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**Review**

**Juan Javier Pescador,**  
***Crossing Borders with the Santa Niño de Atocha***  
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Mexican religiosity is complex, diverse, and dynamic. As it emanates across the border to the United States, traditional icons become imbued with new meaning and power as each succeeding generation tackles the social and political problems of their day. The Santo Niño de Atocha is one of those essential saints of Mexican religion that thousands look to for spiritual help and guidance. His image is known far and wide in North America and, unlike many other so-called “folk saints,” his history and origins can be traced to their source. In *Crossing Borders with the Santo Niño de Atocha*, Juan Javier Pescador documents the complex history of the Santo Niño as he

crosses borders between continents, races, cultures, socio-economic classes, and forms of worship and devotion.

Pescador tells the story of the Santo Niño with thick historical analysis and rich descriptions of the current status of the cult. Pescador describes the dynamic re-appropriation of the Santo through the centuries to meet with the religious needs of Mexicans through a changing sea of conquest, revolution, industrialization, and, most importantly, the imposition of an political border. Pescador shows how the rise of the Santo Niño reaches to the very heart of Mexican history where religion, politics, and iconography all played in the colonial decisions of the Spanish aristocracy. Changing roles of icons rests in the innovative power of unknown individuals who unwittingly decide to change the story a little bit in their particular place and time. More importantly for our day, “the Santo Niño has become a recurrent feature as a discernable marker in contemporary Chicana, Chicano, and Borderlands literature” (122).

The Santo Niño acts as a lawyer, a doctor, a policeman, a tutor, a lifeguard, a miner, and a divine chaplain during the infamous Bataan Death March, among many other roles. Yet, his intercessory mission had humbler origins as the side attraction attached to his mother the Lady of Atocha, the royal Patroness to Spanish royalty. Chapter 1 describes the Lady of Atocha as a grand polarizing force for the Spanish monarchy in Madrid as they sought to colonize the New World. Despite being an important “Mexican Saint,” the Santo Niño’s origins, at least in name, exist in a time before Mexico existed. Like the Virgin of Guadalupe, this figure is a transformed colonial icon.

Chapter 2 describes that replicas of the popular Lady of Atocha found their way to Mexico but her political importance became insignificant due to revolutionary foment and its inherent changes in social structure. The Santo Niño became a wandering Saint capable of walking outside of his various chapels and ministering to the needs of his devoted all along the colonial road *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* that connected central Mexico to the deserts of the North. The

Santo Niño allowed these post-colonial devotees to create “new ways in which they could relate to the sacred” (75). Pescador’s long documentary history shows that competitive milieu of many other images that fought for dominance in a religious world full of regional sensibilities and distinct Catholic brotherhoods and confraternities with their own icons, histories, and goals.

In Chapter 3, the umbilical cord is cut and Santo Niño becomes popular in his own right. There is no one defining moment when this occurred, but Pescador uses diocesan correspondence and inventory reports to glimpse into the innovation that slowly took place in the life of the Santo Niño. Once his separate identity is established, the tales of his miracles began to spread by easily reproducible material culture (e.g. pamphlets, art, etc.) and various forms of public storytelling (e.g. ex-voto plaques and letters). This results in new Santo Niño shrines from central Mexico into the American Southwest.

Chapter 4 brings the Santo Niño into modernity and describes his move from official Roman Catholic spheres to the domain of the home. Officiated largely by family matriarchs, the Santo Niño can be found in many home altars which serve to deinstitutionalize Christian practices which implicitly make his veneration shamanic in nature. Though pilgrimage to Catholic sites still serves a vital role in his devotion, the hybridized home altar worship continues to serve as an important part of religious ritual and identity for many Latinas/os in the United States and Mexico. Past the concerns of colonial and revolutionary Mexico, the Santo Niño becomes a “Border Saint” who aides undocumented immigrants back and forth from the United States. Because of this role, Pescador is able to document images and veneration of the Santo Niño in places far from the U.S. Mexican borderlands like Chicago.

Pescador utilizes italicized chapter introductions that document his personal experiences as a child in a Santo Niño-adoring family and as a researcher visiting important sites. Though perhaps not applicable in the strict historical analysis, Pescador might have successfully adapted more of this personal and travel narrative to the historical facts. Personal experience is essential

in documenting and conceptualizing the modern unfolding of devotion to the Santo Niño. Yet, Pescador answers a fundamental question of paramount importance to modern religious studies: What makes a Saint? The Santo Niño recreates holiness for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans through space and time. Pescador shows that modern veneration of the Santo Niño was largely a product of chance in a centuries-long dialectical exchange of all the processes that went into making the modern Mexican state. An additional question comes to bear in this work: What makes a “Border Saint”? Who is chosen to personify and sedate the pain inherent in the social distortion and criminalization of those Mexicans who go north? The new religious history emerging from the Borderlands is essential in understanding new forms of religion in the United States. This ambitious book delivers its promise of being “a history of the Santo Niño de Atocha everywhere He ever walked... (xii)”