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Rebuilding Hometowns: Religious Worship as an Identity and Tourist Strategies of Place-Making²

1. Introduction: on Religious Migration and Religious Tourism

This paper is about the processes migrants use to create a “home” in exile. It is also about the imaginaries of an “ancestral” home for those that live far away. This paper focuses on how religion works, for many, as a glue agent that holds together the pieces of a life shattered by the experience of migration and displacement. Here religion serves as a suturing thread that simultaneously imagines and “remembers” the past and re-attaches the members (limbs) of a collective body that has experienced social violence. Finally, this paper is about the drama of carving, via the religious, a space within a nation that does not always recognize your humanity because of your migrant or undocumented status.

Religion has become increasingly essential to understand the phenomenon of global migration, (re)settlement, and state-building processes, including the limitations in western nations’ sovereignty as they try to “manage” religious plurality within their territories. Moreover, spiritual migration has evidenced the fallacies of many western states that, despite their constitutions and secular external character, struggle to embrace the religious diversity in their inhabitants fully. For example, let us remember the resistance in Europe to fully embrace Muslims during the refugee crisis of 2015, as many city mayors emphasized Europe’s “Christian” nature. Let us also remember the “Muslim Ban”³ signed by US President Donald Trump in 2017 and the most recent efforts to regulate women’s use of hijabs in France (Lang, 2021), confusing religious and cultural values. All these current examples emphasize the failure (and incapability) of the enlightenment’s promise of separating State and religion.

Moreover, the migration of faith (and religious practices) manifests the limitations (and ruptures) on the boundaries between State, culture, and religion, as they affect our imaginaries (and understandings) around governance, gender, education, aesthetics, performance, and our expectations of citizenship and civility. For example, in the U.S., the narratives (and myths) around Separatist Puritans, or pilgrims escaping religious persecution in Europe, during the 1600s, have become a central theme within academic and popular narratives about the nation’s origins.⁴ The notion of freedom of religion has been embedded into constructing a national ethos of exceptionalism. At the same time, that expectation of a melting pot favored an implicit assimilation model toward mainstream religious institutions and groups (Omi and Howard, 1986).

As our research shows, the religious performance of “home” is an essential element along the migration experience and journey, one that continues beyond the arrival and extends into the settlement process and can involve several generations. Building a piece of an *old* home within a *new* homeland using religion allows many migrants to endure the process of (un)rooting and remaking new roots by the creation of “Religious Intrastates,” or the reconstruction of a nation-home within another nation that it is held together by religious practices (Calvo-Quirós 2022, 20). Migrants do not only carry with them hopes and expectations about their future. They also bring religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith devotions. In this case, the biological metaphor of rooting in plants

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³ ACLU, (2020) “Timeline of the Muslim Ban.” <https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban>

⁴ J. Meacham, *American Gospel*.

implies the transferring and the permanency of some “DNA” amount living organisms. In this sense, it also relates to how migrants, for the most part, reconstruct a “new” self without fully eliminating their origins in their “new” place of settlement.

In our experience, of all the many repertoires of cultural tools available to migrants, religion provides them with a transferable familial narrative that is reliable and consistent within the dramatic shifts created by migration, as it can allow for a reading of the experience of suffering and pain created by the experience. Religion can also work as a shield to individuals (and communities) to slow down the unavoidable transformations created by the new nation. In this sense, remaining whole (as an Italian, Mexican, Irish, etc.) can become, in many cases, synonymous with remaining, for example, Catholic after migrating to a predominantly protestant nation such as the U.S.⁵ In the last century, the experience of migration has deeply transformed the religious landscape in the U.S. Institutional faith affiliation in this nation has been declining, at the same time, it has become more diverse as many demographic shifts, because migration, are taking place. As the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), a nonprofit organization that studies the intersections of culture, religion, and public policy, explains. “Over the last few decades, the proportion of the U.S. population that is white Christian has declined by nearly one-third” (PRRI, 2021). America is changing around religious tectonic plates.

This massive spiritual migration is moving in all directions, affecting all main religious groups. It is transforming both the nations receiving migrants and those from where they are departing. For example, the U.S. Catholic church’s growth in the last decades has been almost exclusively the product of the migration of Latino Americans into the country.⁶ In this sense, we are experiencing a dual transformation of the religious landscape. Migrants are transforming the places where they are settling, both because of their numbers and the way they confront many of our assumptions about normalized religious beliefs, practices, and state privileges. Simultaneously, anti-immigrant rhetoric has populated religious spaces and has been used to promote violence against vulnerable migrants. Religion is intimately interconnected with how the West has and continues to approach migration.

However, migrants are also transforming their hometowns and places of origin, both when they physically return to their hometowns through religious tourism but also when they send money (and goods) via remittances or when they send other people to religious sites to fulfill promises and ex-votos they cannot do because they are unable to leave a nation, for example, because their lack of travel documents, or their immigrant status.⁷ This also happens when they sponsor religious festivities and events from their new homes. They are reshaping their hometown beliefs and practices because of their own migrating experience, for example, around gender relationships, the inclusion of sexual minorities, or even because of class power dynamics. This complex process of religious transformation connects both sides of the migration experience.

In other words, religious tourism happens between and within nations, linking people with their place of origin and their new spaces of arrival or settlement. Therefore, its analysis should include its impact, beyond merely religious terrains but also on the economy, local politics, gender, class, and racial relations within all communities touched by the migration of a community. For us, a comprehensive study of religious tourism by exiled communities can only be approached by considering the historical, political, and social conditions that generated their migration in the first place. Including the conditions of forced assimilation, xenophobia, and/or religious segregation imposed on them, and the impact of how religious expressions continue to be defined as foreign and non-normative by the mainstream groups or the resistance to perceive migrant religious practices as part of the nation’s new makeup. In this sense, ethnoreligious enclaves work as a site where

⁵ For those persecuted, excluded, or ostracized within a particular religious group, the process of migrating can allow for the reconstruction of a new self also religiously.

⁶ Crary 2020; Funk and Martínez 2014.

⁷ Calvo-Quirós, *Undocumented Saints*, 35.

nationhood and cultural affiliation are re-inscribed and reinforced consistently within migrant communities.

1.1 On our Theoretical Framework

For us, political borders are not fixed lines or spaces limited to the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, or the Rio Grande in Texas. Borders move and are carried on by migrants on their bodies, backpacks, and religious practices. Because borders are epistemic, aesthetic, and spiritual, they can be located also in the parking lots outside the retail stores where migrants gather looking for work or in the classrooms where different groups of children study. Borders are also located inside churches and open religious festivals organized by communities in exile that question state-sanctioned norms and practices. Borders are everywhere. They are also created by the definitions and categories around national vs foreigners, and/or expatriates.

Overall, we view migrant religious devotions (and practices) within the processes of social storytelling and the making of nation states, moreover, using James Scott's terms, they are part of a larger network of mobile "hidden transcripts." (1990, 27). Here, the spiritual becomes a site to manifest the "infrapolitics" (Scott, 1990, 19) that permeates the "everyday [existence in] resistance" (Scott, 1990, 195) of migrant communities. We understand many of these migrant religious expressions within the Américo Paredes's framework of "sabidurías populares" or vernacular knowledges (Saldivar, 2006, 59), Michel Foucault's (1997, 7) notion of "subjugated knowledges," and Walter Dignolo's (2000, 13) concept of "subaltern modernities". They are more than spiritual entities. They are also socio-political figures that require a unique set of cultural (and research) codes (Madrid, 2008) to unveil their meanings and functions as they connect present oppression with the past, and the possibilities for the future.

1.2 On shifting methods and the site

Our research in this paper is located within the city of Chicago, Illinois, in the U.S. We studied two migrant communities from Italy and Mexico. Both manifest the unique characteristics of the migration experience of Catholics to the U.S., the struggles to construct a place for themselves in a foreign land, and the anti-Catholic sentiments around them within two different moments in the US. history. In this sense, they are similar but also very different because of the nuances created by the discourses around race that today frame both groups. As we know, the evolution (and characteristics) surrounding both groups' relationship to the U.S. within the Catholic Church has been marked by shifting categories that at one moment perceived Mexicans as white, as manifested in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and Italian as non-white during the years of The Great Arrival (1880-1924). Today these perceptions have shifted dramatically, but just as yesterday, the categories around race and ethnicity remain central to the political discourses defining the religious terrains in the U.S. Let's also remember how the integration of Italian migrants into the U.S. was used to justify assimilation models of a "melting pot" while Mexicans were framed as a "problem" because of their resistance and limited assimilation. As Omi and Winant (1986) have explained, race and systemic racism are central to understanding their different outcomes.

As the influential Italian American researcher of religion and migration, Robert A. Orsi (1985) explains, our research, just like his, is about the "study of religion in the streets" (xiii) and the many processes involved in the mobilization of religious practices amount, migrants, within the US. As his work unveils, "nothing [is] irrelevant" (xix) in studying religious practices, celebrations, and expressions of popular devotion. For Orsi, there is no distinction "between the 'religious' aspect of the festa –the praying and penitential devotions, the religious sacrifice –and what outside observers felt were inappropriate, 'profane' characteristics of the celebration –the food, noise, dancing, partying" (xviii.). Everything is unified by the religious experience, in ways that "at the center of both the devotion and the annual celebration were many hopes and fears, conflicts, expectations and

disappointments and ambivalences in the lives of people of the community” (xxi). Consequently, we see religious sites, as the two we have studied, as historical archives of migrant communities’ struggles, expectations, and hope for a better life. The churches, festivals, and shrines we encountered during our research are ‘loud’ cultural artifacts (and religious products) that map-out migrants shifting journeys and lives as exiles. Because “nothing [is] irrelevant” (xix), we used multiple methods to approach the communities from different angles. We conducted open-ended interviews, systematic ethnographic visits, and participatory observations over several years, in addition to the more traditional historical archival work. All with the scope to access (and unveil), as much as possible, those “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990, 27) or *nascosti* pieces of social knowledge imbodyed by these sites. In this sense, we approached each site as an independent entity, and the methods changed to adapt to the need of each community and the possibilities to engage directly with them. Therefore, in the same way that migrants are always forced to shift and change, we adapted and changed with each site.

2. Roots tourism and identity belonging

As Bauman explains, the concept of identity is particularly attractive because of its promise of certainty and stability against the present model of a *fluid modernity* (Bauman, 2000; Remotti, 2010). However, this promise cannot be fulfilled because, as Pietro Rossi (2007) observes, the identity of a subject, (like a community) is in a constant process of change. This apparent stable self-representation (of our identity) is particularly called into question when we encounter different cultures and social models. This is particularly evident when a group is forced to migrate and it is confronted with racism, xenophobia, or forced exploitation. In search of an indispensable sense of belonging and rooting, the gaze can be turned to the past, to the territory in which people were born. Here the past can be perceived (or imagined) as safe because of the promise of continuity concerning the imposed “dislocated identity” created by the effects of migration (Ambrosini, 2019).

We argue that the tourism of roots plays a central role in the complex dynamic of identity experienced by displaced communities. On the one hand, it is characterized by the desire to (re)find places connected to their past, the history of their family, or their community. They can be individual, collective, or even national.⁸ In this process, identity is created by the intersection of spatial, material, and memory roots beyond the real. In other words, (re)finding roots can be based on actual or imaginary events.

On the other hand, migrating subjects pursued their root-identity through their proximity to the places of their history and/or the physical experience of those spaces (Josiam and Frazier, 2008). As we had explained, this quest for root-identity sometimes takes shape by the recreation of a fragment of one’s “mother” nation in the place of arrival and settlement,⁹ or through the re-proposal of religious and civil rituals that recalls or replicates those rituals taking place on their place of origin. Sometimes this need for root-identity happens by the “*decision*” of maintaining preferential relations with other migrants from your nation or region. In this case root-searching and affirmation becomes collective and relational. This signifies the relevance of ethnic migrant enclaves in the preservation of collective history and the construction of imaginary roots (Ambrosini, 2019; 2020a; 2020b). In these cases, root

⁸ Ireland and Scotland have started real roots festivals with the programs “The Gathering Ireland” opened in 2013 and “Homecoming Scotland” opened in 2014. Referring to Italy, in the XX Annual Report on Italian Tourism of 2016 a particular emphasis is given to the tourism of the roots (De Marchi and Mingotto, 2016) and the Italian Foreign Ministry has recognized the value of this type of tourism by launching a program to encourage “roots travels” - the travels of the roots - with a guide and a site.

⁹ This theme will be discussed in the next section 3 focused on the community of Ceglieesi presents in Chicago that celebrates the Patron of the city of origin, Our Lady Maria SS. of Buterrito, on the same date and in the same way as the origin town in Puglia (Italy).

affirmations happen by the implementation of a combined simulacra of aesthetic and urban elements toward the reproduction or alteration of physical spaces.¹⁰

Because people's engagement with their roots can take the form of traveling to the places of one's history or their family. Very often these modalities are combined with economic forces that promote capitalism forms of tourism. Here is important to distinguish the many forms of traveling, including tourism of roots from other forms that resemble them, such as genealogical tourism and the tourism of origins.¹¹ (Perri, 2020).

Roots tourism refers to a tourism model that Cohen describes as "existential"¹² because it is at the core of people's identity. It involves both first-generation migrants who "return" in different ways to their country and places of origin (Gallino Giani, 2007), as well as their second and third generation, who decide to embark on a journey to rediscover their family (real or imaginary) place of origin. This tourist sees their roots as an opportunity for an identity process, a recovery of a part of their or their family history, and a possibility to rebuild or strengthen their cultural and historical bonds. As Ward and Styles (2003) explain, these connections can also be emotive and symbolic, as their places of origin no longer exist, have dramatically changed, or have been re-created within the marketplace of capitalism.

As we know, tourism is a central sector in the economy of a growing number of countries that invest in marketing strategies of their territories (Aime and Papotti, 2012; Avallone, 2019; Calzati and De Salvo, 2012; Carrera and Barbuti, 2020; Salazar, 2009, 2011; Savelli, 2004, 2012). Roots tourism always begins as a kind of private *imagination* formed first within a person, their families, and the stories they tell about their past. In their collective imagination, these roots are interstitial, niche ones, often defined as "minor," from the main traits of the classic mass tourism destinations. In this sense, as Romita and Perri (2006; 2011) explain, root places are transformed and presented as «spontaneous tourist contexts» since they ignore the logic and criteria of classical tourist attractions. In other words, root tourism is not always part of mainstream tourism in place today, even though, in many cases, both mass tourism and root tourism may intersect in particular places.

Therefore, it is important to point out that the paths of roots tourism always have a strong emotional character, looking both for "intentional monuments" linked to the narration of a personal (or national) history. Root tourism is linked to a territory and has "intentional" emotional value attached to it (Basu, 2005). Root journeys are envisioned as rediscovery journeys to a *place of the mind* more than just a physical place. They are meant to reclaim people's sense of history and the 'roots' of their own identity (Giani Gallino, 2007; Carrera, 2022b). In many ways, we can argue that root tourism is part of a long journey that begins because of people's migration.

Moreover, root tourists move beyond a search for specific historical-artistic elements but rather for the stories of the places and people who live there, of the atmosphere in which they can *dive in*. In this sense, their walking among their root sites weaves a narrative that enriches those engaged in the journey. Memory and direct experience merge until both can be almost indistinctive from each other, giving shape to the dynamic character of their journeys. Here, the places visited are always «much more than simple settings with certain physical characteristics: rather, they should be understood in terms of fluid, changing, dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory» (Arace, 2007: 101). As Gozzoli and Regalia (2005) explain, the self-representing identity of displaced people is always complex, as it denotes a sort of *suspended identity*, as the individuals may feel that they inhabit an in-

¹⁰ Here we are not refuse to recognize that many internal and external factors promote the creation of these enclaves, with both positive and negative consequences for migrants.

¹¹ The tourism of the origins indicates the movement towards the origins of the descendants of the emigrants but does not include that of the immigrants themselves and their children (Perri, 2020). Genealogical tourism is defined as 'all the activities and organizations relating to journeys and stays undertaken to search for the origin, descent, traces of families and to investigate the possible links of kinship and affinity between the tourist and other persons, things and territories» (Caputo, 2016).

¹² This kind of tourism takes on a place and a meaning in the life of a modern person that varies according to his image of the world, according to its greater or lesser adherence to a cultural or symbolic "center" and according to the location (inside or outside) of this center with respect to the society in which the person himself lives» (Cohen, 1979: 181).

between space, or that they belong to multiples places all at once, their homeland and where they live now (Basu, 2004; Josiam and Frazier, 2008).

In this sense, root tourist manifests the concept of «multiple trans-local attachments» developed by Clifford in 1997. After their settlement, they may move in search of an authenticity-home not only of their current living places but also through the knowledge of the places of their family's history. Unlike mainstream tourists who may move in search of what it is new, migrants may travel to the heart of their own culture and traditions to re-find their past (Meethan, 2000; Coleman and Eade, 2004).

We argue that among the factors that have favored the spread of root tourism in recent decades are (a) the massive displacement taking place globally, (b) the role of social media and its virtual communities on the web that have encouraged the search of people's origins,¹³ in addition to the (c) emergence of DNA testing services that promise to trace and map of people's biological genealogies. This is in conjunction with (d) the private and public state-sanctioned processes meant to strengthen capitalist multiculturalism and ethnic consumption. All these rituals reproduced in the territories (and communities of arrival) a sense of forced dual integration toward imaginary "distant citizens" within the daily life of the cities of arrival and origin (Huang et al., 2016). This type of event, especially those with religious connotations, often promotes periodic returns of those in exile living abroad (Ferrari and Faenza, 2015).

3. The Polygamy of place: The role of religion in the process of establishing identity

Although institutionalized religion has experienced significant changes in the last decades (Palmisano and Pannofino, 2021; Scotti, 2018), it maintained an important element within our social scenarios as it continues to represent a strong factor in the self-representation of the subjects by themselves or the states. Even though some argued that its weight had been diminished as a criterion for explaining the world (Berger, 2000), this does not necessarily have led to the loss of its ability to act as a referential meaning to understand and explains the events of people daily life, their self-definition and sense of belonging. Even within *spiritual laicity religious* forms, characterized by what Grace Davie (1994) calls the "believing without belonging," religion retains an important factor for many in defining one's feeling of identity, even only by reference. Moreover, as Ulrich Beck notes, we may be experiencing the progressive revival of religiosity, as he argues, towards a post-secular process of privatization of beliefs. A new kind of subjective religiosity, as defined by Bressan (2016), is spreading not only among younger groups but also because of the new mobility patterns in place by them. This shift is happening outside traditional institutional canons, and it is deeply problematizing the type of religious education (and norms for defining affiliation) these entities have been using. In ways, it is common for people to say *I am spiritual but not religious* (Palmisano and Pannofino, 2021)¹⁴, differentiating both experiences.

As mentioned, religion as a category continues to have a fundamental role in creating (and promoting) social integration and collective identity for many. As Emilé Durkheim (1912) describes the interconnection between the sacred and the profane happens through collective ritual forms above the material ones. Here, the cohesion of a group is ratified through the mix of religious beliefs and rituals, as well as individual emotions (Sciolla, 2012), in such a way that people can connect and strengthen their social bonds by confirming their religious affiliation (and identity) as a group within a nation or a territory. It is in this complex scenario, that we intended to investigate, using a qualitative methodology, how (and in which way) religious worship could strengthen the feeling of belonging to

¹³ The number of agencies and sites specializing in tracing family members to their territories of origin, within the framework of the so-called "genealogical tourism", is increasing.

¹⁴ Formula that identifies those who engage in a search for meaning, following paths that are usually placed outside of organized churches and historical confessions, then outside of formal religions, with which there is no clear opposition.

one's own community of origin. The subject of this specific part of the paper is the community of Italians from Ceglie del Campo, one of the oldest districts of the city of Bari (Italy), who emigrated to the city of Chicago in Illinois (USA) at the beginning of past century. Semi-structured interviews were used¹⁵, both to first and second generation of emigrants, and in particular to the leaders of two associations "Kailia"¹⁶ and "CI-AMA."¹⁷ These interviews took place from March to September 2022, focused on two specific themes: a) the feeling of belonging to the place of origin; and b) the role of religious rituals in strengthening the link with their self-defined "mother land".

During our research interviews, these four themes emerged as salient and deeply interconnected, manifesting, what Laura Zanfrini describes (2007; 2014), as the «polygamy of place». First, it shows how religious rituals play a key role in creating or strengthening the feeling of belonging. In the statements by the subjects interviewed, family memories, stories, material objects, and photographic materials collectively define a sense of identity continuity that links them to their homeland and, in the case of second-generation immigrants, to their own families' past. Many respondents said that they rarely return to their hometown of Ceglie, Italy, because of their work, the school commitments of their children, or the high cost of travel. Nevertheless, they strongly express the desire to return one day or more often to a place they feel is a fundamental part of their roots and their identity. The interviewees also affirm how the religious cult of Our Lady Maria SS of Buterrito and the rituals and celebration around her veneration represent an occasion to experiment with the "feeling of been" in Ceglie, while they are actually in Chicago. In other words, religious celebration allows their city of origin (Ceglie) to be re-live within Chicago, at least for a few days, within their daily exiled/migrant experience.

As the interviews clearly showed, religious practices by Ceglie migrants in Chicago work on consolidating the feelings of belonging to their distant homeland despite their migration limitations. In other words, despite the distance, Ceglie feels close to them because of the ritual perform in their community. Here, reproducing as a simulacrum, many religious celebrations and rituals performed originally in Ceglie del Campo (Italy), as some kind of "twin rituals," become central components in reproducing Ceglie in Chicago today. For example, during the religious festival, which falls in the third week of October, the district of Ceglie (in Bari) transforms its appearance, starting with the redecoration of the public spaces to reflect their local territoriality and connection with means of production, their popular culture and the traditions that have been handed down over time.

One of the most important events is the procession of the Triumphal Chariot and the Medieval Palio, dedicated to the town's patron, at the center of the celebration. This moment is preceded by the Investiture of the Captains, during which the captains of the six districts in the region, each characterized by specific colors, swear loyalty to the Virgin Mary before battling each other through a series of tests and the various games of Palio, or horse racing and cavalry. Certainly, not all of these rites are replicated in Chicago, but plans are in place to facilitate their implementation of most of them over time. In 2004, the original icon depicting the Madonna of Ceglie was brought to Chicago as a sign of 'twinning', allowing Ceglians (from overseas) to venerate the original icon. This event manifests the role that religious rituals and sacred objects can have in confirming the feeling of identity rooting of immigrants' communities by reconstructing pieces of the motherland in the new place of settlement.

The Ceglia migrants' devotions taking place in Chicago have very specific features. A large hall has been built, and within it, every year, the image of the Our Lady of Buterrito, Virgin patron of Ceglia

¹⁵ Some of the interviews were conducted by Dr Marco De Palma.

¹⁶ Dr Giuseppe Laricchia was an important and valuable source of information and analysis of the investigated processes.

¹⁷ On the Association site: «La CI-AMA è un'organizzazione no-profit dedicata alla conservazione e alla promozione del patrimonio e della cultura degli americani di discendenza italiana del Comune di Ceglie del campo (Bari), in Puglia. (...) L'Associazione opera esclusivamente per eventi caritativi e culturali. È stata fondata oltre 30 anni fa da un gruppo di italoamericani di Ceglie del Campo, ora parte della Città di Bari in Puglia. CI-AMA tiene una Cena Danzante della terza domenica di ottobre per la celebrazione della patrona Santa Madonna di Buterrito. (...)».

is celebrated as an event that links both sides of the migration journey from Italy to the U.S. However, while the rite in Italy takes place along the neighborhood's streets and the private homes, in Chicago, the doors of the adjacent rooms to the large hall are opened to create a single common space that becomes the center stage where the whole community gathers around. Tables are set together for people to eat traditional food and listen to music from their homeland. The celebration becomes a tool to strengthen their bonds of belonging. Our Lady of Buterrito holds them together beyond the limitation of distance and time.

Ceglians living in Boston and Miami often move to Chicago during these celebrations on the third Sunday of October. Families travel long distances to participate in these communal lunches. Eating together and speaking the language of origin - identified in the Ceglian dialect more than in the Italian language, represent a possibility to emphasize a collective identity and the value of being Ceglian. These religious events also work as a way to reaffirm people's belonging, create networks of support and mutual aid, and socialize the youngest. In these moments, the other generation learns the performance of their history and the duality of their migrant experience beyond citizenship, as many of them were born in the U.S. The sculpture of Our Lady of Buterrito is another simulacrum of Ceglie that links both places and stories. Religious celebration by exile communities do more that connect with the spiritual, they also create the conditions for a community to recognize itself within a common history beyond the limitations of distance and time.

4. The politics of building a home: St. Toribio in Pilsen and La Villita. "Tu voto es poder. Hazlo por mi!" / Your vote is power. Do it for me!

In the weeks leading to the U.S. elections of 2020, emotions and anxieties were high among the members of the parish of *Saint Agnes of Bohemia* in Chicago. Their old chapel, across from the main church, would be closed on Election Day, as is one of the designated voting sites of this predominant Latina/o community, located in the neighborhood of the La Villita in Chicago. With the prospect that Donald Trump will be reelected as president, the old chapel has been used as a non-stop prayer site, where a constant recitation of rosaries is held for the forthcoming elections.

For a few months, the Society of Saint Toribio Romo (SSTR) had been busy following the divine inspiration of their spiritual patron. They are dedicated to helping Latina/o immigrants. However, they are not involved in assisting them as they cross the U.S. – Mexico border by providing shelter, medication services, education, legal assistance, or by trying to convert them to Christianity, as the spirit of Saint Toribio has been doing along the border. On the contrary, their mission is different. They are looking for U.S. citizens. They want their Latina/o and ally neighbors to register and vote. Under the slogan, "Tu voto es poder. Hazlo por mi" / *Your vote is power. Do it for me*. The Society of Saint Toribio Romo members consistently gathers at the Church of Saint Agnes to be blessed by their local pastor before they embark on their militant evangelic mission... along the streets of Chicago. They have registered thousands of new voters for the incoming elections.

But who was Father Toribio Romo? He was a Mexican Catholic priest killed by government troops in 1928 during the anticlerical conflict known as the Cristero War.¹⁸ Since the 1990s, US and Mexican newspapers have covered undocumented immigrants who have reported seeing the spirit of a priest assisting those in distress (by providing water, food, money, or transportation) as they moved to the US.¹⁹ Known as El Santo Pollero, the Holy Coyote, or the smuggler saint, Toribio Romo was beatified

¹⁸ This conflict was a reaction to the secular and anti-clerical policies implemented by the Mexican state against the Catholic Church

¹⁹ In 1990 several American newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Dallas Morning News*, reported on multiple cases of undocumented immigrants that survived the Arizona Sonora Desert after receiving help from by Saint Toribio Romo (similar reports were also made in the *Arizona Republic* in 2008). Mexican newspapers also reported similar accounts. Ginger Thompson, "Santa Ana de Guadalupe Journal: A Saint Who Guides Migrants to a Promised Land," *New York Times*, August 14, 2002, sec. The World; "Migrantes Repostan supuestas apariciones de San Toribio en Sonora," *Excelsior*, May 12, 2012, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/05/12/nacional/833534>.

by Pope John Paul II in 1992 and canonized in 2000. His devotion has exploded in the last decades as the issue of migration from Mexico, and Latino America has reached unproportioned numbers. The Catholic church of Saint Agnes of Bohemia is located on the West Side of Chicago, known by its inhabitants as the “Mexico of the Midwest.” Eastern European and Irish immigrants settled in this city area in the late 19th century. By the mid-20th century, Little Village experienced the arrival of Polish immigrants, and by the 1970s, the neighborhood shifted its population to a predominantly Mexican settlement. The first church’s building was erected in 1904 and dedicated to Saint Agnes of Bohemia or “Prague” by its parishioners, who were mainly Czech immigrants at that time. As the population increased, the need for a new church became imperative. In 1926, the current edification was erected across from the old building. According to the parish records, over 10,000 members attend weekend Sunday services. Today the population of La Villita is over 80% Latina/o, mostly Mexican immigrants and/or Mexican Americans. To accommodate many attendees, the church has nine services on Sunday alone, seven of which are in Spanish.

The Society of Saint Toribio Romo (SSTR) is a religious-based organization that expanded several parishes, mostly in the La Villita and Pilsen barrios. On that particular Sunday, the service that I attended at *Saint Agnes* ended with three announcements; (a) an exhortation to vote, (b) the announcement that the city will be collecting guns to reduce their circulation on the streets, and (c) a healing mass to remember those that have died because of police brutality and gang-related violence in the last months. To the left of the main altar, there is a provisional Día de Los Muertos altar with photographs of loved ones and the list of community members that have been killed recently by the police and gangs.

The celebration of El Día de Los Muertos, or The Day of the Dead, is an example of a religious veneration that has migrated to the U.S. from Mexico (Castro 2001, 79). This Christian-based holiday is celebrated around All Souls Day. It originated in Mexico, and its celebration has, for the most part, become part of the U.S. mainstream marketplace of celebrations. Mexican immigrants, their descendents, and friends celebrate this holiday by honoring and remembering their deceased with home and public altars. The announcements of that day at church show us the precarious and unique situation of this immigrant community. In this sense, *Saint Agnes* is not that different from many other migrant-centered parishes in the U.S. They are connected by the intersections of state violence, discrimination, and oppressive policies that regulate their immigrant experience and premature deaths.

These altars to El Día de los Muertos do more than just remember loved ones. They recreate a piece of Mexico in the U.S., all around the religious. In this regard, Deborah E. Kanter, in her book *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican*, asks a crucial question: “How had Mexico re-created itself so faithfully every weekend at St. Francis?” (Kanter 2020, 2). To answer this question, Kanter examined Catholic parishes, as St. Francis, where the majority of its members are Mexicana and Mexican descendents in Chicago. She argues that these parishes “served as refugio (refuge) ... had an Americanizing influence ... [and provided] a sense of mexicanidad ... The parish acted as a glue that connected immigrants parents and their US-reared children.” (Kanter 2020, 4). In other words, these parishes are more than religious sites. They are also constructing social identities around what it means to be a Mexican (or Mexican American) in the U.S.

As explained by Conchita Rodríguez, the president of The Society of Saint Toribio, this lay base organization was created with the scope to “accompany [...] the most vulnerable, the immigrant.”²⁰ They are inspired by their Catholic ethos in which society is interconnected as “one single body”²¹ unified mystically in the Eucharistic with Christ. For them, immigrants are the most helpless within the body of society, and therefore the Society of Saint Toribio feels responsible for their wellbeing.

²⁰ Concepción Rodríguez, president of SSTR, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, November 7, 2016. This and all subsequent translations of Rodríguez’s interview are from the author.

²¹ Rodríguez, interview with the author, November 7, 2016. Translation by author.

As one body, what happens with one of its members affects everyone in the social body collectively. In this case, faith connects those living in the U.S. and those in Mexico, as well as those in transit who are not yet part of the nation. Religions hold all together as one single community in-and-out of exile.

The Society regularly visit people in detention during their deportation procedures, especially as Chicago is one of the flighting-deportation hubs in the U.S., from where people are set back to their country via airplane. There, they organize religious and praying services, provide essential goods for those getting deported, and give support and assistance to their families. Their commitment to immigrants' welfare is consistent, which is what they describe as Toribio Romo's vocation to those affected by immigration, in this case, those forced into a retorno/return.

In addition, the group also organizes community town halls, fundraising events, fasting and sponsors social actions in favor of "Comprehensive Immigration Reform."²² They are expressions of a mix of Catholic devotional practices with civil and cultural elements that reproduce a Mexico-in-movement within the U.S. (Calvo-Quirós 2022, 20). They cook traditional food, play mariachi, and ranchera music, and organize dancing events. People wear their own regional clothes and meet other from their hometowns, gather news, and exchange information about job offerings and services in the city. For many, the drama of migration is blended with the joys of experiencing a community gathered together as Mexicans.

In this sense, The Society of Toribio Romo continues the influence of Toribio within the immigration cycle, in this case, as the people are experiencing the retorno. The worship of Saint Toribio, as a Saint of Retorno, deeply connects those deported with those left behind and those in the homeland. Many migrants return and visit the original Toribio Romo's hometown of Santa Ana in Jalisco, Mexico. The devotion to Romo has transformed the small town of Santa Ana, with around three hundred permanent residents, into a religious tourist site and a spiritual service provider with multiple amenities centered around those searching for migration favors, where between fifteen thousand and eighty thousand pilgrims visit every week.²³ During the month-long celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Toribio's beatification more than three hundred thousand pilgrims visited Santa Ana.²⁴ The humanitarian intervention of the Society of Toribio Romo in Chicago must be understood as part of a broader immigration spiritual journey experienced by Toribio Romo's believers. On the one hand, it interconnects the immigrants' early requests for protection from Toribio during their immigration to El Norte. It is now linking them again to the Saint as they receive support on their forced relocation back into Mexico. Saint Toribio becomes a companion of the drama of immigrants between Mexico and the United, regardless of the direction. The deportee's desire to be back with their families and friends in the U.S., the cruel reality of violence and poverty perpetuated by international and national policies in Mexico and the need for a cheap labor force in the U.S. created a never-ending revolving cycle, where Saint Toribio Romo remains deeply connected to the spiritual assistance of those moving back and forth.

5. Conclusions

As discussed here, root tourism can be essential to many migrants' sense of identity and self-worth. For many, constructing a piece of their homeland in their new living places is possible through the intervention of religious practices in what has been defined as "Religious Intrastates" (Calvo-Quirós, 2022, 20). In the two study cases analyzed here, it is evident the fundamental role played by religious

²² Society of Saint Toribio Romo (SSTR), *bylaws*, Chicago, IL.

²³ "Santo que no es conocido". Data are from Rogelio Martínez-Cárdenas's keynote presentation, "El turismo religioso, de la fe al product turístico," at the *XXXIII Congreso de Religión, Sociedad y Política: Dinámicas geográficas del patrimonio, el turismo y lo religioso*, Ciudad Guzman, Mexico, November 9, 2018, which I attended. See also Martínez-Cárdenas, R. 2013

²⁴ "Esperan más de 300 mil" 2019.

rituals and spiritual practices in helping migrants to strengthen their feelings of belonging both to their place of origin and to their new places, despite the long distance of departure. Religious practices became useful for constructing a piece of their homeland in the new nation. Moreover, the tourism of people's roots also happens at the immaterial, imaginary, spiritual, and emotive levels, as it allows migrants (and their decedents) to "visit" their place of origin without leaving their new home, in this case, Chicago. Root tourism confirms their belonging to a family and a national history in both places. As we have shown, here we are talking about a complex process where physical spaces are transformed and embedded (aesthetically and emotionally) to create the conditions for new forms of belonging as a migrant or a family of a migrant. These forms of root tourism are transferred into material objects like religious icons, saint images, the design of an altar, and the food and music used during festivals and religious services. But they are also embedded into immaterial ones like the rituals, or the expectations of citizenship, gender, and class used in place there. This process of identity consolidation, illustrated by Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman, is an important part of a wider recognition of the religious function of reinforcing the sense of integration and belonging through space and time. The construction of root elements plays a fundamental role in this ongoing process. Among them, public, semipublic, and private spaces have strategic importance in material and symbolic perspectives, as they become "places" with identity significance. As Hanna Arendt explained, every political action always requires a "space of appearance," and in this sense, urban spaces like churches, meeting halls, and even streets along which the processions flow become the spaces where the search (and finding) of identity and community belonging takes shape, and it is reinforced. Enhancing the conditions for root tourism means encouraging the creation of a structured system of travel and hospitality, as well as encouraging and supporting these spontaneous practices of affiliation and the associations that organize them. Based on our research, religion, rather than being seen as an element for exclusion and segregation, should be understood by its potential to promote unity, the recognition of self-worth, and dialogue between generations.

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