FAITH AND POLITICS: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSES ENGAGED BY MEXICAN EX-VOTO PAINTINGS FROM THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AND BEYOND

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The *Universalis Ecclesiae* of 1508 authorized Spanish colonization of the Americas in return for the conversion of native populations to Christianity. From its inception therefore, the Mexican nation lived an alliance between Church and State. This alliance promoted the transfer of Castilian Catholicism to American shores. Catholic practices, specifically the ex-voto tradition, visualize this intermingling of religion and politics.

The ex-voto is a devotional painting that expresses gratitude to a religious figure for his/her intervention in a moment of peril. It is commissioned by the devotee as a means of direct communication to the divine. This project analyzes 40 Mexican ex-votos for their reflection of political issues in Mexico. I assert that the Mexican ex-votos engage discussions of social politics. To support this argument, visualizations of socio-political discourses such as the Virgin of Guadalupe as a national religious symbol, police action and economic disparity were examined.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion and politics were made inextricable in the New World as soon as Pope Julius II's Papal Bull, the *Universalis Ecclesiae* of 1508, authorized Spanish colonization of the Americas in return for the conversion of native populations to Christianity.[1] From its inception therefore, the Mexican nation lived an alliance between Church and State that shaped the nature of life in Latin America. This alliance promoted the transfer of Castilian Catholicism to American shores. Catholic practices, specifically the ex-voto tradition, visualize this intermingling of religion and politics.

The phrase "ex-voto" is a Latin term meaning, "from vow."[2] The ex-voto is a commemorative, devotional object that expresses gratitude to a religious figure for his/her divine intervention in a moment of peril or uncertainty. It is commissioned or produced by the devotee as a means of direct communication with the divine. The painted or mixed media ex-voto is signed and dated, thereby creating something akin to an historical document. Created outside the ecclesiastic hierarchy, ex-voto objects candidly reveal the private trials and tribulations of individual believers. Furthermore, as this thesis demonstrates, ex-voto imagery reflects political and social issues.

This project analyzes 40 Mexican ex-votos for their reflection of political issues in the Republic of Mexico from approximately 1820 to the present.[3] The study asserts that

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[1] N. M. Farriss, Crown and Clergy in colonial Mexico: 1759-1821 (London: The Athlone Press, 1968), 7.

[2] Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey, Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States (Tucson and London: The University of Arizona Press, 1995), 9.

[3] Ten ex-votos were randomly selected from New Mexico State University Online *Retablo* Collection, New Mexico State *Retablo* Collection, s.v. "*Retablos*," http://www.nmsu.edu/~artgal/retabloweb/index.html (New Mexico: New Mexico State University, 2001), and three texts: Miracles on the Border, Dones y Promesas: 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda (Exvotos Mexicanos) (Mexico, D.F.: Cultural/ArteContemporáneo and Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1996) and

Mexican ex-votos are, in fact, paintings that engage discussions of social politics. To support this argument, the study examines visualizations of socio-political discourses such as the Virgin of Guadalupe as a national religious symbol, police action and economic disparity. This thesis draws attention to the ways in which these religious paintings, which have previously been considered for solely devotional purposes, participate in the aforementioned socio-political discourses in order to enrich our understanding of these objects.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address how this thesis defines "political" and how the concept relates to art, specifically Mexican ex-votos. In its broadest definition, politics are the structures of government that shape and guide a society. They are established in order to determine how a group of people will make decisions to secure their survival, and include laws presiding over actions and conduct. In egalitarian societies, all members of the society decide upon these laws. However, in large, complex societies this approach is not feasible. Not all members of that community are able to participate equally in the decision-making processes of government. Invariably, societies create a privileged or elite class of citizen that has more access to political power. Social position, therefore, becomes an indication of political entitlement. Likewise, leaders of a society, or those having access to power, tend to safeguard their own interests. Often these interests are directed towards maintaining the social, economic and political power of the ruling class. In this regard, social position has a

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Infinitas Gracias by Alfredo Vilchis Roque and Pierre Schwartz, Infinitas Gracias: Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting (San Francisco: Seuil Chronicle), 2004.

profound effect on the political happenings and governmental policies instituted within a society.

Political and social sciences are also fundamentally related. Sociology is the study of society, including the development, structure and collective behavior of organized groups of people. This definition provides a framework for the discussion of social politics because they are the structures that guide the actions of a society. Political scientist Francis Castles asserts that political and social actions do not exist independently and cannot be divorced from one another.[4] He states that any political act may be regarded as a social act because the creation of policy is intended to satisfy the needs of a social community.[5] This inextricable relationship warrants this thesis' discussion of social and political constructs as one entity, socio-political.

Within a society, governments create constitutions to which members of the community must act in accordance with. Dominant power groups exercise their authority by enforcing compliance to these governing regulations. Whether secular or religious, constitutions protect members of a society by creating a standardized code of conduct and punitive procedures for violators of the code. For example, the King James Version of the Holy Bible identifies appropriate conduct and moral expectations for members of Christian communities. It is organized under the authority of God, who rewards those who adhere to the code or punishes those who transgress. Authority and enforcement are, therefore, crucial components in the political happenings of any community. These constructs must be considered in a comprehensive examination of social politics.

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[4] Francis G. Castles, Politics and Social Insight (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1971), 16-17.

[5] Castles, Politics and Social Insight, 13 and16-17.

Culture and art have a complex relationship to social politics. Author John Street states that popular culture is the vehicle through which society articulates political thoughts and inspires political actions.[6] He explains that popular culture informs cultural identity, which he identifies as an inspiration to political mindedness. Street asserts that by using symbols, signs and images, a society is able to articulate opinion. As such, art is a potent agent in the dissemination of a society's views about politics. In accordance with these theories, scholar Murray Edelman maintains that art instigates political discourses, and these discourses can result in political action or social movement.[7] In his text, From Art to Politics, Edelman defines art as visualizations of our world, in which we construct realities through image and narrative. He explains that the creation of art is based on interpretation, not accurate observation. Furthermore, according to Edelman, art is able to visualize allegorical concepts. Consistent visualizations of morality, justice, virtue and vice, and other metaphors help to form a shared cultural ideology, in which symbols and images are able to signify the ideal or perverse. Edelman asserts that these visualizations are vital to the formation and representation of political opinion, which is often understood through allegorical concepts.[8] Furthermore, Edelman explains that an image can encompass latent meanings that elicit response from the viewer without his/her consciousness.[9] Both authors agree that works of art produced by any culture, whether direct or covert in their political mindedness, have the potential to incite political thought and action because they encourage social discourses.

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[6] John Street, Politics and Popular Culture, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 10.

[7] Murray Edelman, From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

[8] Edelman, From Art to Politics, 2-3.

[9] Edelman, From Art to Politics, 15.

According to the aforementioned parameters, the ways in which Mexican ex-votos participate in social-political discourses are apparent. Ex-votos are visualizations of events happening to individual members of a community. Castles demonstrates social and political actions to be intrinsically related because politics are the mechanisms that guide social situations, all of which reflect the politics of a society.[10] Ex-votos provide a forum in which social and political situations are simultaneously visualized. Secondly, the conquest of the Americas and imposition of Catholicism and Spanish government on non-Christian communities was an overt act of political domination. Indigenous populations were forced to adhere to governments imposed by Church and State. The acceptance of Christian devotional practices, such as the ex-voto, within native and mixed-race communities, testifies to the authority of dominant power groups within Latin America. In fact, in this context, it could be argued that all religious expression is in some sense political. Thirdly, ex-votos are paintings of religious expression that have been embraced and propagated by popular culture. Street explains how popular culture articulates the political thoughts and actions of a society. According to Edelman, art instigates political discourses because it allows the artist and/or supplicant to reconstruct their own realities through images.[11] Because ex-votos are paintings that use symbols and images to reflect reality, as interpreted by the faithful and/or artist, they offer spaces in which political discourses can be re-visualized and confronted by artists, supplicants and viewers. Furthermore, they share in society's notions of moral and immoral ideal types and offer a narrative account of an event

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[10] Castles, Politics and Social Insight, 13 and 16-17.
[11] Edelman, From Art to Politics, 2-3.

based on individual perceptions. These might include visualizations of good/bad or moral/immoral behaviors. Within these episodes, the protagonist overcomes any variety of deterrents through the benevolence of the divine. Finally, ex-votos are publicly displayed, placed on shrine or church walls to fulfill the supplicant's debt to the holy person. As such, the individual paintings engage in socio-political dialogs with other ex-votos displayed nearby. For these reasons, ex-votos provide a medium that successfully articulates political opinion.

Having now defined the thesis' definition of "political" and asserted that Mexican ex-votos engage socio-political discourses, it is important to note the relative lack of scholarship directed at the study of Mexican ex-voto paintings. Prior to the twentieth century, limited research and connoisseurship had been applied to the study of Mexican ex-votos because they were considered folk-art, rather than paintings of artistic and cultural merit. However, an increased appreciation of non-Western art, experienced at the turn of the twentieth-century, has benefited the study of these paintings. Recent scholars, such as Gloria Giffords and others, to whom this thesis is indebted, have made significant contributions to ex-voto scholarship. Additional studies conducted by Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, authors of Miracles on the Border, 1995; the Cultural and Contemporary Art Foundation of Mexico, publisher of Dones y Promesas, 1996; and Alfredo Vilchis Roque and Pierre Schwartz, authors of Infinitas Gracias: Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting, 2004, have provided valuable thematic and historical approaches to the study of this art form. Despite the thoroughness of these works, additional interrogations are needed, particularly studies that analyze the

presentation of social and political discourses within the paintings. This thesis intends to contribute to the body of scholarship by examining visualizations of overt and latent socio-political discourses depicted within Mexican ex-voto paintings.

The methodological approach applied to this study will rely on the visual culture model of research. Visual culture is essentially the study of images for their ability to provide information about a culture.[12] It is a unique model of research, because it privileges the image. Because images are believed to be multivalent symbols capable of different meanings dependent on any number of factors, visual culture studies draw attention to particular histories in the images' creation or beyond. In doing so, visual culture studies seek a broader understanding of a culture based on the dialectic relationship between the image and its historical context. Following visual culture models, this study will provide details of Mexican history that are pertinent to the understanding of the ex-voto paintings discussed in this study.

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[12] Nicholas Mirzoeff, An Introduction to Visual Culture (New York: Routledge, 1999), 4-9. Additional reference sources for visual culture studies are numerous. The following texts are can provide further insight into this methodology: Semiotics and visual culture: Sights, Signs and Significance by Smith-Shank and Deborah Lee, published by the National Art Education Association, 2004; and, The Practice of Cultural Analysis, Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation by Mieke Bal, published by Stafford University Press, 1999.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Scholars believe that votive practices began as early as 2800 B.C.E. in Western Europe.[13] Evidence from Greek, Roman and Iberian cultures indicate a well-developed votive tradition. Votive offerings were placed at holy shrines in attempt to implore the power of a god. The objects often depicted small figurines or anatomical forms. These forms likely indicate prayers for physical well-being. The votive objects were usually constructed of wood, marble, metal or wax materials.[14] This tradition underwent few changes as it continued for centuries. At the discretion of the supplicant, votive offerings could include brief text inscriptions, such as small plaques containing the name of the god invoked or a prayer. These plaques were either affixed to the votive object or displayed alongside the offering.[15] Supplicants likely perceived the narrative quality of the text to be a more immediate means of communication with the divine. Additionally, it promoted the life-like quality of the votive object, which was believed to increase its supernatural powers.[16]

From its inception, Christian votive behaviors closely paralleled these pagan practices. Initially, votive offerings were small figurines placed within Christian churches, places of martyrdom or other holy sites. Like pagan votive practices, Christian votive

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[13] Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border, 10. The resources addressing the historical development of the votive tradition in Europe are numerous. The following sources can also provide further information: Visuality Before the Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw by Robert S. Nelson, published by Cambridge University Press, 2000; The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response by David Freedberg, published by the University of Chicago Press, 1989; and, The Religion of the Estruscans by Nancy Thomson De Grummond and Erika Simon, published by The University of Texas, 2006.

[14] Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border, 10.

[15] Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border, 10.

[16] Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm," Dumbarton Oaks Papers (1954): 137 and 146-149. These ideas are in reference to Christian votive practices. Kitzinger discusses how Christian practice is strongly akin to pagan practice in terms of animation, "magic" and communication with the divine.

traditions remained virtually unchanged for two centuries. However, during the fifth through eighth centuries religious imagery was afforded an increasingly important role within the Church. Not without controversy, Christian imagery was believed by the faithful to have mystical powers that could protect, prevent injury or produce material benefits for the supplicant. Additionally, the incarnate image facilitated communication with the divine.[17] Ex-voto objects fulfilled these roles and were part of a popular form of devotional practice despite the pagan roots of the tradition.

During the Renaissance, traditional votive objects evolved and a new form of votive offering was generated, the painted ex-voto with narrative text. These ex-votos first appeared in Italy at the close of the fifteenth century.[18] General characteristics of painted ex-votos included a narrative scene of the miraculous occurrence, an image of the deity, a brief textual reference describing the event, and a message of gratitude for the deliverance of the supplicant. They visualized a variety of themes such as illness, natural disaster, accidents and relationships. Unlike the figurines and anatomical forms, painted ex-votos named the person receiving divine favor and provided the date the event occurred. By projecting the gratitude of a specific individual, these ex-votos were an even more personalized form of devotional offering. The inclusion of narrative text bolstered the uniqueness of the votive offering and the specificity of the dire event. Furthermore, because the miracle was a transaction negotiated between the supplicant

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[17] Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images," 102 and 138. This article may be helpful for those seeking more information about the role of religious imagery in the fourth through eighth centuries. Kitzinger's article was consulted for much of this paragraph.

[18] Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border, 10. For more information concerning votive practices in Europe during the Early Renaissance, please consult: The Christian World: A Social and Cultural History by Geoffrey Barraclough, published by H.N. Abrams, 1981; and, Popular Religion in the Middle Ages: Western Europe, 1000-1300 by Rosalind B. Brooke and Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke, published by Thames and Hudson, 1984.

and the divine character, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was bypassed. Although the ex-voto was a means of direct communication between individuals and their intercessors, Church authorities apparently found nothing objectionable in the practice.

Early ex-voto paintings were generally commissioned by wealthy patrons. They were created by well-known artists, and employed expensive materials and large-scale canvases.[19] These ex-votos hung inside local churches as testimony of divine favor among the faithful. In light of their patronage, the paintings may be understood to have functioned as evidence of who among the pious were most worthy of divine attention, visualizing economic distinction within the Church. Soon, however, divine favor was more widely distributed, as less affluent patrons adapted ex-voto forms by using inexpensive materials and less costly, usually untrained, painters.

Fueled by the artistic primacy of the Italian Renaissance and pilgrim mobility, the painted ex-voto spread rapidly throughout Europe. By the sixteenth century, the painted ex-voto tradition was firmly established in Spain. Having recently secured the last of its territory from the Islamic Moors in 1492 with the help of God and Santiago Matamoros, Spaniards equated Christianity with militaristic campaign and conquest.[20] Furthermore, the heterogeneous religious environment of Spain had compromised the strict adherence to Roman Catholicism, producing diversified and regional Christian practices. Though this multiplicity was not unique in Western Europe, regions of Spain practiced their own distinct brand of Catholicism in addition to the practices of the

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[19] Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border, 11.

[20] Stafford Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1995), 19. The name, “Santiago Matamoros,” literally means, Saint James the Moor-killer.

Church Universal or Roman Catholic Church.[21] These regional variations included locally chosen saints and unique religious calendars based on Spanish history.[22] As a result, varied regional interpretations of Catholicism and folk superstitions, based on religion, developed throughout the peninsula.[23]

Local devotion also encouraged the intercessory role of saints. In Spain, saints were recognized as representatives of the community. They were referred to as *abogado/a* meaning "lawyer," in Spanish.[24] This title underscores the intercessory role of the saint within Castilian Catholicism. As a result, Spaniards often turned to saints as accessible contacts that one could petition in times of peril or uncertainty. In practice, individuals appealed to patron saints by articulating promises or vows that were private, personal requests made outside the ecclesiastic hierarchy.[25] Upon the fulfillment of such a request, the supplicant was indebted to his/her divine intercessor. The ex-voto became a key component of these negotiations, as the creation of the ex-voto and dedication to the saint was the supplicant's payment for divine deliverance.

The practices of Castilian Catholicism were important to the development of the Church in New Spain. In accordance with Pope Julius's II Papal Bull, *Universalis Ecclesiae* of 1508, the order of *Patronato Real* was created to aid the conversion and colonization efforts of New Spain. This Papal decree created a reciprocal arrangement between Church and State wherein the Church gave the Spanish Crown the necessary

[21] Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 20, and, William A. Christian Jr., Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3.

[22] Christian, Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain, 3. For more information please refer to the text. Christian makes note that he assumes other Catholic settlements, not specific to Spain, practiced regional deviations from the Universal Church, as well.

[23] Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 20.

[24] Christian, Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain, 55.

[25] Christian, Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain, 31.

support to colonize the Americas provided that Spain also be responsible for the conversion of native populations to Christianity.[26] The *Patronato Real* furthermore gave the Spanish Crown full authority over Church staffing in the Americas. Archbishops, bishops, and evangelical mendicant orders were appointed by the King. Under these obligations, Castilian Catholicism was transferred from Spain to the Americas via the conquistadors, Mendicant orders, Spanish settlers and other agents. Simply put, religion was the State.

The mingling of Castilian Catholicism and indigenous religion created additional hybridity in the religious practices New Spanish citizens. Initially, the imposition of Catholicism upon native populations resulted in superficial acceptance of Christianity, wherein indigenous deities were simply swapped for Christian. This cultural *mestizaje* was intensified by the conversion efforts of New Spanish friars who employed accomodational strategies to encourage the acceptance of Christian faith in New Spain.[27] Catholic practices were modified to appeal to native cosmology and pre-Conquest traditions. Indochristian imagery, which visualized an amalgamation of native and Christian aesthetics, was created in order to serve didactic needs of the Church. Fearsome Indian idols became stylized Christian saints and operated as tools to subdue Indian populations and impose Western order.[28] Even when it lacked overt hybridity, Indochristian imagery by its very existence was steeped in the politics of conquest and the social clash of a subjugated people. Its stylized forms and hybrid iconography

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[26] Farriss, Crown and Clergy in Colonial Mexico, 7.

[27] Serge Gruzinski, "Images and Cultural *Mestizaje* in Colonial Mexico," Poetics Today 16:1 (1995): 53.

[28] Gruzinski, "Images and Cultural *Mestizaje*," 55.

likewise referenced recent political events of conquest. The earliest known ex-votos created in colonial New Spain reveal that these paintings share a political association as they continue to do until the present, as discussed later.

Wealthy New Spanish patrons often commissioned large, expensive ex-voto paintings, but this option was not available to less affluent persons. As an alternative, these citizens, generally mixed race and native populations, turned to local, non-guild artists to provide their religious imagery.[29] Like their European counterparts, these artists were not formally trained, and therefore employed vernacular approaches to perspective and composition. This aesthetic included the flat application of color, unmodeled forms, approximated linear perspective, and conceptual renditions of space and time. In the subsequent centuries, these naïve characteristics became hallmarks of New Spanish and Mexican ex-votos.

The earliest "popular" ex-votos were generally produced from ephemeral materials and few have survived.[30] However, late eighteenth-century advances in metallurgy introduced ex-votos made from tin, which quickly became the norm.[31] With permanent, durable votive art now affordable to less affluent citizens, ex-voto production (or at least surviving examples) increased significantly. At the same time, it appears that ex-voto commissions among the wealthy declined, though it did not cease. Elite patrons

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[29] Giffords, Mexican Folk Retablos, 3.

[30] This study recognizes that "popular" is a problematic term. However, this study will use "popular" to reference art produced by non-guild artists.

[31] Durand and Massey, Miracles on the Border, 7. This information can also be found in virtually all sources addressing Mexican ex-votos. These include, but are not limited to: Miracles on the Border, Dones y Promesas: 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda , Infinitas Gracias, and Mexican Folk Retablos by Gloria Frasier Giffords, published by the University of New Mexico Press, 1992.

likely viewed the form as appropriate only for low persons, which comes as little surprise in a society with such firmly entrenched notions of economic and racial distinction.

Mexican ex-voto production has continued throughout the mid-twentieth century and beyond, exhibiting few changes in style or technique. Ex-votos are generally oriented horizontally on 10 x 14 inches or 7 x 10 inches pieces of tin. They are comprised of three parts: a representation of the deity, an illustration of the event, and a textual passage/inscription. The bottom portion of the ex-voto usually contains the textual message, which verbalizes the supplicant's gratitude for divine intervention. These messages convey poignant narrations of dire circumstances. Additionally, they often include the name of the patron and the date of the miraculous event, thereby creating the notion of a historical document. Above the message is an animated scene graphically illustrating the peril or uncertainty facing the devotee. These scenes vary significantly and reflect both the unique situations of the individual and the creativity of the artist in rendering the scene. Finally, an iconic image of the regional or local saint is depicted in the upper register of the ex-voto. Unlike the imaginative renditions of the event, saintly images portray little deviation from official iconography. Recognizable likenesses are necessary so that ex-votos unmistakably express the allegiance and gratitude of the devotee to his/her favorite saint.

The emotional intensity of the Baroque style heavily influenced conventions of ex-voto painting. To visualize the moment of highest drama, New Spanish and Mexican ex-votos incorporate a variety of theatrical devices. Bold, vivid colors contribute significantly to the dramatic potential of the ex-voto. Individuals stand like actors on a

stage revealed by opened curtains. Inconsistencies of perspective, whether caused by limited training or the artist's intention, create visual tension, while sharp angles and illogical and ambiguous spaces heighten the excitement of a scene. Likewise, ex-voto imagery often conceptualizes the passage of time in order to demonstrate a sequence of events in one pictorial frame. Lastly, the paintings spare nothing for the squeamish, depicting blood and mangled or grotesque bodies, no doubt inspired by the bloody Christ figures of the colonial tradition. All of these elements work together to reveal the miracles of everyday events and the events of everyday that are miraculous and invariably dramatic.[32]

The public display of ex-voto paintings is determined by multiple factors including location, available space and ideology of religious institutions. They are generally brought to local churches, cathedrals, pilgrimage shrines or other sacred locales by the supplicant themselves or a representative, if the supplicant is not physically able. The Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, like other religious sites, is the recipient of thousands of ex-votos per year. These ex-votos are displayed throughout the religious complex, with the largest display today being located in entranceway to the Museum of the Basilica. Offerings deposited at this site are so extensive that the objects are routinely disposed of in order to allow room for additional paintings. Because ex-voto paintings reveal private, and/or controversial situations, censorship undoubtedly maintains a significant role in their display.[33] Ex-votos that present challenges to moral

[32] Anita Brenner, Idols Behind Altars (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1967), 170.

[33] There is little scholarship that addresses the public display of ex-voto paintings and how/if censorship affects their display. Additional scholarship directed at the study of this subject would contribute to the understanding of the paintings.

or religious sensibilities threaten the interests of the Church and/or the institution displaying the votive object.[34] As a result, many ex-votos are likely not displayed or are destroyed.

While traditional ex-voto themes include illness, natural disaster, accidents and relationships, issues associated with identity and politics frequently appear in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Often these themes reveal dissatisfaction with the supplicant's social and political situations. They portray images of revolution, urban violence, economic disparity, immigration, homosexuality, notions of *patria*, alcoholism, and drug use. If permitted by the religious institution, these varieties of ex-votos are displayed alongside more conventional (less controversial) votive offerings, demonstrating that the faithful see little distinction between religious and political expression, openly voicing social and political opinions through devotional imagery. At the very least they use the shrine as a space to freely visualize socio-political topics. While speculating on specific motives of ex-voto patrons is beyond the scope of this thesis, examination of these paintings reveals that the faithful perceive socio-political occurrences as an aspect of life to be negotiated with divine help. This study speculates that visualizations of socio-political content within Mexican ex-voto paintings reflect not only the trials of an individual, but the social and political discourses of Mexican citizens.

[34] Street, Politics and Popular Culture, 32-33.

ANALYSIS

Although I reviewed many ex-votos in preparation for this study, I have selected a random group of 40 works available in published reproductions to examine the presence of political themes and issues.[35] Rather than cherry pick paintings that seemed particularly political, this study asserts that the randomly selected ex-votos offer a better, though unscientific, view of the pervasiveness of political imagery in Mexican ex-voto paintings. This study recorded seven general subjects visualized within the paintings selected for analysis. These subjects are: violence, substance abuse, immigration, police action, natural disasters, accidents, and illness. Fifteen percent of the ex-votos dealt with violence, 5 percent visualized substance abuse, 10 percent were related to immigration, 20 percent visualized police action or incarceration, 2.5 percent visualized natural disasters, 17.5 percent were accident-related, and 25 percent dealt with illness (2 ex-votos or 5 percent were indeterminable). Therefore, it can be noted that of the 40 surveyed ex-votos 50 percent or 20 ex-voto paintings engaged overt socio-political themes, such as violence, police action, substance abuse and immigration.

Visualizations of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared 11 times in the 40 surveyed ex-votos. Recognized as the Patron Saint of Latin America, it comes as little surprise that the Virgin of Guadalupe is frequently depicted in these devotional paintings. However, the widespread popularity of her image within Catholic communities belies the political associations attached to her character and the far-reaching implications

[35] The random process of ex-voto selection was determined by arbitrarily choosing page numbers from the published texts. Once the pages numbers had been recorded, I then referenced the page to see which images were to be included within the survey. I did not view the images immediately prior to their selection in order that the selection process would remain unbiased.

colonialism had upon Latin America. As scholar Jeanette Favrot Peterson argues, the Virgin of Guadalupe is a multivalent symbol representing the unification of New Spain and both the oppression and liberation of indigenous and mixed race/*mestizo* populations.[36] Moreover, from the seventeenth-century until the present, marginalized groups of people, in their struggles against dominant power groups, have appropriated the image to represent their perseverance and struggle. These complex and seemingly contradictory histories of the Virgin of Guadalupe require attention before proceeding.

It is believed that on December 8, 1531 the Virgin of Guadalupe made her first appearance to a newly-Christianized, native man, named Juan Diego. The apparition allegedly left an imprint of her image emblazoned on Diego's *tilma*.[37] Possessing both indigenous and Western European characteristics, this image has been interpreted as resembling the native goddess, Tonantzin and the Apocalyptic Woman in the Book of Revelations.[38] Like the biblical figure, the Virgin of Guadalupe is surrounded by a mandorla of gold light, and she stands atop a crescent moon. However, one striking dissimilarity is that the Virgin of Guadalupe is depicted with olive, gray skin, which the faithful likened to native skin coloring.

Interestingly, it was not until 1648 that an account of the miracle was recorded in a printed publication. The scholarship of Peterson, D.A. Brading, and Stafford Poole asserts that initial Spanish apathy and subsequent appropriation of the apparition story was self-serving and reflected the burgeoning *criollo* (American-born Spaniard)

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[36] Peterson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation," 39.

[37] A *tilma* was a cape or coat commonly worn by indigenous/*mestizo* persons in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

[38] Peterson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation," 39-40.

consciousness, as well as the autonomous interests of these leaders in the mid-seventeenth century. During this time, colonial New Spain was a multiethnic society, firmly entrenched in racial and social class distinctions. It was comprised of Spanish, indigenous, and African citizens with over fifteen cataloged nuances of ethnicity that were the product of interracial unions.[39] Peninsular Spaniards, those born in Spain, were the cultural and ethnic elite of New Spanish society. *Criollos*, pureblood Spaniards born in the Americas, were considered intellectually, morally and physically inferior to *peninsulares*.[40] As expected, *criollo* groups felt a tremendous injustice by the prejudices of peninsular Spaniards, particularly because the only difference between *peninsulares* and *criollos* was place of birth. This antagonism ripened resentment between the two groups, prompting the growing population of *criollos* to formulate a program declaring their preeminence in the Americas.

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe was a distinctly American symbol and the first documented, albeit belatedly recognized, miracle of the New World. The story of her apparition proved that *criollos,* not *peninsulares* or Europeans, were God's "chosen people." Her miraculous apparition even attracted the attention of the Papacy in Rome. Pope Benedict XIV stated, 'He (God) has not done the like for any other nation,' a motto which soon appeared on colonial paintings and prints of the Virgin of Guadalupe.[41] Because *criollos* understood her image to be evidence of God's support and favor of the

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[39] This racial classification is visualized in *casta* paintings, which were popular during the eighteenth century. For
more information on caste in New Spain please refer to the text, *Casta* Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico by Ilona Katzew, published by Yale University Press, 2004.

[40] Stafford Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 17.

[41] Stafford Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 2. Translated quote: "Non fecit taliter omni nationi."

newly Christianized colonial territories, they encouraged celebration of the Virgin, particularly her perceived conquest over indigenous religions. This newfound interest fostered increased devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe and literature and art propagated her likeness, now markedly associated to *criollo* autonomy and the divine favor of the Americas.

Although images of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared with increasing frequency in the late colonial era, likely with political motives, the first overtly political use of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe occurred during the Independence Revolution of 1810. Priest Miguel Hidalgo and his army of insurgents featured an image of the Virgin on rebel banners and proclaimed long life to the Virgin of Guadalupe and death to bad, Spanish government.[42] New Spanish citizens siding with revolutionary interests felt an allegiance to the Virgin of Guadalupe, symbol of the Americas and spiritual guide of *criollo*, *mestizo* and indigenous populations.

After the War of Independence, the Virgin of Guadalupe became a ubiquitous symbol of Mexico, as widely known as the hieroglyphic name of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, which is an eagle atop a *nopal* cactus, clutching a serpent.[43] Frequently, Guadalupe and the Aztec toponym, have been rendered together within art. These visualizations present the Mexican State as a construct of an indigenous past and a Christian future. Despite the sacred character of the Virgin, her image is also a political symbol used to represent Mexican nationalism and patriotic attitudes. Contemporary chicano/a artists appropriate the image of Guadalupe for use within modern artworks

[42] Stafford Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 3.
[43] Stafford Poole, Our Lady of Guadalupe, 3. This symbol is recognizable as the Mexican State emblem.

with specific intent to engage socio-political subjects such as, race, nationalism, feminism, homosexuality, immigration, and other subjects.

Bearing this in mind, ex-votos dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe must also participate in these discourses. This study presents these ex-votos to be examples of direct, or overt, socio-political dialogs because the mere presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe implicates the aforementioned social politics. However, this study does not assume these paintings were created with conscious political intent, but rather that Guadalupe is a multivalent symbol that has been used by various groups throughout Mexican history. The continued political employment of the image can be attributed to the pervasiveness of hegemonic influences within popular culture, which have perpetuated her religious and political associations, as discussed later. Whether deliberately called upon or not, the presence of the image within works of art or other visual ephemera engage latent political discourses due to historical use. These discourses and alternative meanings inform ex-voto paintings dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The Ex-voto of Edith Y.A., 2002, is one of 11 of the 40 surveyed ex-votos that feature an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This ex-voto presents a woman with dark skin, light eyes and hair. She kneels prostrate before an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which hovers in the upper register of the ex-voto. The setting appears to a rooftop utility area, which in large Mexican cities, are often used for domestic activities, such as washing and line-drying clothes. The utility room visualized within the Ex-voto of Edith Y.A. has an unfinished or dilapidated ceiling and crumbling plaster walls,

suggesting low-income housing. Above the supplicant, a pair of black tights hangs from a ceiling rafter. The supplicant appears to be in a disarray, as she wears one high-heeled shoe, while the other foot is bare and its discarded shoe lies unattended in the corner of the painting. An empty bottle of tequila lies behind the supplicant, and in front, is an overturned stool. The textual inscription reads that the supplicant gives thanks to the Virgin of Guadalupe for helping her overcome the vice of drinking. Overcome with depression that stemmed from substance abuse, the supplicant tried to hang herself with the tights. The Virgin of Guadalupe intervened and miraculously stretched the tights so that the supplicant would not choke and instead, realize her errors.[44]

Without pretense or disguise, the Ex-voto of Edith Y.A. confronts the subjects of substance abuse, attempted suicide, devotion and redemption. Its presentation of these subjects is challenging to religious discourses, because Catholics regard suicide to be a mortal sin from which a state of grace can never be regained because the sinner is unable to repent. Though the supplicant was able to repent, suicide is nevertheless a sensitive subject to those practicing the Catholic faith. The image is equally political since, the supplicant's marginalized status within the Mexican socio-political apparatus likely led to her downfall or at the least was a hindrance to any possible social or economic mobility.

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[44] Roque and Schwartz, Infinitas Gracias, 250, translated by Roque and Schwartz: "I fell into the vice of drinking and in despair I hanged myself with a pair of tights, trying to kill myself, and when I kicked away the bench I was standing on, the tights miraculously stretched until I could touch the ground. I saw a light that made me understand my error. I managed to untie my neck, giving thanks to the Sweet Virgin of Guadalupe for giving me another chance to live. I begged for her to free me from this vice so I could get back my dignity and confidence, and the love and affection of my family, who suffered so badly to see me that way, and today, after a year of not drinking a single drop, I offer you this *retablo* in thanks. Edith Y. A. (Surnames are concealed in this and all textual passages from Infinitas Gracias). Col. Presidentes, Mexico D.F. August 28, 2002."

As state previously, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe has been appropriated by marginalized communities to represent the unification and political activism of underrepresented groups. According to scholar Serge Gruzinski, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, more than any other New World image, helped to facilitate a breakdown of social barriers that divided New Spain on fundamental philosophical levels, namely pagan religion and Christianity.[45] As an all-inclusive representative of God, the Virgin of Guadalupe incited cohesion within the social groups of New Spain, and later the Republic of Mexico. Devotion to her character contributed to the homogenization of these societies by creating a cult that was inclusive of all persons, regardless of linguistic, racial or ethnic diversities.[46] Her image facilitated the cultural *mestizaje* or crossbreeding of Western European and indigenous populations in order to produce a cooperative State.[47] As such, politically active, marginalized communities for the last four hundred years have understood the value of the image as a symbol of unification and a way to assimilate disenfranchised groups of people within mainstream society.

Edith's alienation from family and community can be understood as a micro-political unit representing the social divisions between *peninsulares*, *criollos*, *mestizo* and indigenous populations during the colonial era when devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe was initiated. Just as marginalized groups have sought order and cohesion by co-opting the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the supplicant of the Ex-voto of Edith Y.A. seeks inclusion within her community and the order of polite society. She seeks to be re-assimilated into the society that has shunned her, mirroring the ways Guadalupe's

[45] Gruzinski, "Images and Cultural *Mestizaje*," 57- 59.
[46] Gruzinski, "Images and Cultural *Mestizaje*," 64.
[47] Gruzinski, "Images and Cultural *Mestizaje*," 53.

image has been used to unite Mexican populations throughout history. Furthermore, Edith's salvation came at the hands of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a potent symbol of Mexican national identity. As a dark-skinned woman, gender and race put Edith at the bottom of Mexico's social hierarchy, which despite laws to the contrary, continues to equate race and class. Her restoration to a socially acceptable lifestyle was facilitated by the dark-skinned Virgin, whose devotion was promoted as a means to overcome such social and political barriers.

Seen from another perspective, Ex-voto of Edith Y.A., expresses the supplicant's dissatisfaction with the State. The subject matter engaged by this ex-voto alludes to Edith's angst with the Mexican government and her perception that the State had failed to protect her from drug trafficking, alcoholism, and/or other circumstances that would cause her to seek escape. Because her government had failed to provide favorable social conditions for Edith, she turned to a divine figure and the assistance of an alternative socio-political system to compensate for State inadequacy.

In another example, the Ex-voto of Vicente C., 1990, also dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe, discourses of nationalism and cultural identity can be noted. This ex-voto depicts the entrance of an illegal immigrant to the United States after wading the choppy currents of the Rio Grande River.[48] On the viewer's left, a billowing Mexican flag flies at full mast. On the right, a United States flag indicates U.S. territory and landscape

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[48] Roque and Schwartz, Infinitas Gracias, 147, translated by Roque and Schwartz: "Vicente C. from Colonia José López Portillo, finding myself out of work for lack of schooling or without trade, went to the United States as a wetback in search of the American Dream my neighbors had talked about so much, and while crossing the river I was abandoned to my fate by the *polleros* (smugglers of illegal immigrants) who had taken my money to get me across. In danger of being captured, I called upon the Queen of Mexicans to grant me the good fortune to arrive safely, promising her this if I managed to get there, and I did. After running so many risks, it worked out very well, and now that I've come back I am fulfilling my vow to her. Mexico D.F. December 12, 1990.

elements such as sage and mesquite trees fill the background. Though partially concealed by shrubbery, a United States border patrol vehicle lies in wait, while a police helicopter hovers above the river, no doubt in pursuit of the supplicant and other illegal immigrants. With one foot planted on United States soil, the supplicant struggles to pull himself from the water while remaining undetected by the authorities. His facial expressions are agonized and relay the peril of his situation. The textual inscription of the ex-voto indicates that the supplicant did not recieve a formal education and went to the United States to pursue "*el sueño americano*," or the American Dream. The text also indicates that before crossing the river, he was double-crossed by the smuggling agents whom he had paid for assistance. In these dire circumstances, the supplicant pleaded to the Virgin of Guadalupe, whom he calls the Queen of Mexicans, to protect this Mexican citizen. Her shining image is depicted in the upper left-hand area of the painting over Mexican territory. It appears that much care was given to her pivotal position, as not even a single ray of light from her mandorla exceeds the outmost bank of Mexican land. Furthermore, she is the single, largest compositional element in the painting. However, in contrast with traditional renderings, she is oriented so that she gazes down and to her left in order that she may direct her gaze at Vicente.

Like the Ex-voto of Edith Y.A., the Ex-voto of Vicente C, engages social and political discourses because it visualizes the Virgin of Guadalupe. The supplicant appeals to a compelling symbol of Mexican national identity for safety and protection from harm. In doing so, he highlights her Mexican political role through the label "Queen of Mexicans" and her location above Mexico. In the Ex-voto of Vicente C., the image of

the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Mexican national flag are icons that designate Mexican territory versus that of the United States. It is evident that the artist has taken care to render these icons with realistic details that even include a depiction of the Mexican national emblem located on the flag. As stated previously, images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Aztec toponym are popular symbols of Mexican nationalism. In the Ex-voto of Vicente C., this territory unmistakably signifies Mexico, as do the renderings of *nopal* cacti, which are additional signifiers of Mexican landscape. Conversely, the United States, while home of the American Dream, appears different and does not include a patron saint or an emphasis on indigenous varieties of cacti.

Furthermore, the composition of the ex-voto contains additional indications of the Virgin of Guadalupe's significance to Mexican nationalism. The position of the image, solely within Mexican territory, suggests a specific designation or tie to Mexico that cannot be compromised. This results in a reversed orientation of the image, which hints at the nationalist sentiments felt by the artist and/or supplicant. Because special care and attention was paid to the re-visualization of the image, it can be assumed that the artist and/or supplicant viewed the Virgin of Guadalupe to be an essential symbol of Mexico. Therefore, the Ex-voto of Vicente C. is a painting that overtly calls attention to Mexican nationalism through the visualization of its national symbols, namely the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Additionally, the Ex-voto of Vicente C., expresses the supplicant's plea to the Virgin of Guadalupe for safety and to avoid capture by border patrol officers. It can be assumed that Vicente's plea also applies to his intentions in the United States, where he

seeks financial liberty and economic opportunities not available in Mexico. Like Edith, Vicente was failed by the Mexican government, although his patriotic feelings for the nation remain firm. He may leave and immigrate to the United States without compromising his Mexican identity. Historically, groups seeking a way to visualize the desire for independence and opportunity against an unsatisfactory political system have appropriated the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. It can be assumed that the Ex-voto of Vicente C. is endowed with similar intent and meaning. The visualization of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe elicits political thought concerning freedom and the pursuit of individual rights. The supplicant rendered in the Ex-voto of Vicente C. gives trust to the Virgin of Guadalupe to protect his physical and spiritual independence because the State was unable to provide this modicum of care. As such, this ex-voto expresses Vicente's frustration with his own government and the adoption of an alternative, faith-based socio-political system, represented by the Virgin of Guadalupe.

In conclusion, the Ex-voto of Edith Y.A. and the Ex-voto of Vicente C, are recent examples of Mexican ex-voto paintings that engage overtly social and political discourses through visualizations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, though earlier works do as well. In this study alone, 11 of 40 ex-votos or a little over 25 percent were dedicated to this advocation of Virgin, indicating an overwhelming allegiance to her character. Though political activism may not overtly inform creation and dedication of ex-voto paintings, it can be understood to be a latent meaning that shapes perceptions of the paintings. This study asserts that within these two ex-votos the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe represents Mexican national identity and is used to incite political

discourses. Likewise, both examples visualize instances of perceived State failure. This can be seen in Ex-voto of Edith Y.A., in which the State has neglected to provide equitable social conditions and/or to mitigate social problems, which resulted in alienation and severe depression. The supplicant's perception of State failure is visualized in the Ex-voto of Vicente C, by the State's inability to provide favorable economic opportunities for its citizens, causing the supplicant to immigrate. In each instance, the supplicants appeal to a divine figure and their religion as an alternative socio-political system. It can be assumed that the public display of these opinions of State failure contributed to the political function of the ex-voto by fostering additional discourses among the population.

Instances of police action are visualized in Mexican ex-votos, particularly paintings completed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this time, Mexican President Porifirio Diaz directed the country in a virtual dictatorship from 1876 to the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Controversial rural policing units, known as *rurales*, were officially organized under Diaz and were said to be one of his many instruments of civil control.[49] In this study, 8 of the 40 surveyed ex-votos visualized exercises of law enforcement in an overt, direct manner. These depictions include scenes of false imprisonment, capture and capitulation, seizure and inspection, or in the extreme, hangings or execution. The following paragraphs will provide further insight into the Porfirian State and the *rurales* whose regulation and harassment of Mexican

[49] John W. Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales* of Porfirian Mexico." Journal of Inter-American Studies 9:3 (June, 1967): 441.

communities formed impressions of police authority often visualized in ex-votos created during the *Porfiriato* and beyond.

When Porfirio Diaz assumed office in 1876 the country was in political and economic chaos. The Mexican presidency had changed hands 75 times in the 55 years of Mexican Independence. Years of civil unrest had compromised agricultural and mining sectors, resulting in scarcities of gold and silver bullion, famine and extreme inflation.[50] Likewise, bandits patrolled interstate highways and restricted travel and commerce.[51] Moreover, the constant political upheavals had undermined the central government, and the country was effectively organized under the authority of regional *caudillos*, Church officials, or elite citizens with political leverage.[52] Exacerbating these problems, the national treasury was drowning in foreign debt and unable to guarantee economic stability for Mexican citizens. Lagging behind the industrialized world, Mexico was without modern modes of transportation or technologies to develop natural resources. The country could not support commerce or other means of revenue growth. In light of these circumstances, Diaz understood the foremost priority of the regime to be the establishment of State order so that infrastructure necessary for economic development could be constructed and the deep pockets of foreign investors could be lured to Mexico.[53]

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[50] John H. Coatsworth, "Obstacles to Economic Growth in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," The American Historical Review 83:1 (1978): 95.

[51] Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, The Course of Mexican History (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 417 and 432-433.

[52] Meyer and Sherman, The Course of Mexican History, 432. *Caudillos* were regional strongmen who assumed power through networking, but were not officially elected.

[53] Meyer and Sherman, The Course of Mexican History, 432-433.

Ironically, Porfirian order depended on an authoritarian government that applied aggressive law enforcement tactics to squelch civil revolts and mitigate crime. Diaz was known to have deployed armed forces in order to put down civil uprisings commanding, "*Matalos en caliente*," or kill them on the spot.[54] As such, his regime was infamous for its ruthlessness in combating crime and silencing civil unrest. In order to extend the strong arm of the law to all areas of Mexico, Diaz expanded the law enforcement duties of a rural police force, *Las Fuerzas Rurales de la Federacion*, better known as the *rurales*.[55]

In 1884, there were ten corps of *rurales* consisting of almost 2000 agents deployed largely across central Mexico.[56] These troops were composed of mostly unskilled men, without prior police training, between the ages of 20 and 50 years old. Consistent with their infamous legacy, many were former bandits, thieves or guerilla fighters. Likewise, discharges for drinking and disobedience were common within the ranks.[57] The main tasks of the *rurales* were to keep the roads safe, aid urban police, provide safety for all citizens, prevent crime, pursue criminals, and provide auxiliary troops to the national army.[58] Though the *rurales* were noted to have been successful in enforcing law and maintaining peace in remote territories, their tactics were controversial, at best.[59]

In order to maintain *Pax Porfiriana*, the Diaz regime deemed it appropriate to suspend guarantees of constitutional rights at least five times during Diaz's terms. In

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[54] Meyer and Sherman, The Course of Mexican History, 430.
[55] Meyer and Sherman, The Course of Mexican History, 434.
[56] Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 445.
[57] Paul J. Vanderwood, "Mexico's Rurales: Image of a Society in Transition," Hispanic American Historical Review 61:1 (1981): 56, 58 and 62.
[58] Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 446.
[59] Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 446- 447.

1886, the suspension of constitutional rights negated a highway bandit's right of *habeas corpus*, trial by court tribunal, defense by counsel and the right to confront the accuser. To withhold information related to banditry or suspicious persons was also a criminal offense punishable by fine or imprisonment.[60] As agents of the Porfirian State, the *rurales* often terrorized communities under pretenses of law enforcement. Virtually anyone could be detained under the charge of suspicious persons. And while these agents did squash revolts and curb banditry, their actions more frequently silenced civil opposition against the Porfirian State.[61]

One exceedingly contentious tactic used to maintain order was *ley fuga*, or escape law. This law authorized police agents to shoot prisoners attempting to flee from police custody. Often, *ley fuga* was no more than pretense for the institutionalized execution of persons suspected of banditry and/or being treasonous enemies of the State. During the *Porfiriato*, over 10,000 cases of *ley fuga* were documented, testimony to the frequency and ease in which political adversaries and other troublesome persons were eliminated by the swift policing policies of an authoritarian State.[62]

Bearing this in mind, it is easy to understand how the *rurales* were the simultaneous scourge and savior of Mexican communities, wielding a double-edged sword of ruthless, or even lawless order. At times, their efforts in abating crime were lauded and their charisma idealized, similar to the American West sheriff with dubious tactics. Conversely, they were likewise regarded by some citizens as thugs of the

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[60] Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 447.

[61] Meyer and Sherman, The Course of Mexican History, 455 and Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 441-455.

[62] Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 447-448.

State.[63] This study identifies the *rurales* force as the figurehead of Mexican law enforcement because they were officially organized under Diaz and their charge was to implement the policies of this regime. Their unscrupulous tactics that included un-judicial searches, seizures, and executions were sanctioned by the State. The presence of the *rurales* was especially strong in rural communities, subject to the will of renegade police forces. Controversial police actions, whether carried out by *rurales* or national guardsmen, are frequently visualized in Mexican ex-voto paintings.

The practices of State police agents, including the *rurales* and federal troops, have shaped impressions of Mexican law enforcement that persist in present-day assumptions of a system riddled in corruption. Gabriel Almond and Verba Sidney reported in a 1963 survey of urban Mexicans that 57 percent did not believe they would receive fair, judicial treatment from law enforcement agents. Compare this statistic to the 8 percent of Americans and 10 percent of Italians who also did not expect equitable treatment.[64] Though somewhat dated, Almond and Sidney's study sheds evidence of lingering police reservations experienced by Mexican citizens and overtly visualized in many ex-voto paintings.

As stated previously, in this study alone, police action was depicted 8 times or 20 percent in the 40 surveyed ex-votos. These visualizations are overtly political, and use symbols, signs and textual passages to engage discourses concerning the authoritative component of Mexican social politics. Typically, these ex-votos avoid open criticism of State authorities, and instead relay the jubilant outcomes of ill-fated crosses with *rurales*

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[63] Vanderwood, "Mexico's Rurales," 52.

[64] Gabriel Almond and Verba Sidney, The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 108.

or other federal agents; implicit however, is the general and widespread distrust of the State that deployed these agents. An example of one such encounter can be seen in the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino*, 1886, that invokes the Lord of Llanito to free a prisoner who claims his innocence.[65]

In the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino*, four mounted soldiers, of an indeterminable police organization, surround a rural farmer or peasant, distinguishable by his *sombrero*, *sarape*, *huarache* sandals and white, cotton clothing.[66] The prisoner is in a subservient position, arms bound by rope, and marching under police custody. Appearing simultaneously in the heavens, a duplicate image of the supplicant kneels at the feet of an image of the Lord of Llanito and appeals for assistance.[67] True to the persisting Baroque aesthetic, bright colors and ambiguous spaces heighten the dramatic quality of the ex-voto. These elements formally create visual tension that likewise mirrors the worrisome predicament of the prisoner. The textual portion of the ex-voto explains that the supplicant marches towards a jail in Jalisco, although the supplicant states that he has been falsely accused of a crime. In this circumstance he called upon the Lord of Llanito to reestablish his freedom.

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[65] New Mexico State *Retablo* Collection, "Catalog number 1968-3-86," http://www.nmsu.edu/~artgal/retabloweb/index.html, (New Mexico: New Mexico State University, 2001, accessed January 2006), translated by: Elizabeth Netto, Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell, editors, Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century *Retablo* Tradition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 328): "On August 10th during the year of 1886, they took him to Jalisco in bonds and Sabas Lima. He invoked the Lord of Llanito because he was falsely accused of a crime and He reestablished his freedom and in thanksgiving for this singular prodigy he presents this *retablo* to…

[66] *Campesino* refers to low-income members of rural communities, also called peasants. The *sombrero* (hat), *huaraches* (woven, straw sandals), *sarape* (blanket) and white clothing were typical *campesino* dress.

[67] The Lord of Llanito is a regional cult image popular in the state of Michoacán.

Rather that being a purely devotional object, the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* portrays a subject matter that references the social politics of a regime whose law enforcement procedures were notoriously unjust. As stated previously, dominant power groups employ certain agents in order to enforce governing policies created by the regime. Members of a community must comply with those mandates or face punitive measures. Therefore, authority and enforcement are key to the social politics of a society. Extreme exercises of law enforcement during the *Porfiriato* were believed to squelch opposition to the regime by frightening communities with radical policing tactics.[68] Tactics such as these are visualized within the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino*. This ex-voto was dedicated in 1886, which corresponds with the 1886 suspension of constitutional rights in the name of *Pax Porfiriana*. The supplicant rendered in the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* was a victim of aggressive police actions wherein legal determinations of innocence or guilt were inconsequential. By visualizing the events of August 10, 1886, this ex-voto presents ethical controversies surrounding Mexican police actions. Once again, the State failed a Mexican citizen, although this failing is more direct than Edith's disenfranchisement or Vicente's limited economic opportunity. Furthermore, it can be assumed that random, non-judicial flexes of police authority incited model behavior from citizens. But to what extent did Porfirian police exercise and/or abuse these policies, and did Mexican communities rebuke this authority?

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[68] Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 441.

Articulations of irony and subversion are valuable outlets for communities who feel oppressed by unjust or immoral authoritative groups.[69] Scholar Lucy Lippard explains that marginalized communities vocalize dissent by holding mirrors to the dominant culture. In this way the community is able to express situations of peripheral experiences that go against the status quo and present challenge to dominant power groups. Ex-votos are, by nature, a form of resistance to these dominant groups because they are devotional paintings commissioned and created by individuals outside the Church. In this regard, ex-votos are not subject to ecclesiastic or State scrutiny and are free to express criticism of dominant groups. Their candid visualizations of social politics deftly express public opinion and political happenings. Furthermore, the display of these paintings creates a forum in which social and political misgivings can be articulated without projecting overt opposition to the dominant group.

The Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* is an overt visualization of the social politics implemented by the Diaz regime. The creation of this ex-voto presents challenge to the State by vocalizing an infraction of justice, albeit in a timid manner. The anonymity of the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* and its careful avoidance of critical commentary concerning police action indicate a community fully aware of the volatility of law enforcement and the tenuous situations arising from an aggressive police State. However, rather than being dismissed and forgotten, the events of August 10, 1886 were rendered in a devotional painting and presumably displayed at a local

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[69] Lucy R. Lippard, Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America, (New York:The New Press, 1990), 199. Lippard refers to the “turning-around” of images, in which marginalized communities invest alternative meanings to images propagated by the dominant culture. For additional information, please refer to Lippard’s text.

shrine. Therefore, the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* subverts the authority of a dominant group by visualizing testimony of unfair and unconstitutional social politics and its public display would have encouraged debate concerning these topics.

While it cannot be determined if this resistance was purposely visualized within the ex-voto painting with political intent, it nevertheless presents an alternative vantage wherein dominant and peripheral cultures clash. According to the scholarship of John Street, this perspective provides an underlying framework that vocalizes the aggression of a subjugated community.[70] The Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* visualizes a perceived infraction of justice and provides a forum to express opposition to police action, albeit discreetly and no doubt conscious of censorship. The creation and display of this ex-voto, would have fulfilled its subversive role by calling attention to dubious police tactics and visualizing individual perceptions of State failure.

Conversely, the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez is an indignant outcry that overtly challenges police action and unfair law enforcement practices. This diptych-form ex-voto is a finely crafted rendition of the situation befalling Pablo Diaz Valdez in the year 1897 in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. Within this ex-voto the supplicant is portrayed as a humble farmer of modest economic means. He wears a long-sleeved shirt, neat pants, *huarache* sandals, a *sarape* blanket draped over one shoulder, and a straw *sombrero*. Like the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino*, the prisoner depicted in the right-hand panel of the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez marches in bonds alongside mounted law enforcement agents. Due to their *charroesque* attire, three of these agents appear

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[70] John Scott, Domination and Arts of Resistance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 37-38; and Street, Politics and Popular Culture, 12-13.

clearly to be affiliated with *Las Fuerzas Rurales de la Federacion*. The uniforms of the remaining nine soldiers indicate that they are most likely guards of the National Army.[71] The left panel of this ex-voto visualizes the execution of the prisoner, wherein the *federales* and *rurales* gather beneath a tree that serves as an execution platform. The commanding *rural* officer aims a hand pistol at the prisoner and it appears that death is imminent. Visualized in both panels of the diptych are two likenesses of the Child Saint of Atocha, who fittingly, is the patron saint of prisoners.[72] The Saint's image displays indigenous facial characteristics including dark skin, brown eyes, a wide forehead, and full lips.[73] These indigenous characteristics likely helped to foster a more intimate bond with Western European saints, as discussed later. The Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez is rendered in an approximated one-point perspectival system with fairly realistic portrayals of figures and space. Additionally, the landscapes of both panels are dotted with *nopal* and *agave* cacti and distant mountains, all identifiable iconography of Mexican landscape.

The textual portion of this ex-voto states that Pablo Diaz Valdez de la Hada from Tetillas, Zacatecs was taken into police custody in 1897.[74] Though he claimed he owed

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[71] A *charro* is a traditional cowboy of central Mexico, known for horsemanship and flamboyant clothing. The *rurales* generally dressed similarly, though uniforms varied. Typical dress would have been a leather jacket, a vest with silver embroidery, doeskin pants, a large hat and a red scarf. The service uniform of the *rural* agent was less formal and ornate. Kitchens, "Some Considerations on the *Rurales*," 454.

[72] The Child Saint of Atocha is believed by faithful to have originated during the Moorish invasion of Atocha, Spain. Christians there were held prisoner without sufficient food and water, but were miraculously sustained by the visits of a Christ-like child, hence the Child Saint of Atocha.

[73] Since The Child Saint of Atocha is a Spanish saint, devotion to this holy figure is a local adaptation, hence the indigenous characteristics.

[74] Dones y Promesas: 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda , 184, translation mine: "In 1897 Pablo Valdez de la Hada, from Tetillas Rio Grande, Zacatecas, when he was taken prisoner for a crime, his family invoked the Child Saint of Atocha to save the life of this prisoner. Commander Estrada, who looked like a lion and with his pistol in hand, prepared to shoot the prisoner. The family of the accused trusted in the

nothing for the crime, Valdez nonetheless faced execution, leading the family of Pablo Valdez to call upon the Child Saint of Atocha to intervene. The textual passage of this ex-voto is scripted in bubble-like captions and narrates the actions of the individuals depicted in the painting. The most poignant of the passages is the text above the prisoner's head in which Valdez tells Commander Estrada that he will be punished before God if he executes an innocent man. Although not indicated in the text, Estrada presumably agreed and released the prisoner.

The Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez visualizes a brazen confrontation between a Mexican citizen and State police agents, who are allegedly engaged in non-judicial actions. With no mention of judicial proceedings, it can be assumed that Valdez did not face trial in a court of law, and instead was apprehended on the grounds of suspicion. Rejecting anonymity, the supplicant and/or artist saw fit to record the names of the high-ranking officers, and of course the supplicant, in the textual portion of the ex-voto. Although it cannot be determined with certainty, this ex-voto indicts the presiding officers in an act of injustice, the attempted execution of a man that was not legally convicted by a court of law. Like the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino*, the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez bucks the oppression of unfair law enforcement by recording specific grievances of perceived inequitable social politics. It provides a transcript that vocalizes the aggression of individuals who feel oppressed by a dominant power

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care and protection of the Child Saint of Atocha to save the prisoner. Three times, Sergeant Manuel Casillas, Assistant Sergeant Santiago Gutierrez and Lieutenant Manuel Cuebas said in a loud voice, 'Listen to us, this man does not deserve to be shot. He does not owe anything.' The soldiers surrounded the accused and said in a loud voice, 'The Child Saint of Atocha favors the prisoner.' When he was at the execution platform for more than an hour, three times the prisoner said loudly, 'Listen to me Commander Estrada, if you shoot me you will be punished before the presence of God because I do not owe anything.'"

group.[75] Refusing to deny or dismiss the event, this individual and/or artist felt compelled to record Valdez's confrontation with law enforcement agents within a devotional painting, likely fully-aware of the defiance of such an articulation. The visualization of these events presents an infringement of justice that offers resistance to the perceived unfairness of these authoritative groups.

Of particular significance to the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez is the indignant tone of the textual passage in which the supplicant holds Commander Estrada accountable before God if he proceeds with the execution of an innocent man. This passage implies a tragic understanding that a corrupt State is ineffectual in protecting the personal rights of its citizens and the only authority to which one may petition is God. In their time of crisis, Pablo and his family turned to an alternative socio-political system, the Christian religion and its entourage of protective saints, to provide a counter against the Mexican State.

Both the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* and the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez demonstrate the aggressive law enforcement actions of Mexican police. The Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* visualizes the whim of a capricious force wherein virtually anyone could be detained during a suspension of constitutional rights. Though it does not name specific individuals involved in the incident, this ex-voto subverts the authority of a dominant power group by its very creation. Likewise, the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez challenges State authority by its personal testimony and documentation of individuals present at the attempted execution of a man who claimed innocence. By trusting in the ultimate authority of God, these ex-votos acknowledge that the Mexican

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[75] Scott, Domination and Arts of Resistance, 12-13.

government is unable to protect its citizens. The supplicants, instead, turn to religious, political organizations beyond the State. Lastly, it can be assumed that the public display of these ex-votos presented additional challenges to the Mexican government by publicly articulating criticism of the State.

Although Mexican ex-votos rarely engage overt discussion of economic disparity, inequalities of personal economics are plainly visualized within the iconographies of ex-voto paintings. In this study, the subject of economic disparity is examined through an analysis of iconography that is understood to represent the supplicant's economic situation. Iconographic analysis of ex-voto paintings can provide telling indications of socio-economics because it offers visual clues that project the larger political, social or economic contexts of the ex-voto paintings.[76] In order to better understand how the ex-voto paintings analyzed by this study reflect socio-economic circumstances, it is necessary to describe the economic situations in Mexico since the Revolution of 1910.[77] Because good government is understood to be an essential shaping force in the economic growth and security of its citizens, civil revolution often seeks more equitable socio-economic conditions, as was the case in Mexico.

In Mexico, financial stability for the populace has been elusive. Simply put, the historic frailty of the economy was a result of Spain's draining of resources during the colonial era, ineffective governments in the republican era, and graft. Mexican governments did little to bridge the widening chasm between the wealthiest and poorest

[76] Donald Preziosi, editor, The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 227.

[77] This study does not include discussion of the economic constructs of New Spain and the Republic of Mexico due to limitations in scope. The study recognizes post-Revolution reforms as the impetus for socio-economic improvements in Mexico, and begins discussion with the 1910 Revolution.

of its citizens. Noted by early nineteenth-century explorer Alexander von Humboldt, Mexico was a country of inequality. Approximately one hundred years after Humboldt's observation, an 1895 survey recorded that 1.44 percent of Mexican citizens were considered upper-income earners and an overwhelming 90.78 percent were regarded as low-income earners.[78]

Although momentous gains in industry, commerce and mining had been accomplished during the thirty-one years of the *Porfiriato*, the average Mexican citizen saw little change in their financial situation. Little attention was paid to the domestic sectors of the economy. In fact, Diaz's fiscal policy relied heavily on foreign investors, whose capital was able to construct a shiny veneer on the country. Additionally, laissez-faire fiscal policies perpetuated unequal distributions of wealth in Mexico by maintaining backwards colonial regulations and protecting semi-feudal hacienda lands. Furthermore, one way the regime retained its power was by plying political opponents with special incentives or bribes, frequently at the expense of underrepresented groups, usually low-income indigenous and *mestizo* populations.[79] These bribes usually took the form of political appointments, grants of land and an estimated 900% increase in bureaucratic employment.[80] The means to economic and social mobility were, for the most part, concentrated in the hands of a small group of elite Mexican citizens, politicians, foreign investors and landholders.

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[78] Roger D. Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 39.

[79] Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development, 147.

[80] Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development, 151.

A bitter source of contention for *mestizo*, indigenous and other low-income populations, was the gradual seizure of over two million acres of small-holder and Indian communal lands. Often, rural communities did not hold formal deeds to their land because it was considered unnecessary to communal lifestyle. Unfortunately, this allowed the government to annex territory as it saw fit. Generally, these lands were either appropriated by the State for railroad or industry, dispensed in order to appease political opponents, or simply sold to wealthy, private citizens.[81] According to the research of Robert Hansen, by 1910 approximately 90 percent of rural farm workers did not own land and about 85 percent of Indian communities had lost their land holdings.[82] This 90 percent mirrors the 1895 estimate in which 90 percent of Mexican citizens were also classified as low-income earners. Dire economic situations for *campesino* populations meant that many were absorbed into the debt bondage systems of the haciendas, especially in the south. Elsewhere across the country factories and mines employed individuals displaced from agricultural regions. Landless and poor, *campesino* families accumulated still more debt thanks to company stores known as, *tiendas de rayas*, and other loan mechanisms.[83]

In addition, the worldwide economic recession experienced at the turn-of-the-century had profound effects on the Mexican economy, which was driven by foreign investment. These effects included the cessation of foreign capital within Mexico, a glut of Mexican export products, layoffs and unemployment. All of which, resulted in inflation.

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[81] Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development, 26.
[82] Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development, 147.
[83] Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development, 24.

Middle to low-income earning citizens were among those hit hardest.[84] Throughout the entire country the standard of living for these populations decreased. Compounding the problem was an estimated 25 percent drop in wages and an 80 percent rise in the cost of essential food products from 1898 to 1911.[85] Throughout the crisis, the Mexican government did little to mitigate the compounding problems. Demonstrating classic Marxist theory, Mexican economic policy had protected the elite, and exploited the poor through unfair labor practices and private ownership of the means of production.[86] Unfortunately, this was not novel to the Diaz regime, and racial and economic barriers in Mexican society had produced glaring economic disparities since the colonial era. Visualizations of disparity are noted in the forthcoming discussion of Mexican ex-voto paintings.

Though these circumstances are in no way comprehensive of the complex phenomena leading to the Mexican Revolution of 1910, they do indicate a microcosm of turn-of-the-century Mexican politics and social conditions. In 1910, peasants, trade union workers, political parties and middle-income earning citizens united, though often with contradictory goals, in a call for large-scale social and economic reform. Because land tenure was believed to be a major cause of the wide-scale poverty and continuing peasant insurrections, agrarian reform was a key platform of revolutionary groups. Reform governments, instituted as early as 1915, began a system of land redistribution

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[84] Friedrich Katz, edited by Leslie Bethell, "The Liberal Republic and the *Porfiriato*, 1867-1910" Mexico Since Independence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 110.

[85] Bethell, Mexico Since Independence, 111. This text was consulted for much of this paragraph.

[86] Luis A. Serron, Scarcity, Exploitation and Poverty: Malthus and Marx in Mexico (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1980) 25-26. This study has relied on Serron's interpretation of Marxist theory to explain the economic situation in Mexico.

that divided large, private landholdings, into communal *ejidos* to be awarded to families and communities. By 1960, approximately 2.5 million groups had received *ejido* land grants.[87]

While this study identifies post-Revolution reforms as impetus for economic improvement, glaring economic disparity continues in Mexican society. As noted by economic analyst Nora Lustig in a 1996 study published in 2001, almost 25 percent of Mexican citizens live below the poverty line set by the World Bank at $2 per day.[88] A statistic even more alarming is that 44 percent of the nation's total income is held by 10 percent of the population, also noted by Lustig. Social equality and equal opportunity has been the continual trial for the post-Revolution Mexican governments. Economic disparity and the inability to enhance one's social and economic position has been a source of frustration to approximately one quarter of Mexican citizens, many of whom seek illegal employment in the United States. Though immigration is a topic beyond the scope of this study, problems resulting from economic disparity are an immediate concern of many Mexican citizens. The aforementioned history informs discussion of economic disparity, observable in the iconographies of Mexican ex-voto paintings.

The Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz, 1908, is an ex-voto dedicated to Our Lord of the Hardships for the miraculous rejuvenation of health to the supplicant's granddaughter.[89] Illness and recovery are plainly indicated as the subject of this

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[87] Hansen, The Politics of Mexican Development, 175-176.

[88] Nora Lustig, "Life is Not Easy: Mexico's Quest for Stability and Growth," Journal of Economic Perspectives 15:1(Winter 2001): 101.

[89] Dones y Promesas: 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda, 204, translation mine: "Being that my granddaughter Guadalupe was very sick with meningitis, I offered to make a *retablo* dedicated to Our Lord of the Hardships if he would grant an improvement. Having obtained this favor, I now complete this

devotional painting. However, a wealth of socio-economic, and therefore political, information can be garnered from an iconographic analysis. Visualized within the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz is a luxurious and spacious domicile with high ceilings and painted walls that display stylish, art nouveau ornamentation. Decorative, rather than solely utilitarian, furniture fills the bedroom. These furnishings include a vanity nightstand, mirrored dresser, decorative end tables, wooden chairs, and a large bed with a headboard and footboard. Additionally, religious artwork, fresh tulips, crystal knick-knacks and an oriental carpet can be seen in the room. There are two figures depicted in the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz, a light-haired, bedridden child and a matronly woman with fashionable clothing and hairstyle. The bed linens are ornate and embellished with lace filigree, while the woman's gown appears to be made from a luxurious material. In both instances, artistic treatment has rendered the resplendent quality and minute details of the extravagant materials in order to relay the wealth of the family.

By comparison, the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista, 1865, visualizes a different social and economic situation. The Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista is a painting dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Christ of Esquipulas for the restored health of the supplicant.[90] The subject of this ex-voto is also illness and the recovery of the supplicant due to divine intervention. The dwelling presented by the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista

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promise. Puebla, January 1908." Our Lord of the Hardship is an advocation of the Christ figure, which was venerated by the citizens of Puebla.

[90] Dones y Promesas: 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda, 141, translation mine: "On the 3rd day of February, 1865, Sr. Emeterio Bautista became sick with a fever, and for 9 days he vomited blood and had violent and continuous hiccups that lasted for 10 days and three other illnesses with which they attempt all possible human remedies. He was not believed to be found alive, unless he received divine attention. It was that which made him implore the Christ of Esquipulas and the Virgin of Guadalupe. In that moment he recovered his health and he presents this *retablo* to record this wonderful miracle."

appears neither spacious nor luxurious, but instead cramped and stark. Adobe walls and dirt floors indicate a rustic lifestyle, possibly a rural home wherein luxury and fashion serve little function. Decorative furnishings are absent, as are ornamental fixtures and knick-knacks. Set in a bedroom or area serving as such, the afflicted man rests uncomfortably on a platform bed. A coarse, Mexican-style blanket barely covers him. Rather than being supported by billowy pillows, he lays atop a woven, straw mat. Surrounding him are three attendants, most likely friends and/or family. Some of these figures are barefoot and all are clad in *campesino* attire, similar to the descriptions of dress from the Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino* and the Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdez. Additionally, a doctor is portrayed in the lower left-hand side of the painting. He is distinguished by his black tailored suit, starched shirt and polished shoes. Separated by more than attire, the aloofness of the doctor is literal as he depicted in the lower area of the painting, far removed from the humble figures and the bloody, vomiting supplicant.

Although both ex-votos visualize illness and recovery, striking dissimilarities exist in the iconographies of the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz and the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista. These different iconographies are an important indication of conflicting economic situations, particularly because the subject matter of the two ex-votos is virtually identical. Examinations of iconography can uncover additional meanings, which are not readily apparent. Icons are abbreviated images that reference a preexisting base of knowledge in which symbols have already been invested with

conventional meanings.[91] Endowed with these meanings, the treatment of such iconography can reference additional information that helps to facilitate a broader understanding of the work.[92]

In light of this explanation, a wealth of social, economic and political information can be deduced by the presentation of iconography within the ex-votos of Ignacia O. de Tamariz and Emeterio Bautista. For example, compare the spacious interior, high ceilings and painted walls displayed in the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz with the small, constricted living quarters visualized within the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista. Likewise, the adobe walls, dirt walls and only the barest of furnishings seen in Bautista's ex-voto indicate a different economic standard of living from the crystal vases, oriental carpets and textile comforts visualized in the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz. Iconographic differences in the artists' renderings of the beds are also an indication of differing economic situations. The expensive furniture, lavish details and costly lace seen in the bed linens of the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz clearly denote privileged social status and personal wealth. Conversely, the rudimentary bed, straw mat and coarse blanket of the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista indicate a disadvantaged existence and lower income status. Created roughly fifty years apart, these ex-votos suggest the prevalent economic disparity experience by many Mexican citizens. Additionally, these ex-votos allude to the inequitable conditions between urban and rural residences, demonstrating the poverty of landless, rural Mexicans.

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[91] Preziosi, The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, 237.
[92] Preziosi, The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, 236.

In another example, the Ex-voto of 14 Workers, 1944, the destitute conditions and vulnerability of Mexico's working class citizens are visualized.[93] The Ex-voto of 14 Workers depicts a mining accident that trapped fourteen workers in the Santo Niño mine for eleven days. According to the textual inscription, the divine intervention of the Christ of Villaseca was responsible for the safety and rescue of the workers.[94] The fourteen workers are visualized within this ex-voto wearing tattered clothing or in varying stages of nudity, including bare chests, rolled-up pants or clad solely in under garments. The faces of the men are nondescript and several appear to be looking down or have their backs turned to the viewer. Suggesting lethargy, a majority of the men sit, with their hands on their foreheads, and one lies in the corner. Presiding over the entire scene is an image of the Christ of Villaseca, who casts rays of light into the otherwise darkened interior of the mineshaft. Adhering to traditional visualizations of the Christ of Villaseca, this image likewise exhibits dark skin, bloody wounds and a crown of thorns.

The subject matter of this ex-voto is clearly an expression of gratitude to the Christ figure for delivering the men from a horrific death. However, like the two previous ex-votos, the Ex-voto of 14 Workers exhibits iconography that indirectly engages complex discourses concerning socio-political issues. These dialogs question social status, race, and the State's exploitation of lower-income earning citizens.

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[93] Dones y Promesas: 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda (Exvotos Mexicanos), 162, translation mine: "In the mine of Santo Nino on September 14, 1944, after having entered the mine, fourteen workers were separated after the entrance caved-in and trapped them. Having lost all hope of being rescued, they entrusted with much passion in the powerful image of Christ Villaseca, having known that after eleven days, all would be found alive. For granting this pleasure, we dedicate to him the present offering."

[94] Gloria Fraser Giffords, Mexican Folk *Retablos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2nd ed., 1992), 37. According to Giffords, Christ Villaseca is one of three black Christ figures popular in Latin America. The name of the Christ most likely reflects the town, de Villa seca, where the image originated.

The iconography of the figures rendered within the Ex-voto of 14 Workers indicates their low-income status. All of the workers are depicted with non-Caucasian skin pigmentation. These skin tones range from olive-gray to a ruddy, earthen-brown and indicate *mestizo* heritage. Because Mexican society has a long history of tying race to class (or class to race), the viewer easily understands the accident victims as being poor. Economic status is also indicated by the artistic treatment of clothing, or the lack thereof. Although the conditions of the mine were likely stifling, it can be assumed that the men were dressed in rags and partial clothing because of their financial means. Traditionally, artists have visualized low-income persons as virtual savages, either nude or partially undressed. This is especially true of colonial art and even contemporary art that continues to present romantic visions of the Americas. Because mining was a dangerous and non-lucrative occupation, the workers' clothing likely references their station in life. Furthermore, the poses and composition of the painting accentuate the anonymity of the workers, who are faceless, slumped persons without distinctive characteristics. Even the textual portion of the ex-voto does not identify the workers by name, underscoring the invisibility and political silence of working class citizens within Mexico.

The Ex-voto of 14 Workers illustrates, once again, how the Mexican State failed to protect the social equality and personal safety of its marginalized citizens. By 1944, the year this ex-voto was created, most of the mines in Mexico had been nationalized due to post-Revolution reforms enacted in 1938. The Santo Niño mine, therefore, was likely owned and managed by the Mexican government. As such, the State was

responsible for maintaining safe working conditions for miners and mitigating the hazards of a dangerous occupation. The Ex-voto of 14 Workers visualizes how the State neglected to fulfill its obligations by not insuring safety and a secure working environment. In this circumstance, the workers appealed to a divine figure for his assistance, and in doing so, shrugged the State and discounted its role as protector of Mexican citizens.

The dedication and devotion to the Christ of Villaseca is also significant. As one of three black Christ images of Latin America, Villaseca exhibits noticeably darker skin tones than those of the workers. The exaggerated pigmentation, essential to this saint's iconography, may indicate a source of enhanced holiness, sanctity or virtue. Scholar Gloria Giffords notes that darkened treatments of skin tone exhibited by Latin American holy figures were an intentional psychological tactic implemented by New Spanish friars in their attempt to Christianize native populations.[95] Friars believed that images of saints, Christ and the Virgin that displayed indigenous characteristics, or those made-over according to a native aesthetic, would encourage trust and allegiance to the new Christian faith. These perceptions continue to inform the faithful, who claim allegiance to the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example, because of her "brownness."[96] Furthermore, in this study, 20 of the 40 surveyed ex-votos contained visualizations of saints exhibiting indigenous or *mestizo* characteristics. This common mode of depiction is testimony to the longevity of this tradition and its psychological efficacy.

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[95] Gloria Fraser Giffords, Mexican Folk *Retablos*, 37.
[96] Westerfelhaus and Singhal, "Difficulties in Co-Opting a Complex Sign," 103-104.

Also, traditional visualizations of the Christ Villaseca emphasize the iconography of Christ's bloody crucifixion wounds. Generally, this figure is rendered with rather graphic treatment, including, bloody hands, feet and a head, topped by a crown of thorns. Giffords asserts that these displays call attention to the pain and agony of the Christ figure, and as such, mirror the martyrdom of the supplicant.[97] It can be assumed that this is also the case in the Ex-voto of 14 Workers, wherein the supplicants faced a rather gruesome death, and perhaps felt closer to the divine figure because of their own agony.

While the subject matter of the Ex-voto of 14 Workers can be generalized as accident-related, the iconography of this ex-voto suggests more profound meanings. Through iconographic visualizations of unsafe working conditions, poverty, and race, the Ex-voto of 14 Workers engages discourses concerning the social economics of Mexico's low-income earning citizens and the ways in which the State has failed these populations. The accentuation of *mestizo* characteristics, such as skin pigment, imply that socio-economic mobility is determined by one's race, or caste, as was also the case in colonial New Spain. Likewise, the nameless and faceless figures of the Ex-voto of 14 Workers draw attention to the political silence of these groups and the restrictions placed upon social and political mobility due to race. For these reasons, this study presents the Ex-voto of 14 Workers as a visualization of the widespread economic disparity experienced by low-income Mexican citizens, generally *mestizo* or indigenous populations. Additionally, the public display of an ex-voto such as the Ex-voto of 14 Workers, may have called attention to the ways in which the State did not fulfill

[97] Gloria Fraser Giffords, Mexican Folk *Retablos*, 37.

constitutional guarantees of social equality for all citizens, or at the least, safety to all persons despite their social or economic status. The presentation of these ideas within a public forum provides challenge to the State's ineffectual management of mining facilities and may have encouraged discourses relating to these socio-political issues.

In conclusion, the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz, the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista and the Ex-voto of 14 Workers present visualizations of economic disparity in Mexico. This study began with a brief historic review of the Mexican economy around the year 1900, citing the Revolution of 1910 as impetus for economic reform. A climatic moment for disenfranchised groups, this revolution called for better government, in which domestic economic policy would include provisions to safeguard the livelihood of all citizens, regardless of social status. By comparing the iconographies of the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz and the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista, visualizations of economic desparity are demonstrated. The Ex-voto of 14 Workers presents the prejudices and inequality experienced by Mexico's working-class citizen, suggesting racial discrimination towards *mestizo* populations and the failure of the State to provide equal opportunities for all citizens.

Before concluding it is necessary to address the public display of ex-voto paintings inside Mexican churches, cathedrals, cult shrine centers or other sacred locales. While little academic scholarship has been directed toward determining the function of ex-voto display, it is nevertheless instructive to consider this topic. As discussed, most ex-voto paintings are offered at shrines dedicated to the appropriate divine person. The grateful supplicants hang their paintings on the walls surrounding the

cult image. Although there is little scholarship on the topic, supplicants presumably place their paintings on the shrine walls with no criteria beyond locating the object near the cult figure. In light of what this thesis has argued, that Mexican ex-votos provide a venue for political discourses beyond direct State and Church scrutiny, it would seem that their display likewise provided the opportunity to exceed socio-political norms.

As indicated throughout this study, the majority of ex-votos analyzed exhibit a consistent theme, the failure of the State to provide favorable conditions for its citizens. In these circumstances, individuals have appealed to holy figures to form an alternative social organization and political system beyond the State. Publicly displayed ex-votos are testimony to this process. They visualize the supplicant's embrace of divine faith and an alternative socio-political system in lieu of faith in a State that proved itself inadequate. Because ex-voto imagery provides visualization of State criticism, the public display of these paintings can be regarded as a subversive act. Additionally, access to public displays of ex-voto paintings is not subject to social, economic or racial barriers. Virtually, all able-bodied and willing members of a community can create, display and view ex-voto paintings. Within church displays, ex-votos like the Ex-voto of Ignacia O. de Tamariz and the Ex-voto of Emeterio Bautista, are hung side by side without regard to the supplicants' social, economic or racial status. By State standard, these displays create a space that is egalitarian, inclusive and virtually uncensored. With fewer discriminatory restrictions than exercised within the Mexican social ambit, public displays of ex-voto paintings at religious shrines may mitigate social inequalities experienced by Mexican citizens by creating a venue where race and social status are

under less scrutiny. Alternatively, public displays may reinforce social prejudices by granting a more privileged status to ex-votos commissioned or created by elite citizens. These privileges may include biased curatorial decisions such as longer display times and/or preferred positions near the cult image. In either case, in a society that maintains a rigid social and racial hierarchy, this intermingling is radical and is a topic richly deserving further study.

One final point to consider before concluding is the methodological approach taken by this study and the subsequent conclusions that can be drawn from this model of research. As indicated, this thesis applied a methodology modeled upon visual culture studies, which analyze the visual ephemera produced by a culture in order to interrogate and draw conclusions upon the political, social and economic components of a particular culture. Although this thesis seeks to reveal conclusions regarding Mexican faith and the socio-political dynamic of Mexican devotional practices, it must be noted that the fragmentary information available, regarding display, patronage, and connoisseurship, hinders this analysis.

This thesis can, however, conclude that those who participate in ex-voto practices are deeply pious and value direct engagement with divine figures. Their offerings can be understood to represent the confirmation of a private dialog between individuals and their divine intercessors. As such, the faithful view the personal act of dedication as an opportunity to personally express their gratitude to the divine figure in the same immediate manner in which the conversation began, outside Church or State scrutiny. Because ex-voto paintings are publicly displayed, it can be assumed that within

a community that values direct communication to the divine, these paintings also serve to memorialize personal encounters.

In addition, because the practice is free from outside scrutiny, the ex-voto medium is perceived to a foster a confidant-like relationship between the supplicant and the divine, possibly explaining the frequency and ease in which controversial and politically-charged subjects are visualized. As this thesis has demonstrated, these politically minded expressions are often manifested as comments on Mexican social politics, revealing that the faithful may perceive Church and State to be inextricable. In any regard, those participating in ex-voto practices do not find it objectionable to present personal expressions of devotion in union with testimonies of social and political events. These combinations of secular and non-secular ideas are publicly displayed in religious venues indicating that the faithful understand the shrine to be a space that honors their intimate relationship to the divine and supports their initiative to freely express thoughts and opinions regardless of institutional hierarchies within the Roman Catholic Church. Sensitivity to the practice of ex-voto offering and other local, religious traditions of Mexico may be understood to be part of continuing accomodational strategies permitted by the Church in order to maintain these souls within the fold.

One final conclusion is that although ex-voto practices appear to transcend socially imposed barriers and appeal to those of all social and racial backgrounds, the faithful often see fit to visualize the strained relationship between social status and race. This is particularly intriguing considering that ex-votos of the privileged and underprivileged, usually *mestizo* or indigenous persons, often hang side by side at the

church or shrine. This thesis concludes that the faithful view the shrine as a non-discriminatory space and reserve judgment in light of inclusivity within the Christian community.

SUMMARY

This thesis analyzed 40 Mexican ex-voto paintings for their reflection of political issues occurring in the Republic of Mexico. This thesis asserted that these ex-votos engaged socio-political dialogs beyond their religious function. Among such visualizations of socio-political imagery, the following themes were examined, representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a national religious symbol, police action and economic disparity. The thesis used visual culture studies as a theoretical model to organize the study. As such, the historical contexts relevant to individual ex-votos paintings were examined with detail.

In regard to the Virgin of Guadalupe, 11 of the 40 surveyed ex-votos visualized her image as a cultural symbol, believed to inspire nationalism and unity within marginalized communities. Eight of the ex-votos, or 20 percent, displayed overt visualizations of police action. This thesis contended that such imagery subverted the authority of dominant power groups. Lastly, the study examined displays of economic disparity by analyzing the iconographies of three ex-votos. The thesis concluded that within Mexico personal income, social status, and race are strongly connected.

Lastly, the thesis identified a consistent theme within the ex-votos, the supplicants' perception that the Mexican government had failed to protect their basic rights. As an alternative, these citizens appealed to a divine figure for assistance. Therefore, religion became an alternative socio-political system beyond the State. The public display of ex-voto paintings can be regarded as a subversive act because it provides the opportunity to articulate these State failings. Though this study maintains

that ex-votos are not necessarily created with political intent, their imagery nevertheless incites social and political discourses. The study has presented these discourses in order to enrich the understanding of Mexican ex-voto paintings.

APPENDIX

BODY OF IMAGES

Images 1-10 are from Infinitas Gracias: Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting by Alfredo Vilchis Roque and Pierre Schwartz, published by Editions du Seuil, 2003.

1. Ex-voto of a Thankful Family, 2003.
2. Ex-voto of Señora Mercedes G., 1949.
3. Ex-voto of Socorro S., 2000.
4. Ex-voto of Dionicia M., 1955.
5. Ex-voto of Señora Yolanda D., 1960.
6. Ex-voto of Paco M., 2000.
7. Ex-voto of Vicente C., 1990.
8. Ex-voto of José P., 1934.
9. Ex-voto of a Gang Member, end of the 20th century.
10. Ex-voto of a Edith Y.A., 2002.

Images 11-20 are from Dones y Promesas : 500 Años de Arte Ofrenda published by the Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo and Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1996.

11. Ex-voto of a Father, Mother and Family, 1975.
12. Ex-voto of Señor Emeterio Bautista, 1865.
13. Ex-voto of 14 Workers, 1944.
14. Ex-voto of D. Manuel Viedma, 1856.
15. Ex-voto of Pablo Diaz Valdes de la Hada, 1897.
16. Ex-voto of Manuel Rajel, (indeterminable date).
17. Ex-voto of Señor y Señora of Nicolacito, 1920.
18. Ex-voto of an Old Woman, (no date).
19. Ex-voto of Ignacio O. de Tamariz, 1908.

20. Ex-voto of Rosalina Vazquéz de Cortes, 1991.

Images 21-30 are from Miracles on the Border by Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, published by The University of Arizona Press, 1995.

21. Ex-voto of Señora Tivurcia Gallego, 1917.

22. Ex-voto of Isidro Rosas Rivera, 1976.

23. Ex-voto of Juan Sánchez, 1990.

24. Ex-voto of Paula Martínez, 1964.

25. Ex-voto of Eulia Ortiz, (no date).

26. Ex-voto of Jesús Domingo Huerra, 1946.

27. Ex-voto of Jesús Jose Sánchez O., 1990.

28. Ex-voto of Victoriano Grimaldo, 1988.

29. Ex-voto of Antonio Alcaraz, 1949.

30. Ex-voto of F.P. el Coesillo, (no date).

Images 31-40 are from the New Mexico State University Online *Retablo* Collection, copyright 2001.

31. Ex-voto of an Anonymous *Campesino*, (1968-3-86), 1886.

32. Ex-voto of a Miracle (1966-5-69), 1880.

33. Ex-voto of Estanislado Diaz (1965-5-23), (indeterminable date).

34. Ex-voto of Maria Antonia Castellanos (1966-5-4), (no date).

35. Ex-voto of Ambrosio Ruíz (1966-5-39), 1908.

36. Ex-voto of a Man in a Black Suit (1966-5-31), (indeterminable date).

37. Ex-voto of Dolores Villalobos (1966-5-27), 1884.

38. Ex-voto of a *Campesino* (1966-5-85), (indeterminable date).

39. Ex-voto of Angela Alonso and her Family (1966-5-143), 1949.

40. Ex-voto of Jesús Morelos (1966-5-61), 1893.

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