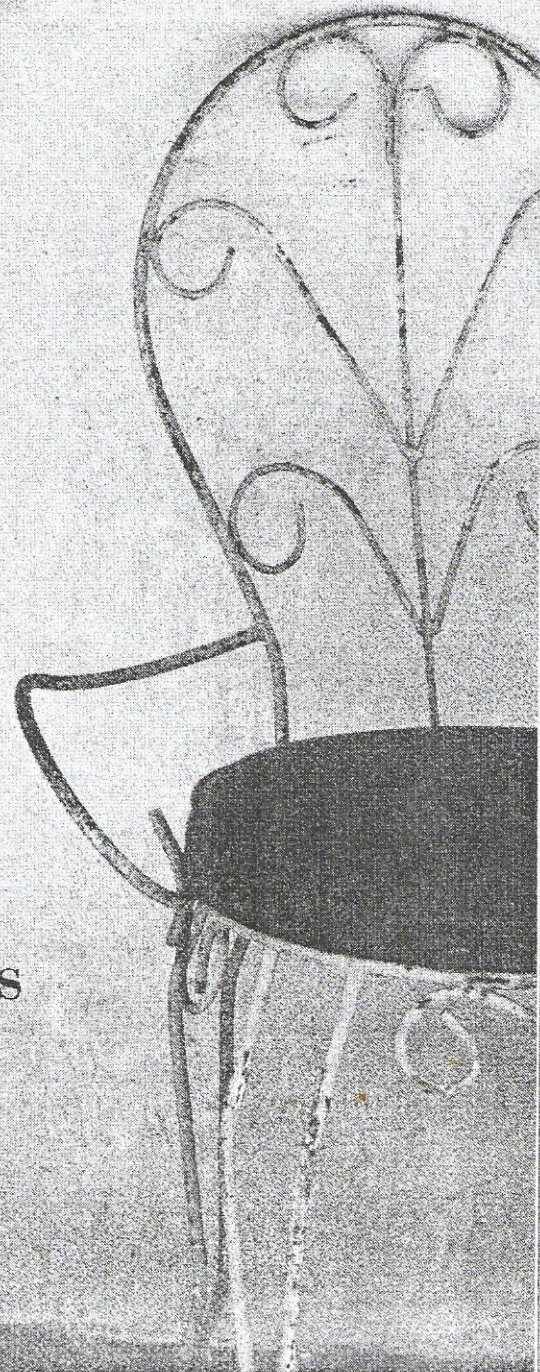


edited by
PAUL DiMAGGIO *and*
PATRICIA FERNÁNDEZ-KELLY

Art *in the*
Lives *of*
Immigrant Communities
in the
United States



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EDITED BY
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Miracles on the Border

THE VOTIVE ART OF MEXICAN MIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES

Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey

In recent decades the volume of migration between Mexico and the United States has risen dramatically and transnational movement has emerged as a major force binding the two countries. Although Mexican immigration has been the subject of many statistical studies (see Durand and Massey 1992 and Massey et al. 1994 for reviews), it has been less common to examine it from the viewpoint of the migrants themselves. Nonetheless, a growing literature has sought to portray migration, especially migration without documents, from the perspective of its participants. Investigators have compiled oral histories to reveal the life course dynamics of international migration (Durand 1996; Gamio 1931); analyzed the content of popular Mexican songs about migration and border crossing (Fernandez 1983; Herrera-Sobek 1979); and assembled letters written by undocumented migrants to friends and family at home (Siems 1992). One study gave disposable cameras to immigrants and asked them to take pictures of features of their environments that to them appeared “American” and “Latino” (Massey and Sánchez 2007). Many studies have done participant observation and in-depth interviewing among migrants to appreciate the vagaries of life in the United States through their eyes (Chávez 1991; Durand 2002; González-López 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001). A few former undocumented migrants have even published memoirs (de la Torre 1988; Pérez 1991).

We add to this growing literature by undertaking a systematic analysis of votive paintings left by U.S. migrants and their families at religious shrines in western Mexico, the traditional heartland for migration to the United States (Durand 1988; Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 2001). Known popularly as *retablos*, from the Latin

retro-tabula (behind the altar), these paintings are typically prepared or commissioned to offer thanks to a divine image for a miracle or favor received (Giffords 1974). They tell the story of a threatening event from which the subject has been miraculously delivered through divine intervention (Cousin 1982). Here we analyze a newly expanded sample of *retablos* dealing with Mexico-U.S. migration to update earlier work on this subject (see Durand and Massey 1995, 1997, 2001) and to discern the latest trends in the subjective meaning of migration from the viewpoint of those who actually live it.

ORIGINS OF MEXICAN RETABLOS

The word *retablo* originally referred to decorative or didactic paintings and sculpture placed behind the altar of Catholic churches in the early middle ages (Giffords 1974). Later it came to denote reliquary boxes placed at the rear of the altar (de la Maza 1950); and during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was generalized to refer to all painted altar panels and frontal pieces (Cousin 1982; Giffords 1991; Schroeder 1968). In the most literal sense, therefore, *retablos* include any paintings or objects placed around the altar.

The practice of leaving objects to thank or beseech a divine image has ancient roots, of course (Egan 1991). According to abundant archaeological evidence, the ancient Greeks, Romans, Etruscans, Iberians, and Gauls all possessed well-developed votive traditions (Decoufle 1964) in which it was common to acknowledge or pray for the restoration of health by leaving small figures of clay, wax, wood, or stone shaped like hands, eyes, arms, legs, feet, or vital organs. These traditions persisted into the Christian era, but during the fifteenth century these anatomical tokens gave way to a more elaborate display of supplication through painting.

Originating in the early Renaissance, the first votive paintings appeared in Italy at the end of the 1400s (Cousin 1982). The practice of votive painting spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean and then diffused northward into the rest of Europe and ultimately the New World (Egan 1991). Votive practices entered Mexico more with Spanish soldiers than priests. Votive supplication has always been a popular folk tradition rather than a formal religious practice, and Egan (1991) relates that the Conquistador of Mexico himself, upon being bitten by a scorpion, prayed to the Virgin of Guadalupe for deliverance and promised to prepare a votive if he survived this misfortune. Cortez kept his promise and ordered the goldsmiths of Azcapotzalco to fashion a votive containing forty emeralds and two pearls set in a gold box that housed the remnants of the poisonous arthropod that dared to attack the conqueror of Mexico (Valle, Arizpe 1941).

In transplanting votive traditions to Mexico, of course, the Spanish did not encounter a cultural vacuum. Indeed, archaeological evidence suggests that votive practices were well established in Mesoamerica long before the arrival of the Spanish (Montenegro 1950) and pre-Hispanic votive objects have been found in ruins throughout Mexico and Central America (Sánchez Lara 1990; Solís 1991;

Townsend 1992). Despite the existence of strong pre-Hispanic votive traditions, however, the practice of votive painting initially did not take hold among Mexico's indigenous populations after the conquest. Although popular religious expressions were tolerated by the evangelizing priests, they were not encouraged, and mission-aries instead sought to insert European practices into the native spiritual milieu (Lafaye 1976).

As a result, votive painting first took root among American-born Spaniards, known as *criollos* (Giffords 1974: 119). As in Europe, the practice grew out of altar paintings of biblical scenes commissioned for didactic purposes (Montenegro 1950). Dating the earliest retablos in Mexico is difficult because they were usually executed on perishable media such as canvas or wood that did not survive. A series of engravings of the Virgin of Guadalupe done by the Belgian artist Stradanus between 1604 and 1622 suggest that retablos were present in Mexico by the early seventeenth century (Orendain 1948). The engravings show four painted retablos hanging to either side of the Virgin's altar, each containing an explanatory text recounting a miraculous happening (Genaro Cuadriello 1989; Sánchez Lara 1990).

As time went on, votive painting increasingly came to be associated with Mexico's mestizo population, people of mixed Spanish and Indian origins in whom pre-Columbian traditions were united with European styles in a way that did not threaten officials of the Catholic Church. The arrival of tin plate in the nineteenth century introduced a cheap and versatile medium that quickly displaced canvas and wood and opened retablo art to broader social participation (Giffords 1974: 1991). Over time, the origins of supplicants shifted from *criollo* to mestizo, and the geographic center of retablo painting shifted away from Mexico City and into the heavily mestizo west-central region of the country. By the 1920s, the production of votive art was concentrated in five key western states: Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas. Although votive practices continue to be expressed throughout Latin America, painted retablos achieved their fullest development and greatest expression in Mexico, and only there have they continued to function as a living artistic tradition (Durand and Massey 1995).

AESTHETICS OF RETABLOS

The classic Mexican retablo is painted on a piece of tin that has been reduced from a larger sheet by a progressive cutting into smaller sections (Giffords 1991). Most are rectangular in shape, with the largest being about 280 sq. in. (14 × 20 in.) and the smallest being around 18 sq. in. (3.5 × 5 in.). The most common sizes are 140 sq. in. (10 × 14 in.) and 70 sq. in. (7 × 10 in.) (Giffords 1974: 1991; Orendain 1948). In terms of composition, retablos typically incorporate three basic elements: a holy image, a graphic rendering of the miraculous event, and a text explaining what happened and expressing gratitude (Giffords 1974: 1991). The holy image is usually depicted suspended in clouds and located to one side of the composition.

Although the representation of the holy image must bear some relation to official iconography, the rules of interpretation are loose rather than rigid. In order to function effectively within the context of an ex-voto, a holy image need only convey identity in general terms. A variety of colors, styles, shapes, props, and levels of detail may be used to depict a holy image, as long as overall recognition is achieved. Strict reproduction of a holy image is not important because the action itself is the focus of the work. Moreover, because votive paintings are left at specific shrines, the identity of the image is usually clear from the context in which it is placed. Any doubts about the identity of an image are usually dispelled by the text, which mentions the image by name.

Textual material is generally found at the bottom of the painting. In addition to thanking the holy image, the text normally states the place of origin of the donor along with the date, place, and circumstances of the event, and it gives an account of the miraculous intervention by the holy image. Expressions of gratitude draw upon a standard vocabulary that has evolved over hundreds of years. Most begin with the words "doy gracias" (I give thanks) and express a heartfelt need to "hacer patente" (make known) the miraculous results of a divine intervention. In them, the supplicant states that at the moment of crisis, "me encomendé a la Virgen" (I entrusted myself to the Virgin) and tell how "me concedió el milagro" (she granted me the miracle). They often end with the simple statement that "por eso dedico el presente retablo" (for this I dedicate the present retablo).

The largest and most important part of the pictorial space in most retablos is given over to depicting the miraculous event itself. In rendering circumstances under which the divine intervention occurred, there are few strict protocols. According to Moyssen (1965: 26), "the imagination of the artist has ample scope to express the supernatural and divine intervention that is superimposed on logical reality and only is acceptable in terms of a blind and irrational faith." The principal desideratum is that artistic devices heighten the emotional intensity of the moment and emphasize the ongoing drama of events. Although the choice of materials, styles, and methods is open and flexible, over the years several techniques have become conventional (Durand and Massey 1995).

Mexican retablos typically rely on bold, bright colors to augment the emotional effect of the miraculous event. In order to convey the power of extreme circumstances, retablo painters make full use of the color spectrum, yielding luminous and vibrant works. Although scenes of family members gathered around a sickbed may occasionally be rendered in subdued tones, the colors are rarely dark. Actions and dramatic events are almost always presented in vivid colors. Background detail is frequently painted using divergent hues to add emotional power to the composition, and the actors themselves are often rendered in contrasting tones.

Mexican votive paintings also self-consciously manipulate space to underscore the dramatic nature of unfolding events. Scale and proportion are often skewed to intensify emotion; angles become sharper and perspective awkward in order to increase the dramatic power of a scene. Helplessness in the face of a dire situation is captured by juxtaposing tiny human figures with larger-than-life holy images

(whereas in real life, sacred images tend to be small). The surreal nature of the moment is enhanced by a haphazard placement of figures, props, and background constructions.

Most votive paintings systematically segment and reorder time. Events that occurred sequentially are broken down into representative moments and shown simultaneously. Different stages in the progress of a miraculous event are arranged within a common pictorial frame. Supplicants shown in the throes of a dire circumstance in one part of a retablo are pictured offering thanks to the image in another. Actions occurring before, during, and after the miracle are shuffled and presented for maximum psychological effect.

At times, theater props and stage motifs are used to emphasize the drama of unfolding events. In such paintings, action takes place on crude stages erected magically in the picture space; curtains are pulled back to reveal figures in critical situations; lush and lustrous fabrics are draped over walls and furniture as if on a set; actors appear to perform before audiences of horrified onlookers; cinematic techniques such as the flashback and fast forward are employed to move about in time.

Finally, in the course of their evolution Mexican retablos have incorporated new materials and techniques to create collages that blend traditional painting with modern media. Photographs of family members are affixed to lend verisimilitude to painted scenes. Photocopies of documents are appended as proof of the divine intercession. A commercially printed image of the Virgin is glued to a spot specially prepared for the purpose. Unlike paintings of saints, therefore, Mexican ex-votos have not been threatened with extinction because of the advent of cheap, industrially produced products. Indeed, commercially printed images are simply incorporated into the composition. If anything, the range of techniques available to retablo artists has multiplied as the genre has continued to evolve.

From an aesthetic point of view, the artistic power of Mexican retablo painting comes from its economy of execution. According to Herrera (1983, 151), "The drawing is naively painstaking, the color choices are odd, the perspective is awkward, space is reduced to a rudimentary stage, and action is condensed to highlights. Adherence to appearances is less important than the dramatization of the ghastly event or the miraculous encounter between the victim and the resplendent holy image." In essence, retablos condense extreme human emotions such as fear, sorrow, apprehension, gratitude, relief, horror, and rage onto small sheets of tin painted in the most elemental of styles. Looking at people depicted in the throes of a circumstance that appears to have no earthly remedy, or imminently facing a crushing and painful loss, we not only share the intensity of the fear and sorrow, we also experience the relief of delivery. It is the rendering of such powerful and elemental human emotions in simple and unpretentious artistic terms that makes retablos so compelling as works of art. As the folklorist Frances Toor (1947, 67–68) has noted, "retablos—realistic pictures of super-realistic events—are painted with great sensitivity and profound recognition of a truth that makes a miracle of reality and of reality a miracle."

Our interest in migrants' retablos began in September of 1988, when we traveled to the sanctuary of San Juan de los Lagos to visit the Virgin of San Juan and inspect her votive paintings. As we perused the colorful pictures and dramatic texts, we noted several that dealt with migration to the United States. We began to look for more of these paintings, and within an hour we had located a dozen votive paintings left by U.S. migrants or their relatives. It quickly occurred to us that these paintings might shed a distinctive light on the topic of Mexico-U.S. migration, offering a rich source of historical and sociological data on a subject that has been notoriously resistant to study—undocumented migration. Because they depict salient events at the moment of their occurrence, moreover, they provide an immediate record of migrants' most pressing concerns. By scrutinizing these paintings, we thought, we might glimpse how illegal migration was perceived and understood by the people who experienced it.

In the ensuing years, we visited dozens of religious shrines known to support a votive tradition and scoured galleries and antique dealers on both sides of the border looking for retablos that dealt with the subject of U.S. migration. In religious sanctuaries throughout Mexico we have endeavored to take photographs and transcribe texts whenever we come upon a votive painting that deals in any way with migration to the United States, and in private galleries we have made it a point to purchase any such retablo. Together we currently own fifty-nine retablos painted or commissioned by U.S. migrants or their relatives, and we have made these available as a traveling exhibit that is regularly lent to museums and galleries throughout North America free of charge.

At the time of our book, *Afrances on the Border* (Durand and Massey 1995), we had located 124 retablos dealing with the topic of U.S. migration; we have since continued to compile texts and images, and the database now contains 166 retablo paintings. The scenes and texts contained in these works constitute the basic data for our study. In each case, we have a digitized photograph of the painting and a transcription of the text. Included in the database is any votive painting that we encountered and judged to have been prepared by a current or former migrant to the United States, or a member of his or her family. All of the retablos were executed on a durable medium—in most cases tin, but in a few cases cardboard, masonite, wood, or glass.

We chose to focus on durable media in order to control for the selective way that votive paintings survive. Although we can observe contemporary votive offerings on all sorts of perishable media, we can only observe works from the past that have survived. Thus, any view of migration reconstructed from earlier retablos is likely to be more highly selective than a view pieced together from votive materials encountered in the present. If certain sorts of themes are more likely than others to be rendered on perishable media, then the abundance of these sorts of themes would naturally increase as time progressed, irrespective of what migrants were actually concerned about at different points in time.

In order to hold constant the degree of selection over time, we focus on retablos that were executed on durable media that would be likely to persist over time. Although this approach controls somewhat for *one* source of selectivity, it by no means eliminates selection bias from our sample of retablos. We have no way of knowing, for example, whether certain kinds of migrants are more likely than others to produce retablos; and although tin is a relatively inexpensive medium, it could also be that migrants with more money and resources systematically choose to create retablos on durable rather than perishable media, thus lending the sample a potential class bias.

Finally, there are institutional factors that might determine the survivability of retablos, such as whether different parishes have different policies toward a religious tradition that is ultimately more popular and folkloric than Catholic or official. By far the most common icon in our database is the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, which accounts for 43 percent of all images in the database, followed by El Santo Niño de Atocha at 15 percent, and the related images of El Señor de la Conquista and San Miguel at 7 percent each. The latter two images are both located in the sanctuary of San Felipe Torres Mochas and in practical terms constitute a single pilgrimage site. These four sites, which together comprise nearly three quarters of the images, are all well-established places of pilgrimage with long traditions of displaying and preserving votive paintings on durable media such as tin, suggesting that institutional factors may not play a large role in determining what content has survived. However, well-established traditions are no guarantee of continuity in policies toward retablos, as we discovered at the sanctuary of El Señor de Villaseca in Guanajuato (which constitutes 5 percent of the images in the database). There a change in clerical administration brought in a priest who was adamantly opposed to folk traditions unsanctioned by Rome, and he arranged for all of the retablos to be removed from the sanctuary walls not long after we photographed them. Thus the potential selectivity of our sample of texts and images is a possibility that should always be born in mind in evaluating our findings.

Although migrants share many of the same problems as others who bring votive offerings before a sacred image, the experience of international migration yields distinct circumstances that distinguish them from other supplicants. A typology of retablos developed for general use, such as that of Creux (1979), is therefore of limited utility in attempting to comprehend and classify the range of problems experienced by Mexican immigrants. Although illness, catastrophe, war, fire, falling work, and animal problems (Creux's categories) may befall migrants, the meaning of these problems is very different in a foreign context. In addition, Mexico-U.S. migrants face the pain of separation; the hazards of moving north; the risks of crossing the border; the fear of falling sick in a strange land; the threat of arrest and deportation; and the thorny, ever-present issue of documentation.

In view of these distinctive concerns, we developed our own typology of retablos that builds on the earlier efforts of Creux and others, but which takes into account the unusual situation of U.S. migrants. The scheme contains five major headings and fifteen detailed subcategories. The major headings follow the course

of a migrant's journey to and from the United States. They include "Making the Trip," "Legal Problems," "Medical Problems," "Getting by in the U.S.," and "Homecoming." Under these broad rubrics, we define a variety of subcategories that address particular topics.

THE CONTENT OF MIGRANTS' RETABLOS

In order to carry out a detailed content analysis of retablos, we classified each ex-voto into one and only one of the fifteen subcategories. In cases where more than one subcategory could have applied, we classified the retablo according to the subject that, in our judgment, was dominant. The results of this operation are shown in table 11.1. As can be seen, the first general heading is "Making the Trip," and it considers three salient issues involved in moving from Mexico to the United States. Difficulties encountered while traveling north fall into the first subcategory, and those faced while crossing the border comprise the second; the third subcategory focuses on the special problems that women face in going north.

As the table indicates, around 17 percent of the retablos in our sample deal in some way with one of these themes. Some 2.4 percent of the pictures fall into the subcategory "Heading North." A good example under this rubric is the retablo left by a woman from León, Guanajuato, who was traveling north to the United States in October of 1946 when the roadway suddenly washed out and several of her companions were swept away. Fearing the worst, she called upon the Virgin of San Juan and entrusted them to her protection; later they miraculously turned up unharmed, a piece of good fortune that she credited to the divine powers of the Virgin.

Another 2 percent of the retablos come under the heading of "Women's Issues." One such painting, dated November 19, 1989, was left by María del Carmen Parra, who gives "thanks to the Holiest Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos for having granted that [my] daughter could marry in the United States." For many women, marriage to a migrant, a Chicano, or an Anglo-American (from the retablo it is not exactly clear who her daughter married) provides a path of potential mobility to a better life, one free from the strictures of poverty and patriarchy in Mexico, and one to which mothers frequently aspire on behalf of their daughters (see Goldring 1995; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Espinosa 1998; Reichert 1982). In other cases, issues faced by women are more threatening, as when Concepción Zapata was heading north through Texas when a "Tejano" attempted to abduct her. She was able to escape by hiding behind a tree with her younger brother, for which she felt a debt of considerable gratitude to the Virgin of San Juan (Durand and Massey 1995).

By far the most frequent subject mentioned under the general heading of "Making the Trip" is "Crossing the Border," a subject that concerns 13 percent of the retablos in the sample. As this relatively high frequency indicates, the risks of border-crossing loom large in the minds of Mexican migrants who lack legal documents and must enter the United States surreptitiously. In addition to the risk of arrest and deportation, undocumented migrants also face the hazards of fraud,

TABLE II.1
DISTRIBUTION OF RETABLOS BY SUBJECT

Subject	N	%
Making the trip	28	16.9
Heading north	4	2.4
Crossing the border	21	12.7
Women's issues	3	1.8
Legal problems	21	12.6
Arranging documents	11	6.6
Run-ins with the law	10	6.0
Medical problems	37	22.3
Getting sick	26	15.7
Having an operation	11	6.6
Getting by in the U.S.	48	28.9
Getting lost	1	0.6
War	14	8.4
Work accidents	3	4.8
Traffic accidents	16	9.6
Crime	2	1.2
Getting ahead	7	4.2
Homecoming	28	16.8
Grateful migrants	8	4.8
Thankful relatives	20	12.0
Unnamed miracles	4	2.4
Total retablos examined	166	100.0

injury, robbery, thirst, hunger, and drowning (see Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Those who make it through the gauntlet of border-crossing hazards naturally feel indebted to a holy image for watching over them, and for delivering them from danger (Durand and Massey 1995).

Angelina García Solís, for example, left a votive addressed to el Señor del Saucito "for the miracle that he granted me in the year 1949. Finding myself drowning in the waters of the Rio Grande in el Norte in the company of other friends, in the most desperate moment I invoked his help after I had given up hope. I give him a thousand and one thanks, and also to God, that through his mediation

He did me such an immense favor." Another anonymous votary thanked the Virgin of Ialpa for saving "me from death on the 20th of September of 1948. Upon wishing to cross the Rio Grande, two friends were killed but I was able to save myself."

The second major heading is "Legal Problems," the subject of roughly 13 percent of the retablos in our sample. The problem of documentation looms large for Mexican migrants, since without a legal residence card or some other form of legal documentation, a person's tenure in the United States is insecure and can end at a moment's notice. As a result, undocumented migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and are confined to an underground economy of unstable, poorly paid jobs. Nearly 7 percent of the retablos we sampled concerned the issue of documentation. One of them was left by Luz Bravo Magaña, who on November 8, 1945, simply offered "thanks to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos for the miracle of having obtained without difficulty my passport from the American consulate" (anyone who has ever waited in line to get a visa at a U.S. embassy can appreciate how "miraculous" this event seemed). In 1989 another man left a retablo giving thanks to the Virgin of San Juan "for having acted on the petitions that I made to you for my brother to get his visa."

A second subcategory, comprising another 6 percent of the sample, focuses on encounters with law enforcement officials, the most feared of whom are immigration officers. Migrants occasionally run afoul of other authorities, however, and at times end up in jail. For such people, the usual problems of loneliness and fear are magnified by the fact that incarceration isolates them in a strange culture and prevents them from seeing loved ones who remain in Mexico. Thus, Juan Jaime Delgado addressed his retablo to the "Lord of Villaseca that is venerated in the Sanctuary of Mineral de Cata. I give infinite thanks for helping me get out of jail in the United States and for arriving safely in the city of Guanajuato in the year 1986." In his retablo, José Gutiérrez likewise gave "thanks to the Lord Saint Michael for having saved me from a sentence of 20 years in a prison in Chicago, U.S.A., releasing me after only 8 months."

A third general heading is "Medical Problems," perhaps the most common theme among retablos generally. Getting sick and experiencing accidents are risks of life that every human must face, but these events are especially terrifying when one has no friends or family nearby, when one does not speak the language, and when one lacks money or insurance to pay doctor bills. About 16 percent of the retablos we sampled mentioned getting sick in the United States. The gratitude that Maria de Jesús Torres felt after her daughter got well was such that she traveled all the way to Jalisco from her home in National City, California, to "offer infinite thanks to Our Lady of San Juan for having given health to my daughter, Teresa Torres, who suffered from asthma and epileptic attacks for several years." Facing an operation is also threatening when one cannot communicate effectively with the medical staff, or when one does not fully understand the medical system or its technology. About 7 percent of the retablos in our collection explicitly give thanks to an image for surviving a surgical procedure performed in the United States.

On January 3, 1962, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for example, Concepción González Anderson underwent a surgical procedure in which "they did an examination to see if I had cancer. Thanks to the Holiest Virgin of San Juan, I was spared from this sickness for which I give infinite thanks for the miracle she gave me."

While living and working in the United States, Mexicans face a variety of additional issues related to well-being that are grouped under the fourth general heading, "Getting by in the U.S.," which comprises 29 percent of the *retablos* we assembled. Once a migrant has entered the United States, new difficulties arise. Getting lost in a strange setting is a problem treated in about 1 percent of the *retablos*. Often this misfortune befalls migrants from small towns who arrive in large U.S. cities, but it also occurs in the countryside, often in arid parts of California, Texas, or Arizona, where migrants travel for work. Ponciano Guzmán did not give details on his *retablo* of September 4, 1951; he just gave "thanks to the Virgin of Zapopan for having gotten us out of this desert without harm."

Unlike Mexico, the United States is a global power with many foreign commitments, and entering its armed forces carries the very real risk of having to go to war in a far-off place. Legal immigrants, as well as children of Mexicans born in the United States, are subject to the U.S. military draft (including the children of undocumented parents), and Mexican immigrants have fought in all major wars of the twentieth century, including the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Some undocumented migrants join the U.S. military as a means of legalizing their status. Among the 166 *retablos* we assembled, 8 percent thanked an image for a safe return from war. The oldest such *retablo* we found was prepared by the uncle of Angel Turburán and deposited in the Sanctuary of El Señor de Villaseca on July 19, 1917. Referring to his nephew's service in World War I, the text states that "having been mortally wounded in the war, his uncle Roberto Rodríguez, from . . . New Mexico, commended him to the Holiest Lord of Villaseca that he should not die. . . . Having cured him from his sickness he makes public this miracle."

Aside from the extreme case of warfare, Mexican migrants face other risks while abroad. One is accidents at work, mentioned in around 5 percent of the *retablos*. Migrants tend to be employed in agriculture, construction, the garment industry, and small-scale manufacturing, hazardous sectors where employers are under intense competitive pressure. In order to keep expenses low, companies invest little in safety devices or new equipment, thereby increasing the risk of work-related accidents. Some 4 percent of the *retablos* in our sample mention an accident at work. One such *retablo* was left by Manuel Reyes, who found himself picking cotton near Brawley, California, during the fall of 1954 when he got his hand caught in some machinery. At this moment, he invoked the image of San Miguel, who intervened to free him, "losing a finger but saving my life, and in proof of gratitude I dedicate the present *retablo*."

Another 10 percent of the *retablos* in the sample revolve around traffic accidents, a danger especially prevalent among migrants living in crowded urban areas and driving lonely country roads throughout the United States. In 1954 one grateful migrant gave "thanks to the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos for having saved me

from an automobile accident in which four persons were left dead and four injured that occurred in San Francisco, California." Another risk for migrants, especially in cities, is crime, which as the subject of 1 percent of the *retablos*, such as the one that alluded to a car-jacking experience that befell a migrant in Compton, California.

Of course, getting by in the United States is not simply a matter of surviving negative experiences such as crime and car accidents. Ubiquitous among the votive objects left in Mexican sanctuaries are tokens of some foreign success: a driver's license, a report card, a high school diploma, a college degree. Although it is less common to find *retablos* commemorating these events, some 4 percent of the offerings gave thanks for some personal achievement or advancement in the United States. One offered thanks to the Virgin of Zapopan for "having been able to obtain a nursing certificate in the U.S.A." Another, from a migrant in Los Angeles, simply thanked this Virgin for "a miracle obtained in the artistic world some years ago." Perhaps the most important part of getting ahead is finding a good job, for without work migrants cannot repay the expenses of the trip, support themselves, or send money back home to family members in Mexico (Durand 1988; Massey et al. 1997; Massey and Parrado 1994). One such *retablo* was left by J. Melquiádes Murillo of Puerto de Loja, Guanajuato, who in 1961 gave "thanks to Holiest Mary of San Juan de los Lagos, because I prayed to Her that I might go and come across the border and that I might be hired."

The last phase of the migrant journey, "Homecoming," involves the return of migrants to the warmth of their families and familiar soil of their birth. Given the many hazards and difficulties faced in the course of a U.S. trip, migrants and their families are often overcome with gratitude when a long separation finally comes to an end. The strength of this emotion is such that a votive of thanks is commissioned and left at a local shrine. Roughly 17 percent of the *retablos* in our sample fell under the general heading "Homecoming," with 12 percent expressing the gratitude of family members and 5 percent offering thanks from the migrants themselves.

Typical of the grateful migrants was Tereso López, of Rancho de la Palma, near Silao, Guanajuato, who contributed a *retablo* on the occasion of his return to Mexico from the United States. He "gives thanks to the Holiest Virgin of San Juan. Finding himself in the United States and commending himself to the Virgin he asked that upon arriving on his soil he would go to visit her." Another *retablo* illustrates the relief felt by family members left behind when a loved one returns. Candelaria Arreola of El Grullo, Jalisco, was praying for her son's return in 1955 when he miraculously arrived. As she explains, "I give thanks to the holiest Virgin of Talpa for having brought my son home from the United States where he stayed for a long time. I began to pray your novena and I hadn't even finished when he returned. Thank you my mother!"

CHANGES IN CONTENT OVER TIME

A systematic analysis of the content of migrants' *retablos* thus provides a glimpse into the special problems and difficulties faced by Mexican immigrants. If we

simply list those subcategories with relative frequencies of 5 percent or more. We see that crossing the border, arranging documents, and avoiding encounters with legal authorities are principal preoccupations of U.S. migrants, and that getting sick, having an operation, going to war, and experiencing traffic accidents are major risks of life in the United States. When they manage to overcome these problems and return home safely, migrants and their family members are filled with gratitude.

Additional insight can be gained by classifying the subject of migrants' *retablos* according to the period in which the trip took place, a task that is carried out in table 11.2. This analysis employs five temporal categories: 1900-1939 represents the early years of Mexico-U.S. migration; 1940-1964 corresponds to the Bracero era, when the U.S. government sponsored a temporary labor program that brought some 4.5 million Mexicans into the United States to work (see Craig 1971; Samora 1971); 1965-1985 is an era of rapidly growing Mexico-U.S. migration; and the modern period, which begins in 1986, marks when the United States embarked on a contradictory policy of lowering barriers to cross-border movements of goods, capital, information, services, commodities, and many classes of people while somehow rendering the frontier impermeable with respect to labor. A residual fifth category contains *retablos* whose date could not be firmly established.

The largest number of *retablos* (27 percent) come from the growth years between 1965 and 1985, followed by the modern era and the Bracero era (at 25 percent and 21 percent, respectively), whereas the least frequent period is the early

TABLE 11.2
DISTRIBUTION OF RETABLOS

Subject (%)	Period of migration				
	EARLY YEARS 1900-1939	BRACERO ERA 1940-1964	GROWTH YEARS 1965-1985	MODERN ERA 1980+	(UNDATE)
Making the trip	20.0	22.2	14.3	12.2	20.0
Legal problems	10.0	6.0	8.6	22.0	13.4
Medical problems	0.0	36.3	17.2	19.6	22.2
Getting by in U.S.	50.0	33.3	34.3	22.0	24.4
Homecoming	20.0	3.0	22.9	19.5	17.8
Unnamed	0.0	0.0	2.9	4.9	2.2
N	10	34	45	42	45
% in period	6.0	20.5	27.1	25.3	27.1

years (around 6 percent of *retablos*). Roughly 27 percent of the *retablos* could not be dated with certainty. Given the limited number of *retablos* in our sample, we only examine temporal shifts in the main content categories.

Issues surrounding homecoming appear to be significant in all periods, with the exception of the Bracero era, when U.S. medical problems and the problems of getting by dominate. The problem of getting by in the United States is notably salient in the early and growth years of U.S. migration. Although this category is also prevalent during the Bracero era, it is underrepresented during the modern period. As transnational movement has become routine and institutionalized; therefore, issues relating to getting by have receded into the background, since, unlike their predecessors, migrants arriving after 1980 can count on a host of friends, relatives, and compatriots, as well as a range of formal and informal contacts, to facilitate their entry and employment within the United States (Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994).

Perhaps the most striking trend over time is the increasing salience of legal problems, in particular those related to documentation. From the early to the modern era, the percentage of *retablos* dealing with legal problems increases from 10 percent to 22 percent; and after 1980 issues related to the acquisition of legal documents dominate all others. This trend reflects the fact that since the late 1970s U.S. law has become increasingly restrictive with respect to Mexican immigration.

In 1976 Mexico was placed under a quota of 20,000 immigrants for the first time, and in 1978 it was forced into a worldwide ceiling of 290,000 immigrants, which was subsequently reduced to 270,000 in 1980 (see Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990, 28-29). The 1990 Immigration Act reduced the number of visas accessible to legal resident aliens, and the 1996 Immigration Reform Act raised the household income threshold required to sponsor the entry of family members (Zolberg 2006). These changes have made fewer immigrant visas available to Mexican nationals, causing those who do manage to acquire papers to be very grateful when they get them.

CONCLUSION

In this analysis we have sought to follow a suggestion originally made by Gloria Giffords (1974: 124) in her seminal study of Mexican *retablos*, who argued that "an examination of all the ex-votos in any one shrine or church would produce a fascinating record of the people's hopes and fears, their thoughts, lives, and experiences, a record more honest than the fullest statistical study." *Retablos* provide a tangible and compelling view of the complex phenomenon of international migration, one that packs considerably more punch than mere statistics. Although we cannot reproduce them here, the forty color plates contained in Durand and Massey (1995) give a hint of the emotional power of *retablos* as compelling works of popular art. These works of popular art unambiguously reveal the degree to which U.S. migration has become a core part of the collective experience of the Mexican people. Working in the United States is now an institutionalized feature

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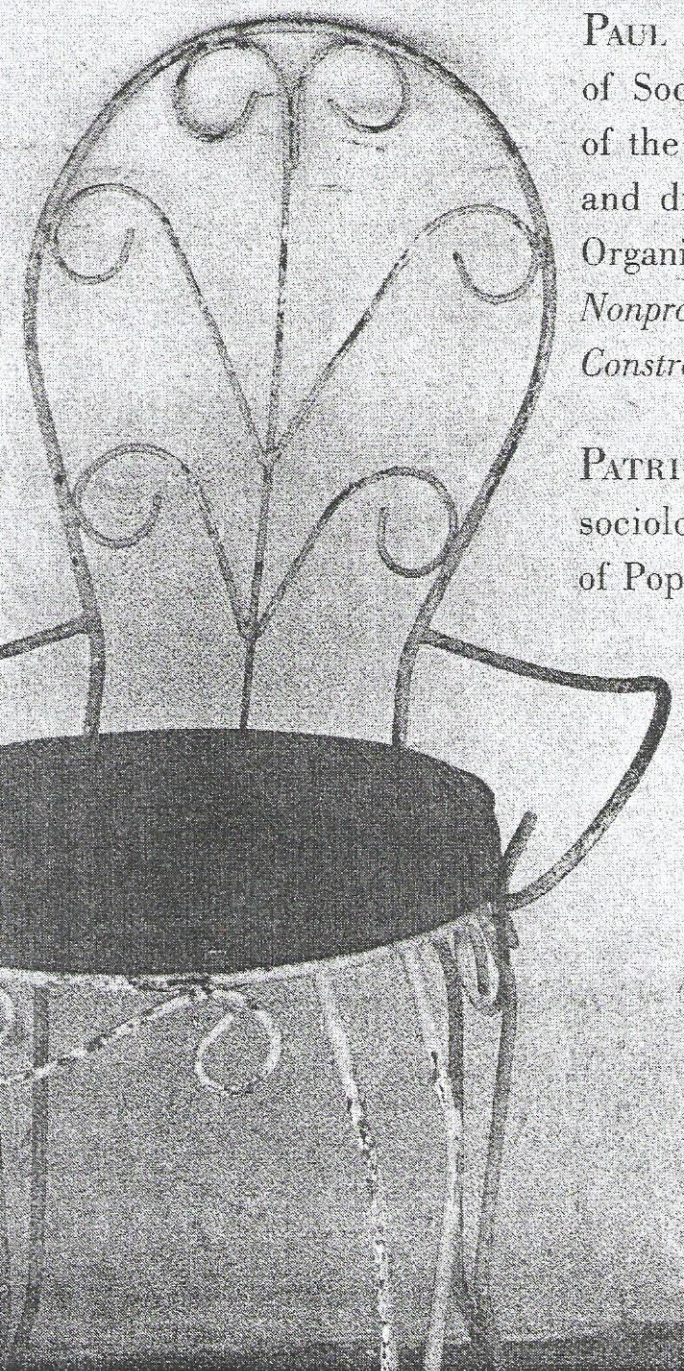
signed in Los Angeles, Dallas, or Chicago is as natural as seeing one from Guadalajara, Morelia, or León.

At present, hundreds of thousands of families in western Mexico have a member on "the other side" and know firsthand about the joys, privations, sorrows, and devotions of migratory life. Migrants customarily maintain close ties with their relatives at home, and while working abroad they dream of returning to build a house, open a store, buy land, or retire in luxury; and if these dreams remain elusive, at least they can look forward to making a visit to the local shrine to pay homage to a venerated image. Each year thousands make such a pilgrimage to appear before images of the Virgin located in Zapopan, Talpa, and San Juan, or to thank images of Christ in Mineral de Cata, San Luis Potosí, or San Felipe and the Holy Child in Plateros.

Retablos are important because they depict a side of migration usually not told in statistical reports or even in detailed interviews with migrants. Going north has become a rite of passage for young men, synonymous with adventure, excitement, and personal esteem (Kandel and Massey 2002). It represents a source of pride and satisfaction for those who return with goods and money; and success in the United States is a frequent subject of boasts and exaggerated stories (Reichert 1982). In this atmosphere, those who have not fared well are apt to remain silent. They do not want people to think they were lazy or afraid. Only to a sacred image can they tell the truth and reveal their true stories of sadness, fear, and apprehension.

Retablos testify to the feelings and experiences of people who migrate back and forth to work in a strange land. In Diego Rivera's (1979) words, they are "the one true . . . pictorial expression of the Mexican people," and they get at the heart of the matter in a way that academic reports never can. After looking at the pictures presented here, and seeing how deeply migration has become rooted in the popular culture of western Mexico, one intuitively grasps why simply passing a new law or changing a bureaucratic regulation will not easily end the ongoing flow of people across the border. For better or for worse, international migration is pulling Mexico and the United States closer together and blending their peoples and cultures in new and exciting ways. The process of binational union is now far too advanced to be easily controlled by the political and economic actors who originally set it in motion. Whatever one's feelings about it, the cultural synthesis embodied in these retablos is probably the way of the future.

ART IN THE LIVES OF IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES in the United States is the first book to provide a comprehensive and lively analysis of the contributions of artists from America's newest immigrant communities—Africa, the Middle East, China, India, Southeast Asia, Central America, and Mexico. Adding significantly to our understanding of both the arts and immigration, multidisciplinary scholars explore tensions that artists face in forging careers in a new world and navigating between their home communities and the larger society. They address the art forms that these modern settlers bring with them; show how poets, musicians, playwrights, and visual artists adapt traditional forms to new environments; and consider the ways in which the communities' young people integrate their own traditions and concerns into contemporary expression.



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