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CREATING SPACES OF THIRD GENDER IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW SPAIN:
REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN
PORTRAIT PRINTS OF MEXICAN
COLONIAL NUNS

Molly Nelson

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**CREATING SPACES OF THIRD GENDER IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW
SPAIN:
REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN PORTRAIT PRINTS OF MEXICAN
COLONIAL NUNS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

In Colonial New Spain, *vidas interiores* were confessions written by nuns in convents under the order of their confessors. These *vidas* served as the basis for biographies of the sisters, which were written and distributed by confessors. *Vidas* frequently included printed portraits of the subjects on whom they were based. One important aspect of these portraits is the gender identities of the nuns portrayed. In many of these *vidas*, nuns took on masculine roles typically unavailable to women in the Viceregal era. To accomplish these undertakings, nuns gave up their femininity, including the standard colonial role for females as wife and mother. As nuns, these women struggled to shed their unholy sin through prayer, reflection, and penance. This continual battle against feminine sin allowed nuns to take on roles considered traditionally-male in the Novohispanic era, such as leadership and scholarship. Because of the lack of unholy femininity and the “male” tasks these nuns could accomplish, they could be seen as beings in a space of third gender, whom were also worthy of emulation. In my discussion, I will examine the role of the space of third gender for New Spanish nuns, and how the printed portraits in *vidas* convey these standards.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: ISSUES, QUESTIONS, LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues and Questions

Vidas interiores chronicle the lives of model nuns before and during their time in a convent. While they were originally written as penitential exercises within convents, many *vidas* also served as the basis for biographies of the sisters written by male confessors as writings intended for nuns and the religious public in colonial Mexico. The strong influence of the Catholic Church in Novohispanic life shaped how these *vidas* were rewritten and published. *Vidas* were intended to serve as models of ideal Christian womanhood, as specified by the Catholic Church. Included with the written text are printed portraits of the female subjects of the *vidas*. *Vida* portraits show their subjects in a way that few other women were depicted in the Novohispanic era. The nuns are shown writing, reading, and practicing leadership, unusual activities for colonial Mexican women of any class. While the *vidas* share the theme of nuns modeling a godly life, and create a unique space, each reveals multiple facets of conventual and religious life in New Spain.

In my survey of the three portraits, there are three different categories of which I discuss. First, the portraits are unframed or framed, meaning an engraved “frame” surrounds the nun. The second category is the classification of the main actions in the portraits: devotional, study/desk, or mortification. Devotional portraits focus on a prayerful pose, study/desk portraits indicate the sister is standing or sitting at a desk, and mortification

portraits highlight the practice of bodily mortification. Lastly, I refer to the portraits as full- or half-length, which simply refers to whether the sister's upper or full body is shown in the print. While I do not discuss all the portraits I included in my general survey (**Table 1** on page 91), the table gives an overview of what types of vida portraits exist.

These writings and portraits exist in an ambivalent space. While they were written for nuns' confessors as part of penitential exercises, vidas also allowed nuns to subtly question authority and gain autonomy within a convent.¹ Nuns shed their femininity and gained male qualities in these portraits, creating a space of third gender. The third gender is a space where nuns struggle with female sin and begin take on qualities generally only seen in Novohispanic men. Jake Scobey-Thal writes in "Third Gender: A Short History" that "Gender is a construct, and people should be able to define it for themselves".² Scobey-Thal outlines how Aristophanes, a Greek comedic playwright, defined the third gender as "a union of the male and female", which is the definition I will use in my discussion.³ Taking on traditionally male roles such as scholarship and leadership, while constantly atoning for female sin through prayer and self-mortification, allowed nuns to create this space of third gender. Fighting against this sin is also what established nuns' eligibility as role models for other women in New Spain, as living without female sin was seen as the pinnacle of ideal Christian womanhood. Nuns' portraits in vidas captured their lives and their struggle to purify their souls from sin in the hope that other nuns

1. Kathryn J. McKnight, "The Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo, 1671-1742," (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997): 5.

2. Jake Scobey-Thal, "Third Gender: A Short History," *Foreign Policy*, June 20, 2014, accessed December 6, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/30/third-gender-a-short-history/>.

3. Scobey-Thal, "Third Gender: A Short History."

would strive to replicate these sisters' holy lifestyles. Nuns' vida portraits set a standard of emulation for other sisters. While the images differ in specific actions, both the portraits and the written vidas themselves follow a formula of smallness before God and constant struggles towards holiness. The male authors of vidas use a standard formula to write their subjects into purity and holiness before God. Looking at formulae for other types of Novohispanic portraits will be useful for my analysis of vida portraits.

Rather than following norms of secular Novohispanic portraiture, portraits of nuns in vidas more closely follow the standards of New Spanish religious portraits, such as those of saints and male clerics. As very little research has been done on the printed portraits of Novohispanic nuns in vidas, the language and themes of other New Spanish religious portraiture still provide a useful starting point to analyze the printed images in vidas. While the vidas of nuns and their accompanying portraits have been grouped together, there exist several variations within the genre that reveal different accomplishments and practices of the sisters. Do all the nuns shown in these portraits complete the same activities, or do they find different paths in their battle to live a sinless life? What do the portraits tell us about life in a convent? Also, what do they maybe leave out in the portrayal of the sisters? Researching potential answers to these questions will help to reveal the intended trajectories and meanings of the images in nuns' vidas..

In New Spain, female bodies were viewed as inherently flawed and sinful because of the original sin committed by Eve in the Garden of Eden. From this concept of feminine flesh, it was desirable to control and contain female bodies; either in a marriage managed by a

responsible husband, or under lock and key in a convent. It was within these secure institutions that dangerous femininity could be managed, and a more ideal form of Christian womanhood achieved. Nuns offer one example of how women were perceived as constantly struggling with their sinful female flesh through asceticism, prayer, reading, and mortification. Printed portraits offer evidence of these activities, and tell the viewer that these women were no longer viewed as a danger to society because of unconstrained womanhood. In the portraits, nuns are shown triumphing over the sinfulness of the female flesh as they begin to take up certain male roles and masculine qualities. The modes of showing this continuity of gender roles in printed portraits, as well as how these portraits begin to address gender fluidity of the nuns, is the focus of my discussion.

Nuns served as unique role models in colonial Mexico, and *vidas* were a means of demonstrating their morality to other nuns and religious public. *Vidas* of both male and female clergy were rewritten from the original confession by confessors, published, and disseminated to serve as models for an ideal Christian lifestyle.⁴ Because nuns were able to continually fight against womanly sin, as accounted for in the *vidas* and their portraits, they could be seen in a similar space as virtuous males. Because “female” and “sin” were seen as intertwined in New Spain, nuns that were shown as role models could not be seen as completely female, because then they would carry sin and not be worthy of emulation. Ironically, taking something away from women that was inherent, in this case their

4. Kelly Donahue-Wallace, “Bajo los tormentos del tórculo: Printed Portraits of Male and Female Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New Spain,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 14, no.1 (2005): 109.

female sex, was the epitome of ideal Christian womanhood. It is the battle against sin by nuns that allows them to be role models.

Examining how themes of gender are formed in these portraits through content will be an important part of my analysis. What techniques do the artists use to frame nuns in a male light? With what objects are these nuns depicted that masculinize them? The medium of the images themselves is also of considerable importance. In Novohispanic territory, prints were believed to carry truth and infallibility.⁵ When images were printed with nuns, the prints were seen as being truthful and accurate representations of Godly virtue. This weight of truth came from the first printed book – the Gutenberg Bible. Because the Bible was the first book to be printed, the weight of the method used to print it carried significance when other literature and images were printed. This importance also came with the printed portraits in *vidas*. When combined with the text, these images had the ability to carry a powerful message. The manuscripts themselves also pose many questions, and examining the portraits in combination with the text will help to further reveal meaning within the images.

5. Donahue-Wallace, “Abused and Battered: Printed Images and the Female Body in Viceregal New Spain,” in *Women and Art in Early Modern Latin America*, ed. Kellen Kee McIntyre and Richard E. Phillips (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2005): 129-30.

Literature Review

Colonial Novohispanic art only arrived in art historical scholarly discussion in the twentieth century, much later than European works completed in the same era. Prints, especially, were long considered to not have the same artistic merit as paintings and sculpture. Only recently has the genre of printmaking in colonial Mexico begun to be explored. One of the main scholars who investigates this subject is Kelly Donahue-Wallace. Through several articles, she highlights the propagation and preponderance of prints through New Spanish society. Donahue-Wallace notes that because prints were often associated with the Catholic Church, they were believed to carry a measure of truth with the ecclesiastical weight of the Catholic Church behind them. Because of this belief, prints carried important messages to the people of Viceregal New Spain. Because these messages were mainly visual and easily distributed, they carried a message that was easily interpreted by the masses. Religious messages were particularly important. One aspect of Novohispanic printmaking that Donahue-Wallace's research has cracked open is ecclesiastical printed portraits, including those of nuns. In this thesis, my discussion will center on these Viceregal printed portraits of nuns in *vidas interiores*.

Portraiture

The visual language of portraiture is key to understanding the Viceregal aristocracy. Secular portraits captured the identity of noblemen and their families, and functioned as displays of power, privilege, and noble blood. Portraiture was primarily done for those of noble or aristocratic blood, including *mestizos*, those of mixed Indian and Spanish lineage who had descended from the indigenous nobility. Portraiture mainly focused on these groups because they were the classes who could afford to have the portraits completed. Various features of the portraits reveal the high stature of the sitters, as discussed by Magali Carrera in the book *Imagining Identity in New Spain*. Men were shown in full regalia, usually in a quarter turn toward the viewer. This position established them as powerful, aloof, and looking down upon the viewer. They posed with various instruments of knowledge and learning, as well as royal decrees proclaiming their noble status, titles, and documents that proclaimed the right to hold land. The women depicted in these portraits also posed with elements that showed their wealth, including opulent fabrics, jewels, and foreign furniture. Portraits were often hung in places where they would be viewed by many, such as entrances to homes and public institutions.⁶ The *Portraits of Simón de la Valle and María del Carmen Cortés y Cartavio* (**Figure 1**) demonstrate how these portraits showed faith and power. Simón de la Valle is shown at a desk writing, as a sign of his authority and leadership. His wife, María del Carmen Cortés y Cartavio holds a rosary and Bible, and wears a crucifix around her neck to show her piety and faith.

6. Susan Deans-Smith, "Creating the Colonial Subject: Casta Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain," *Colonial Latin American Review* 14 (2005): 189.

They are both in a quarter-turn away from the viewer to present themselves as powerful and aloof.



Figure 1, Artist, *Portraits of Simón de la Valle and María del Carmen Cortés y Cartavio*, Oil on canvas, Peru, Circa 1750.

<http://denverartmuseum.org/collections/spanish-colonial-art>

Religious portraiture also held a special role in Viceregal New Spain, especially those in *vidas*. In these prints, men and women of the clergy were shown completing their daily activities, including housekeeping and civic service. As mentioned above, these images were intended to inspire piety and an unwavering dedication to God, as the portraits' subjects demonstrated. Prints and paintings that depicted Catholic saints were also popular. In the article "La casada imperfecta: A Woman, a Print, and the Inquisition," Kelly Donahue-Wallace discusses the dissemination of a print of St. Josaphat, and how it

led to much controversy and an Inquisition trial for one woman. Events like this demonstrate the power of portraits of nobles and saints in New Spain, and how they can influence opinion, public perception, and action by the highest authorities.

Painted nun portraits, as different from the prints in vidas, also constitute an important subgenre of Viceregal portraiture. Crowned nun portraits were painted when a young girl took her vows to become a full member of a convent community. In these portraits, the subjects would be dressed opulently with intricate crowns and surrounded with many accessories including candles, dolls of the Christ child, flowers, and palm fronds. Nuns often dressed this same way in portraits celebrating the twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversaries of their vows.⁷ Sor Ana Teresa de la Asunción (**Figure 2**) provides an example of a crowned nun portrait. She wears the veil of her new order and poses with objects demonstrating her piety. Death portraits were also important memorials. After the death of an important female leader in a convent, a portrait of the deceased sister was painted, often wearing a crown and holding flowers, not unlike the portraits of entering novice nuns. These would hang in convents as a reminder of the importance and good deeds of particular nuns, and to serve as a role model for generations of sisters to follow.⁸

7. James M. Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico: Crowned Nun Portraits and Reform in the Convent* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 37.

8 . Córdova, *The Art of Professing in Bourbon Mexico*, 35.



Figure 2, Mariano Peña y Herrera, *Sor Ana Teresa de la Asunción*, Oil on canvas, New Spain, Circa 1789.

<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/artes-y-medios/monjas-coronadas-una-exposicion-de-pintura-novohispana>

Role of convents and nuns

Convents played a special role in New Spain. They were institutions of power and prestige that often served the daughters of the most important families and became refuges where young women could practice ideal Christian womanhood, as Donahue-Wallace terms the ideal Novohispanic female behavior. In the essay “Monjas coronadas: The Crowned Nuns of Viceregal Mexico,” Kristen Hammer notes that having a daughter

enter a convent was an affirmation of the status and piety of noble Viceregal families. Not only did they have to pay the hefty dowry for the entrance of their daughters into the most prestigious convents, they often had to prove that they were descended from “Old Christian” blood; that is, having no Jewish, Moorish, Indian, or Black lineage. With a daughter in the convent, and oftentimes a portrait to commemorate the event, families could publically assert their power and religiosity.

Gender roles

The literature on gender in the Viceroyalty of New Spain emphasizes the proper role of women in society at large and in convents. These gender roles are very much a matter of performance. Gill Perry, in the introduction to *Gender and Art*, highlights the theme of socially constructed and performed gender roles, like those in New Spain. Gender is not something one is born with; rather it is performed in quotidian rituals and through generally established norms in society. In New Spain, the performance of elite women in these roles was strictly regulated within a marriage or inside convent walls. In “Bajo los tormentos del tórculo: Printed Portraits of Male and Female Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New Spain,” Kelly Donahue-Wallace emphasizes that the role of women was indeed secondary to that of men. Biographies of female nuns were only published in exceptional cases where the nun was seen as having overcome her inferior status of sinful womanhood. Much of the scholarship follows the same line of women being subjected in various ways in the viceroyalty.

One of the major ways in which women were subordinated in society was through the Inquisition, as discussed by Donahue-Wallace. In these cases, women were brought before an Inquisition tribunal to answer for actions that were deemed conflicting with the beliefs of the Catholic Church. Some of the crimes that highlight the persecution of women include the dissemination of prints promoting excommunicated orders and claims of sexual encounters with various religious figures. Many of the women that were punished under the Inquisition were unmarried, secular women whose dangerous femininity was not properly controlled.

Prints

Prints carried a powerful meaning in New Spain. Since prints were often used by the Catholic Church, the government, and other authorities; the public saw them as authoritative and infallible. The power and authority with which prints were endowed is evidenced in one particular Inquisition case involving a woman named Manuela de Candia. Candia was caught distributing prints depicting a major saint of the Jesuit sect, which had been banned in 1767 from all Spanish territories by the Crown. The Inquisition worried that people would believe Candia and then continue promoting the banned Jesuits and one of their martyrs, St. Josaphat.⁹ Candia was brought before a tribunal and ordered to cease and desist the creation and distribution of these prints. On account of the infallibility associated with the printed image in New Spain, the prints of clergy were very influential. In the case of prints incorporated in biographical *vidas*, they

9. Kelly Donahue-Wallace, "La casada imperfecta: A Woman, A Print, and the Inquisition," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 18 (2002): 232.

model an ideal Christian life, especially for women, reviewed and handed down by authorities. This will figure in prominently in my discussion of the portraits and vidas later on.

CHAPTER TWO METHODOLOGY: MODES OF ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Modes of Analysis and Interpretation

My approach to the analysis and discussion of these prints will be both a formal and socio-historical analysis of the works. I use the traditional art historical method of formal analysis to break down the images into their constituent parts, and then discuss them each in turn as part of the whole image. I will also critically analyze the images in relation to the social milieu of Novohispanic Mexico. This approach is useful as it allows the viewer to follow the reasoning of the author and critically examine each part of the image both individually and as a part of the whole image. Eventually the viewer can consider all the images in concert with one another as part of a greater discussion of the meaning of holy femininity.

Formal analysis is a mode of art historical analysis that examines the form, the material, execution, and placement of the artwork; allowing the viewer to render greater meaning from all of the component parts.¹⁰ After the formal analysis is built up from the most basic parts of the composition; including medium, line, texture, and color; the piece is examined in its entirety. Only then can it be determined what the subject of the image is. After the formal analysis, it is necessary to look at external information about the image to determine more about its meaning, context, and purpose. Viewing the object image can lead to a shallow interpretation when just the formal analysis is taken into consideration.

10. Sylvan Barnett, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art, Tenth Edition*, (Boston: Pearson, 2011), 50-51.

However, when viewed with external information such as sociohistorical context, the image takes on a different meaning and significance.

Examining the printed portraits of nuns without a concept of social context would be very difficult. Donald Preziosi discusses about reading outside of simplistic interpretations in his volume *Rethinking Art History*. Preziosi insists on rethinking art history beyond terms of traditional art historical discourse. This means thinking outside of connoisseurship and simple oppositions. This means looking at how artworks "...appear to reflect social and historical processes."¹¹ While it is possible to examine technique, medium, and other aspects of a piece; these elements take on greater meaning when examined in concert with the social history of the work. For example, looking at light in an image might show how the printmaker used a certain technique, such as thin lines. However, when examined with the social element, this light takes on a greater meaning in the print because it might be used to show favoritism from God in the case of a favored or especially spiritual nun (see **Figure 4**, *Sor Sebastiana Josepha*).

In my discussion, I also examine printmaking as its own form of fine art, comparable to painting and sculpture, rather than as a lesser medium. Giorgio Vasari, in the *Vite* from the 1500s, begins to look at printmaking as its own genre of art, not lesser than sculpting or painting, but simply as a different kind of art.¹² Barbara Stoltz states that, "the fact that

11. Donald, Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 16.

12. Barbara Stoltz, "Disegno versus Disegno stampato: printmaking theory in Vasari's *Vite* (1550-1568) in the context of the theory of disegno and the *Libro de' Disegni*," *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (2012): 19. doi: 88995005.

Vasari creates a theory of printmaking gives the proof that he perceived the importance of printmaking in the arts.”¹³ I employ theories specific to printmaking to assess the impact of these works in Novohispanic society. Also unique to printed works such as these is the incorporation of printed text. I rely on the written text for interpretation of the printed works. I include the text in the images for my investigation. All of these analyses factor into the different levels of interpretation of the prints I will examine below.

Formal, Contextual, and Comparative Analyses

I use various analyses and discussions to inform my examination of these prints. I will then compare them to one another to deduce a greater schema for the meaning of these prints in New Spain. After an introduction of social and conventual elements surrounding the prints in the colonial era, I look at each print through an individual formal analysis. I then complete an iconographic analysis that allows me to look at the greater meaning of the actual objects in the image.

Iconographic analysis follows formal analysis and looks at the significance and interpretation of objects and figures in the work. It considers iconographical meaning of individual objects or figures, and what they might represent individually, within the greater context of the work, and their larger social meaning. This form of analysis allows me to determine the relation of different objects in the work, and how they form a greater meaning both within and outside of the work. I use the iconographic analysis of the

13. Stoltz, “Disegno versus Disegno stampato,” 19.

printed portraits jointly with a textual analysis of the nuns' vidas. This allows me to determine the function and significance of particular objects which may be of importance to the nun and her conventual life and role. Lastly, I compare the images of each nun one to another in order to establish norms and differences that unite and differentiate these images. Comparative analysis looks at the common threads that run through the images that help show how these nuns existed in a space of undefined gender in Novohispanic Mexico

CHAPTER THREE CONVENT LIFE

As Brides of Christ, nuns were expected to uphold the professed vows for the duration of their lives. Sustaining commitment to their vows sometimes resulted in exceptional fame for certain nuns. Biographies of their lives were published, after being rewritten from their own writings by male confessors. *Vidas* served as testament to their piety and demonstration of ideal Christian womanhood. These biographies, or *vidas*, often included an engraved portrait of the nun actively engaging in prayer or in other activities at her convent. As the portraits that are the object of my study contain many elements of both architecture of convent life, interpreting their social meaning and function requires an understanding of a broad range of topics. These topics include the role of convents in colonial life, the requirements for entrance, the economic interests of convents, convent architecture, the activities of religious life, rituals and ceremonies, and the spiritual writing carried out by nuns.

Role of Convents

Convents held a unique space in New Spain. Young women had many reasons for entering a convent. Many were spiritual. Their religious vocation often started at a young age. In many *vidas* the author recounts how from early childhood onward, future nuns lived ascetic lives, depriving themselves of daily comforts and rejecting societal luxuries. While convents functioned as institutions of faith and religion, they also served as exclusive refuges for the daughters of the wealthy. Aristocratic criollo families frequently

sent their daughters to the convents as a way of maintaining familial prestige. Those families whose daughters belonged to convents were perceived as having elite status because of the strict religious, blood purity, and monetary requirements necessary for a daughter to enter many Novohispanic convents.¹⁴ There were often also economic interests for entrance into a convent. Asunción Lavrin notes that "...convents were still regarded as safe social outlets for a family of short means and several marriageable daughters."¹⁵ While entrance to a convent was not cheap, it was significantly less expensive than furnishing a marriage dowry for a daughter. However, this did not make it any easier to gain admission to an exclusive convent.

Attaining a place in an important institution did not come easily for young women or their families. Requirements for entrance into a convent were numerous. For the most elite convents, the rules for entrance were also very rigid. Novohispanic convents followed the rules set forth by the Council of Trent, which convened between 1545 and 1563 in Italy. Novice nuns needed to show that they were legitimate children, that they came from a respectable family, and that they were in good health. They also needed to prove *limpieza*, and pay a dowry.¹⁶ Finally, the lifestyles of young nuns were considered when they entered the convent, since it was often assumed that only the best young women should wear the veil.¹⁷

14. Asunción Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," *The Catholic Historical Review* 58 (1972): 367.

15. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 368.

16. Alma Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas: Profesión y muerte en Hispanoamérica virreinal* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdes, 2008), 81.

17. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 368.

For entrance into the numerous convents in major cities of New Spain; including Mexico City, Puebla, and Antequera; families established and showed their pure Catholic lineage, known as *limpieza de sangre* or blood purity. Many monasteries required proof of purity of blood called a *probanza*. Similar standards were in place for the convents and their potential female entrants in New Spain.¹⁸ In *Genealogical Fictions*, María Elena Martínez discusses the thoroughness of proving *limpieza* for the Franciscan monastery, the Province of the Holy Gospel. When young men petitioned to enter the Province of the Holy Gospel, parish records were reviewed to ensure that generations going back to the grandparents of the individual petitioning were not entered in the baptism books for Indians or members of a *casta*, those of mixed descent. Those who knew the young man's family were often interviewed to ensure that nowhere in the bloodline had there been marriages to heretics, Moors, Jews, Blacks, or Indians. This process ensured the deep Catholicism and religiosity of the young man and his family.¹⁹ However, the *probanzas* constituted just one part of requirement for entry into the convent.

Rules for entrance requirements guided most of the convents in New Spain, although there are documented cases where not all of these regulations were fulfilled, as Alma Montero Alarcón points out in the book *Monjas coronadas*. Oftentimes, novice nuns did not meet the minimum age requirement but were admitted into the novitiate period

18. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 85-86.

19 . María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 215-17.

anyway.²⁰ In other cases, daughters born out of wedlock were admitted. These flaws in lineage were overlooked on account of dispensations given by ecclesiastical authorities, so long as the young woman could show that she lived a good Christian life and came from a clean lineage regardless of the marriage status of her parents.²¹ There were also certain convents that were more relaxed in their entrance requirements, and would admit mulatas and mestizas.²² One of the most difficult parts of the entrance requirements to fulfill was the dowry. According to Montero Alarcón, the families of many young women could not afford the dowry to certain exclusive convents, and some were only able to collect it "...gracias a los bienhechores, las cofradías y las colectas realizadas por las mismas jóvenes."²³ After these requirements were met, the young woman entered into a novitiate period where she could consider whether or not the cloistered life was for her.

Entrance into the Convent

The novitiate was a sort of exam designed to test the resolve of potential nuns.²⁴ It generally lasted one to two years, during which time the novices practiced the vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity. It was after this period that the young woman left the convent for a period of approximately three days, visited her family and shed the last remaining vestiges of secular society and its luxuries. Oftentimes, this visit home is when the profession portraits of the young women in elaborate nuns' habits and crowns, also

20. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 86.

21. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 86.

22. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 86.

23. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 84.

24. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 91.

known as crowned nun portraits, were painted (see **Figure 2**). Portraits were not the only display of luxury associated with entrance into a convent. After the profession ceremony, families would often throw lavish parties that demonstrated their wealth and elite status to the rest of the community.²⁵ These festivities contrasted greatly with the vows that were professed at the ceremony.

The vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty that the new nun would take governed the nun's actions for the rest of her life. They were considered binding until her death, under the penalty of mortal sin if they were broken.²⁶ Separate orders interpreted these rules differently throughout the colonial era. Some orders, such as the Capuchins and Recoletas, took vows of poverty that included asking for alms to cover meals and other daily expenses. Other orders such as the Franciscans, kept servants and lived in private cells.²⁷ Certain orders even allowed for the keeping of *reservas*, or incomes for other expenses that the nuns felt necessary for a comfortable life in the convent.²⁸ While many orders allowed for these small luxuries, those such as the Capuchins observed the vows much more strictly, even accepting those who had no dowry to offer.

25. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 372.

26. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 373.

27. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 373.

28. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 374.

Economic Interests of the Convents

While many convents required high dowries, they were also involved in a variety of economic interests that gained funding for multiple uses in the cloisters. While their investments and economic efforts had varied success, convents were nevertheless influential economic entities in New Spain. Asunción Lavrin writes that convents' "investments in land, industries, and urban properties played a decisive role in the shaping of the general economy of New Spain." While not all of these efforts were profitable due to mismanagement, convents became such major property holders and lenders that by the end of the 1700s, they were "...quite capable of affecting the economic development of the community and the country in general."

The original sources of these funds that allowed the convents to wield this influence varied and contributed greatly to the economic standing of the convents. Patrons and dowries supplied a significant portion of convent funds. Landed and wealthy criollos would often provide the initial funding for the convent, with additional funds disbursed over time and even left to the convent in the will. The sisters themselves also donated to their convents in multiple ways. Firstly, the dowries that came with professing nuns were quite hefty for many convents, providing a steady income with each new novice nun. Dowries were regularly 3,000 to 3,500 pesos per sister.²⁹ By the 1810s, urban convent properties could be worth 40,000 to 50,000 pesos, so 3,000 pesos was more than a drop in

29. Asunción Lavrin, "The Role of Nunneries in the Economy of New Spain in the Eighteenth Century," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46 (1966): 371-375.

the bucket for many of these convents.³⁰ Sisters could also use personal funds from their *reservas* to donate back to the convent. Since this money was given from the sister's family, and not the veiled nun herself, it did not violate the Church's vow of poverty required of nuns.

With these sources of funding, convents ended up with rather deep pockets compared to many other colonial institutions. Lavrin notes that certain convents had annual incomes of up to 63,000 pesos, a considerable amount in colonial Mexico City. Along with the urban property convents owned, they maintained a strong financial position within colonial New Spain. While management of these resources was not always stupendous, they put convents in a comfortable enough position to continue their mission. Along with funds, the architecture of the convents helped to achieve their goal of bringing sisters closer to God.

Convent Architecture

While there were great differences in how the nuns of different orders lived, the architecture of the convents where they lived shared many similarities. The principal purpose of convents was to enclose the nuns. Cloisters kept the nuns in, and kept others out, except for those whose entrance was absolutely necessary, such as doctors. The architecture of the convents was meant to effectively separate nuns from the fleshly world. As Francisco de la Maza states: "Los conventos de monjas...exigieron una

30. Asunción Lavrin, "The Execution of the Law of Consolidación in New Spain: Economic Aims and Results," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 53 (1973): 36.

arquitectura especial que respondiera a la peculiar manera de vivir de las enclaustradas ‘esposas del Señor.’”³¹ Colonial convents usually adjoined a church, where the public would worship and receive communion. A church usually consisted of a single nave, with a central aisle and seating on either side. At the end of the nave, there were upper and lower choirs, where the nuns spent much time in prayer, song, and worship. The choirs were separated from the church nave by a grill, so the nuns would be kept apart and invisible to the public in attendance at mass. The choir would usually connect to the rest of the cloister via a small private staircase. Sisters would return here multiple times throughout the day to sing and pray, all the while leading active lives in their convents. The cloisters were only accessible to the church through a small window through which the nuns were able to receive communion from a priest.

While the convents served a purpose within a church, they also functioned as small institutions in themselves. Convents existed as small cities within the greater ones in which sisters lived. Maza describes them as having small streets, plazas, chapels, gardens, and cemeteries; in addition to the cells where the nuns were housed.³² Throughout the cloisters, nuns participated in many activities designed to strengthen their holiness. Within each convent nuns lived in their own cells or in a communal dormitory-style space. In certain orders, such as the Benedictines, nuns could, in a veiled snub at the vow of poverty, own the cells in which they lived.³³ Benedictine nuns would fill their cells

31. Francisco de la Maza, *Arquitectura de los coros de monjas en México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1973), 9.

32. Maza, *Arquitectura de los coros de monjas en México*, 12.

33. Lavrin, “Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico,” 374.

with luxuries such as ornaments for their habits and drinking chocolate. Other orders, including the Carmelites and Capuchins did not allow this kind of luxury – nuns lived in extremely sparse surroundings, which permitted only the bare necessities.

Activities

The nuns of New Spain did not live static lives. While they were cloistered, they participated in civic life, serving as leaders and role models in convents. They also engaged in intellectual pursuits, all the while manifesting their devotion to God through vehicles ranging from prayer to self-mortification. Nuns did not live a sedentary life of luxury. While in many convents they wanted for little, sisters actively strove to better themselves, their convents, and their communities; elements all highlighted in the printed portraits.

The nuns partook in a multitude of activities in convents outside of song and prayer, varying from the mundane to the morbid. As the majority of nuns spent all of their time cloistered, how they passed each day reveals much about their values and where they placed importance in their lives. While a great deal of the day was spent in worship and prayer, they also participated in activities designed to cultivate their intellect and character. Lavrin discusses how reading was extremely common among New Spanish nuns, as they were supposed to spend their time reading the Great Books, as well as

religious texts and hagiographies.³⁴ While many nuns could write, some stood out for their talents, such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, well known for her poetry and other writings. Many women were also commanded to write about their lives as penitential exercises, at the order of their confessors.³⁵ Some of these *vidas* were rewritten for the public by confessors, so they could be made available to the religious public and other nuns. The goal of publishing these *vidas* was to disseminate examples of ideal Christian womanhood for other nuns to follow. As I have already discussed, in *vidas interiores*, there were often printed portraits where the subjects were shown with objects pertaining to their position. It is possible to discover many of the activities of the nuns from their portraits.

In the portrait of the New Spanish nun María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz by,³⁶ the viewer can infer some of her activities based on the artwork. As Donahue-Wallace notes, Sor María, like many other nuns of her station, is "...surrounded by objects of [her] good administration."³⁷ The image shows Sor María with books, writing implements, and a portrait of the Virgin of the Pillar. The sister also carries the license granted to her by Pope Benedict XIV that gave her permission to establish a convent that she eventually founded. From these accouterments, it is possible for the viewer to envision Sor María as a literate civic leader who also embodied the ideals of Christian womanhood such as

34. Lavrin, "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," 382.

35. Kelly Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*: Printed Portraits of Male and Female Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New Spain," *Colonial Latin American Review* 14(2005): 108.

36. Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*," 107.

37. Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*," 107.

worship to God and enclosure of her dangerous femininity in a secure institution. While the activities in the image of Sor María are relatively tranquil, other portraits allude to violence in an attempt to gain a life closer to Christ.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Ceremonies were a significant part of life as a nun in New Spain. Ceremonial rituals defined the entrance, anniversaries, and the death of a nun; serving as markers and bookends for convent life. The first important ceremony was the taking of the habit where the nun began her novitiate period. The dates and details of the ceremony where the young girls took the habit were often described in *vidas*, during sermons given at the ceremonies, and in cartouches in portraits of the young novitiate's profession. The nun-to-be would leave for the ceremony at the church from a family friend's home or the house of her godparents dressed in rich fabrics and accessorized with jewels. The dress was significant because during the ceremony of the taking the habit, the young woman would change into the habit of the order, symbolizing her transition from the fleshly world to the spiritual one. At this time, the novice nun would often cut her hair to further distance herself from her former material existence.³⁸

The ceremony of the taking of the habit began when the novice entered the church with her parents, godparents, and other important relatives, kneeling in front of the principal altar to pray. After this, the habit of the novice was blessed with holy water by the main

38. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 120.

priest of the convent. The young woman would then exit to the chapel's foyer with a chaplain and two nuns. During this period in the foyer the novice would admire images of the Virgin Mary and Crucified Jesus in a demonstration of her faith and religious vocation. The convent doors would open after this period of personal reflection, where the young lady would enter and was greeted by the rest of the cloistered nuns. At this point the priest would read a sermon that reflected the religious qualities and nature of the young woman that brought her to the order. The novice would then answer questions that ensured her free will and dedication to convent life. Following this, one of the key parts of the ceremony took place: the dressing of the young woman in the habit and veil behind a doorway with the other cloistered nuns. She would then exit and present herself to her family, friends, and the general society as a new novice member of the order.³⁹

While the taking of the habit was undoubtedly a significant moment in the life of a young nun, the profession ceremony was even more important. The ceremony of profession would take place at the end of the one to two year novitiate period. Before this ceremony the novice nun would return home to shed the last vestiges of secular life. The ceremony began with a sermon from the lead priest of the convent who would highlight the glory and devout obligation of a religious calling, and what the weight of professing to the convent meant for the young woman, her family, and the religious community at large. While the other nuns of the convent looked on, the priest would ask the nun-to-be to reflect on her decision to become a nun, and consider what professing meant to her life. Subsequently, she would profess her vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty; as well as

39. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 125.

her lifelong dedication to God and her new convent. The ceremony ended with singing, and the nun being recognized by her new, cloistered name, prefixed by “Soror,” meaning sister. Celebrations would follow throughout the city, with her family and friends celebrating the new life one of their own had undertaken. It was during this time that nun entrance portraits were painted, in the home of her parents or at the convent into which the young woman was entering.

While some ceremonies celebrate the beginning of a new life, others mark the end of one. The death of a nun was also a notable moment in convent life. After being given the last rites, and being surrounded by her religious sisters during her death, the recently deceased nun was processed through the cloisters before being laid out below the choir. Similarly to the nuns’ profession portraits, deceased sisters were adorned with a crown and a flowered branch or palm, representing lifelong dedication to her faith. According to Montero Alarcón, the death portraits also symbolized a peaceful and joyful transition to her heavenly life.⁴⁰ In her coffin, the deceased sister was surrounded by lit candles and covered with many flowers. The body of the nun was laid out for three days, continually watched over by her sisters. After this period, she would be interred with hymns and prayers.

As the life of a nun began and ended with ceremonies, many events took place during her life in the cloisters that also merited important rituals and ceremonies. The naming of a nun as abbess was another significant event when the nun being voted into a position

40. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 129.

wore a crown. As an abbess, the nun elected by her sisters would lead the convent and act as an intermediary with both ecclesiastical and civic authorities. The election of an abbess was also often immortalized in a portrait; the portrait was meant to serve as an example of an ideal Christian life for other nuns in the convent.⁴¹ The twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversaries of a profession ceremony were celebrated in the same way, with a portrait commemorating the virtuous nuns' qualities. While religion was a key aspect of profession and other ceremonies, the splendor and opulence of celebrations that came with them were often important social indicators of status and wealth.

While these ceremonies did in fact serve as important markers in the life of a nun and a convent, they were only secondary to the daily spiritual life within the convent walls. For most women who entered a convent as nuns, the spiritual environment offered a permanent respite from *el siglo*, the outside world. They lived nearly every day in the same manner, dedicating themselves to prayer and spiritual contemplation. Through these holy actions, they believed themselves to be moving closer to God. Everything else in the convent environment was intended to help with this final goal. Architecture, daily activities, and interactions with outsiders were all carefully controlled in such a way that God was the focus of every day and nearly every action in the nuns' lives. It is this dedication to spirituality that would become memorialized in the *vidas interiores*.

41. Montero Alarcón, *Monjas coronadas*, 148.

Female Writers in the Convent

Writings by members of holy orders are very common in religious literature. Poetry and confessional works were penned by well-known saints, including Saint John of the Cross and Saint Augustine. There is also precedent of female writers in religious roles, such as Catherine of Siena, named the first female doctor of letters in the Catholic Church. The writings of nuns in the *vidas* that are examined here take precedents from many of these works. *Vidas* are also written according to their own formulae, says Kathryn Joy McKnight in *The Mystic of Tunja*. The techniques used in confessionals and other writings by these nuns show the strategies nuns and their confessors used to reach out to other female members of the clergy and religious public. As McKnight describes, similar methods are in use across the writings of female religious members. In particular, she examines them through the writings of Columbian nun Madre Castillo. While Madre Castillo wrote in New Granada, the rhetorical strategies she uses can also be seen in the *vidas* of New Spanish nuns.

One theme in *vidas* and other conventual writings is how the nuns construct themselves as miserable and sinful beings before the perfection of God. However, like Madre Castillo, this visioning of themselves as weak contrasted with the powerful roles they carried out in convents and how they subtly questioned the authority placed over them in colonial Mexico. McKnight writes that Madre Castillo envisioned herself in her writing as “weak and worthless”; however, this self-representation must be contrasted against Madre Castillo’s “rise to power in the convent and to the language of such documents as

those she signed during three terms as abbess.”⁴² Like Madre Castillo, the Novohispanic nuns who wrote *vidas* would subordinate themselves in their writings while holding powerful positions that influenced events both within and outside of the convents. Rather than simply reading these *vidas* as forced confessionals, it behooves us to read them as thoughtfully-written texts that elucidate the juxtaposition between power and submission. McKnight writes that we should treat the nun as an “...autonomous creator of meaning and style whose lived reality can be read in a truthful text.”⁴³ To tease out further meaning in the text, McKnight suggests that we follow several suggestions to deepen our understanding of the genre.

McKnight offers multiple points to consider when analyzing *vidas*. A *vida* is produced within a relationship between nun and confessor.⁴⁴ *Vidas* were written as penitential exercises ordered on the nuns by their confessors. In these works, nuns wrote about their childhoods lived in penitence and the constant shame that they felt as they were humbled in prayer before God. Autobiographical *vidas* were not intended to be published, but those considered exceptional were incorporated into the *vidas* written by a confessor, spiritual director, or another male clergy member. When studying *vidas*, it is also important to keep in mind “...the human capacity and responsibility for naming and determining oneself.”⁴⁵ According to McKnight, this is the ability of nuns to create identity in their own *vidas*. While these are all key concepts to keep in mind when

42. McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja*, 5.

43. McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja*, 10.

44. McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja*, 18.

45. McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja*, 19.

studying vidas, they did not develop in the New World, rather, they owe much to an author from the Old World.

St. Teresa of Avila was a Spanish nun, mystic, and writer born in 1515 in Gotarrendura, Spain. She entered the Carmelite convent in Avila, Spain in 1535. St. Teresa wrote many works, among them two major works that both served as models for the confessional writings of Novohispanic nuns, the *Book of Her Life* and *Interior Castle*. While St. Teresa discussed her life and upbringing in these works, the rhetorical models she used also strongly affected the way that New Spanish nuns constructed their own works. St. Teresa used her writings to help determine how women would later be viewed within the structure of the Catholic Church.

Carole Slade discusses how St. Teresa transformed the genre of the confessional, which “presumed the guilt of the narrator, into a vehicle of self-defense.”⁴⁶ St. Teresa’s work was very influential for other female writers in convents in realizing the power their images held, a trait very useful for the vidas of New Spanish nuns and the accompanying portraits. Slade notes that St. Teresa successfully understood how to manipulate gender in order to construct herself as a powerful, yet humbled figure. Slade writes that “he who represents...controls the social construction of gender, which reciprocally derives from and translates into political and economic relationships.”⁴⁷ In sixteenth-century Spain, when St. Teresa lived, it was typically men who did the representing. St. Teresa inverted

46. Carole Slade, *St. Teresa: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), xii.

47. Slade, *St. Teresa*, 2.

this standard and constructed her own image in the *Life* using a female gaze, thus allowing her to control her own power and relationships, even though she lived a cloistered life. St. Teresa did not believe herself to be the only individual that occupied this niche, and began to format a type of autobiography that other female nuns could follow. As Slade wrote, “Teresa replaced the [previous] model [of nun’s autobiographies] by subtly transmuting the female script of nun to that of another Christian script, that of apostle.”⁴⁸ Rather than allowing herself and the nuns that followed her model to become pitiful victims of original sin, St. Teresa highlighted herself as overcoming this disability, which allowed other nuns to follow her example and do the same in the New World.

St. Teresa not only worked to establish herself as an unsubordinated individual, she also showed how religion functioned for nuns not only as members of a religious order, but also as women.⁴⁹ St. Teresa profoundly exposed how religion influenced and molded her in the *Life*, and this allowed other nuns to analyze the role of religion in their own lives. Religion was able to give nuns different abilities, such as the mystical visions like St. Teresa had, or unique leadership roles, like many of the New Spanish nuns examined here. More than anything, St. Teresa foreshadowed the ability of these Novohispanic clergy women to minimize the shame their bodies caused because of original sin, and maximize the positive abilities they possessed through favor from God and constant dedication to religious life. New Spanish nuns took the model established in the *Life*, and to a lesser extent in *Interior Castle*, and manipulated the type to fit their own lives and showcase their own abilities and holiness. More than anything, vidas modeled after St.

48. Slade, *St. Teresa*, 3.

49. Slade, *St. Teresa*, 6.

Teresa's confession allowed nuns to have both a voice and power even within a convent. What the examples of Madre Castillo and St. Teresa show us is that the writing of nuns was not isolated to the convents of New Spain. Rather, it was a wider tradition that has its roots in Iberia, and beyond, and spread to different areas of the New World.

Conclusion

Convents served as both a refuge and an influential institution in New Spain. Religious orders were frequently a place for the wealthy to protect their daughters and maintain high standing in Novohispanic society. However, convents also wielded an enormous amount of influence in civic spheres due to their deep coffers and connection with the powerful Catholic Church. It was the sisters who lived in these convents who helped create institutions of power and prestige. The activities in which the sisters participated as part of their convent life, including writing, patronage, and civic duties were what allowed the convents to become so powerful in the first place.

Within convents, nuns were not burdened with the sin of their female sex nor the responsibility of being a wife and mother. Without these occupations, sisters were free to exercise prayer, penance, and everything else that was necessary for a fulfilling convent life. Part of this time spent in the convent included writing confessions for male confessors. It was through these confessions that nuns would assert their power. While they were under lock and key in the convent, confessions served as a way for the nuns to assert their power on a similar plane as religious men.

Life in a convent was marked by rituals and ceremonies intended to help sisters achieve a holier life. Everything from the entrance ceremony to death portraits highlighted a pious, yet full, life. While nuns were dedicated to living a life for God, they spent their time cultivating skills in leadership, scholarship, and patronage. Written *vidas* and the accompanying portraits captured the full lives of these sisters. While convent life was separated from the world—the *siglo*, nuns were not immune to social changes. In the next section, I discuss the social context surrounding colonial Novohispanic nuns and how it eventually influenced convents in a drastic way in the seventeenth century.

CHAPTER FOUR SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context surrounding *vidas* and their accompanying portraits significantly influences both image and text of the *vidas*. The foundation of convents provided a refuge for spiritual women, but also became a center of controversy for ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Sisters sought to create their own rules and manage their convents, but male officials wanted to control the convents and the women inside of them. The Bourbon Reforms affected all levels of society in New Spain. The orders came from as high as the Spanish King who sought control of all the Spanish territories. The nuns rebelled against these reforms in both vocal and subtle ways. While they went so far as to not accept the reforms in certain convents, the portraits also reflect a more nuanced form of rebellion. The portraits in *vidas* show sisters with tools of erudition and leadership, indicating that the authorities could not limit their what was inside their minds. These small acts of rebellion are documented in both text and image, and reviewing the historical background gives the viewer more context surrounding the *vida* portraits.

Before the Bourbon Reforms

The Catholic Church in Early New Spain

Along with European norms that the conquistadores brought to Mexico, they also brought a mandate for conversion of the native peoples to Catholicism. Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull for Christianization of the Americas in 1493, and left the Spanish with the

mission of Christianizing the territories, including New Spain.⁵⁰ With this order, the Spaniards began imposing Christian norms and standards in New Spain, including the conversion of the native peoples in and surrounding Tenochtitlan.

The evangelization of the natives began with the arrival of *los doce apóstolos*, twelve Franciscan friars from Spain. The twelve Franciscans were the first Spaniards to begin the Christianization of the Mexican natives. These Twelve would hold significant and powerful positions throughout their tenure in New Spain. The Apostles were strict believers in the rule of St. Francis and they considered this ascetic lifestyle necessary to their mission.⁵¹ This allowed them to complete their mission of evangelization with dedication and constant work. The result of this fervor and desire to convert natives resulted in the fact that “thousands of Indians, if not converted, were nevertheless brought within the orbit of the Catholic Church by the Franciscans.”⁵²

The Spaniards, especially the missionaries, taught the various ethnic groups in New Spain the tenets of Christianity and began to baptize the natives into Catholicism, entering their names in a *libro de castas*. The *libro de castas* was a book where names were written along with the *raza*, the cultural association of the individual. This religious conversion continued throughout the colonial era. Religion, however, was not relegated to members

50. Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Introduction to *Art of Colonial Latin America*, by Bailey (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005), 37.

51. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. “Twelve Apostles,” by Brian Wilson, accessed July 15, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/twelve_apostles.

52. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. “Twelve Apostles,” by Brian Wilson, accessed July 15, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/twelve_apostles.

of the clergy and the natives they were converting. Religion would infiltrate almost all aspects of life in New Spain, beginning with the blood with which people were born.

In *Genealogical Fictions*, author María Elena Martínez traces the discourse of *limpieza de sangre* from its origins in Spain, and its journey over to colonial New Spain. The concept of *limpieza de sangre* is especially crucial in New Spain because it influenced who could enter institutions, hold certain positions, and who could marry whom. *Limpieza* defined class and status: a stain in a family line could wreck the social prospects of generations to come. *Limpieza* also proclaimed the strength of one's Christianity, with only old Christians, *cristianos viejos*, being allowed to hold positions of significance within the Novohispanic Church and government. *Limpieza* was so important because, as Martínez states, "...[A] 'pure lineage,' was a critical sign of a person's loyalty to the faith."⁵³ This lineage would turn out to be very important in appointing officers to the territory of New Spain, the responsibility of the Spanish Crown and the Audiencia they appointed.

The Viceroyalty and Hapsburg Rule

The Council of the Indies in 1524 transferred the official power over American territories to the Crown, under the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella. Direct advisers to the King oversaw the territories and reported to him regularly. In 1527 the King created an

53. María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 1.

Audiencia, an advisory group that directly oversaw the territories of the Spanish crown. The Audiencia immediately preceded the appointment of the first Viceroy of New Spain.

The political status of New Spain was transformed from that of territory to that of official viceroyalty in 1535 when the king, Charles V of Spain, appointed Antonio de Mendoza y Pacheco to be viceroy and serve in the king's stead in the territories. The viceroy served as the king's eyes and ears in New Spain, representing him both physically and symbolically. As Sonya Lipsett-Rivera states, "the relationship between the head and the rest of the body provided the central metaphor of Spanish society for authority over subjects."⁵⁴ In this metaphor, the king represents the head and his subjects are the body. This order was deemed necessary for the proper rule of law in Spain, and therefore, in its territories. The position of the Viceroy was a way for the King to replicate his Spanish rule in New Spain, allowing a physical presence to serve the territory on his behalf. While the Spanish King was not physically present in New Spain, the Crown still had a direct hand in the dealings of its territory in the form of a viceroy. The Viceroyalty would continue to be ruled by powerful European houses for years to come, beginning with the Hapsburgs.

The rule of the Hapsburgs over Spain started with Charles V of Spain, grandson of the Catholic Kings. He began his reign in 1519. The House of Hapsburg continued to be sovereign over Spain, including its territories, until 1700 when Charles II died and left the

54. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, "Language of Body and Body as Language: Religious Thought and Cultural Syncretism," in *Religion in New Spain*, ed. Susan Schroeder and Stafford Poole (Albuquerque: U on New Mexico P, 2007), 70.

throne to Philip V of France, of the house of Bourbon. Throughout the tenure of the House of Hapsburg in rule over New Spain, the Spanish “Crown was very diligent in undermining the authority of the first generations of conquistadors and their descendants and imposing royal institutions of governance and authority.”⁵⁵ The Crown would use its influence through bureaucrats in the Americas to make economic gains for the Spanish monarchy.

Under the Hapsburg empire, the rulers enforced a particular type of economy, known as mercantilism.⁵⁶ Mercantilism is the economic practice of securing raw materials for the wealth of the ruling party or Crown. The Spanish Crown collected many raw goods, with a high preference placed upon precious metals.⁵⁷ This resulted in a drastic underdevelopment of agriculture and industry.⁵⁸ These economic decisions would eventually harm the Spanish economy. The massive import of precious metals to Spain resulted in inflation, making Spanish goods more costly than those produced in other

55. *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, s.v. “Politics and Government: Hapsburg New Spain,” by Martin V. Fleming, accessed July 17, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/politics_and_government_hapsburg_new_spain.

56. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. “Trade and Markets: Hapsburg New Spain,” by Louisa Schell Hoberman, accessed July 15, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/trade_and_markets_hapsburg_new_spain.

57. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. “Trade and Markets: Hapsburg New Spain,” by Louisa Schell Hoberman, accessed July 15, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/trade_and_markets_hapsburg_new_spain.

58. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. “Trade and Markets: Hapsburg New Spain,” accessed July 15, 2013, by Louisa Schell Hoberman, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/trade_and_markets_hapsburg_new_spain.

European countries.⁵⁹ This lack of economic foresight on the part of the Hapsburg Crown not only affected Spain, but the Viceroyalty of New Spain too. Much of the weight of this failure was blamed on the Viceroy.

The Viceroy was the individual in charge of assuring that monetary and unfinished goods reached the King back in Spain, including silver. This silver “was particularly important for financing royal business that was slowly paying off the Crown’s constantly increasing debt load.”⁶⁰ However, mercantilism under the Hapsburgs and the Viceroy was inefficient and worked slowly, doing little to pay off the mounting debts of the Spanish Crown. Members of the ruling class often held positions in various audiencias, or committees. Such overlapping duties and audiencias would filibuster new laws and progress, including sending raw goods back to Spain, further stalling economic progress. Mendoza himself was in no rush to bring new laws into existence: “[D]o little and do it slowly,” worked well in the colonial environment.”⁶¹

As the colonial period continued, the Crown began to have to sell offices that carried with them prestigious titles in order make up their massive debt caused by the mercantilist

59. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. “Trade and Markets: Hapsburg New Spain,” accessed July 15, 2013, by Louisa Schell Hoberman, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/trade_and_markets_hapsburg_new_spain.

60. *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, s.v. “Politics and Government: Hapsburg New Spain,” by Martin V. Fleming, accessed July 17, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/politics_and_government_hapsburg_new_spain.

61. *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, s.v. “Politics and Government: Hapsburg New Spain,” by Martin V. Fleming, accessed July 17, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/politics_and_government_hapsburg_new_spain.

economic policies. King Phillip II began to sell offices in New Spain, too, to gain funds for himself.⁶² These offices highly favored *criollos* and non-noble Spanish families who had found prosperity in the Americas. Through this sale of offices, they could gain titles and notoriety for the family name and future generations. These policies eventually caused much suffering for the Spanish Crown as it accrued more debt at the end of the 17th century. Because the last ruler of the Hapsburgs, Charles II, died without an heir, the responsibilities of ruling Spain and its corresponding territories fell to Phillip V of France, of the House of Bourbon.

While the House of Hapsburg's policies and rule sputtered out toward the end of the 17th century when the House of Bourbon took over, many institutions from the original rulers remained in place throughout the rest of the colonial period, including the office of the Viceroy and many provincial borders within New Spain. The Church was another significant institution that stayed in place through the end of the colonial era and continued to influence politics in New Spain. While the Spanish Crown under the Hapsburgs began the Viceroyalty, it was the Bourbons who would drastically reform it.

62. *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, s.v. "Politics and Government: Hapsburg New Spain," by Martin V. Fleming, accessed July 17, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/politics_and_government_hapsburg_new_spain.

Bourbon Reforms

The Bourbon Rulers

After the decline and eventual end of the reign of the House of Hapsburg, the House of Bourbon became the ruling dynasty of Spain and its territories, including New Spain. On account of the economic deterioration and increasing debt Spain had accrued during the reign of the Hapsburgs, the Bourbons wanted to drastically reform the New Spanish economy. In the Bourbon view, this was best accomplished under strict centralization of all government entities, starting under the first Bourbon ruler of Spain, Philip V, who ascended to the throne in 1700. The Bourbon dynasty created an absolutist state spanning the globe that put most of the power in the hands of the reigning monarch.⁶³ Because Spain was still greatly suffering under the debt from the House of Hapsburg, the new ruling house decided to concentrate on its richest territory, New Spain, to turn a profit.

In 1765, under Charles III of Spain, José de Gálvez was sent to New Spain as visitor general to review the situation in New Spain and recommend any needed reforms.⁶⁴ The Bourbon government desired to streamline all elements of colonial society from the very powerful Church to the structure of the family. They began these efforts with the

63. Susan Deans-Smith, *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. "Bourbon Reforms," accessed July 28, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry.do?ta=routmex&uh=bourbon_reforms.

64. Susan Deans-Smith, *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. "Bourbon Reforms," accessed July 28, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry.do?ta=routmex&uh=bourbon_reforms.

expulsion of the Jesuit order. In 1767 the Spanish government expelled all members of the Jesuit order from Spain and its territories, including New Spain, because they felt that this order was undermining the government. This expulsion caused much strife in New Spain because the Jesuits were a powerful and influential order, and several were New Spanish-born *criollos* who felt they had a right to remain in New Spain. This resulted in a multitude of protests from the citizens in New Spain, against which the Bourbons imposed an authoritarian regime. A woman named Manuela de Candia circulated prints of St. Josaphat, a Jesuit saint, in 1768 in protest of the Jesuits' expulsion from New Spain and its territories.⁶⁵ The Bourbon government prosecuted Candia under the Inquisition, although she suffered no severe punishment.

Along with religion, the mercantilist system was also changed. The Bourbons attempted to drastically reform the economic policy that had suffered under the Hapsburgs. The goal of the Bourbon economic policy was to stimulate economic growth and streamline the collection of taxes and fees under a salaried, merit-based bureaucracy.⁶⁶ Bourbon authorities also tried to streamline international trade by using fewer boats to ship goods back to Europe, and increased tariffs to raise profits.⁶⁷ This increased demand for

65. Kelly Donahue-Wallace, "La casada imperfecta: A Woman, A Print, and the Inquisition," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 18 (2002), accessed October 16, 2012, doi: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/msem.2002.18.2.231>.

66. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. "Bourbon Reforms," by Susan Deans-Smith, accessed July 28, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry.do?ta=routmex&uh=bourbon_reforms.

67. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. "Trade and Markets: Bourbon New Spain," by Pedro Pérez Herrero, accessed July 28, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/trade_and_markets_bourbon_new_spain.

American products in Europe resulted in further reforms within New Spain. The Spanish authorities began to rely heavily on regional centers of trade, which then shipped goods to major ports.⁶⁸ The mining frontier was also pushed further north because of the increasing demand for precious metals. What these reforms show, from the 1700s onward, is an attempt by the House of Bourbon and its various rulers to streamline the industries of New Spain so that it would become profitable for the Spanish Crown. While the Bourbon Crown found differing measures of success with its various pursuits, it profoundly changed the structure of New Spanish society, including those most insulated from the outside world.

Convent Reforms and Vida Común

Institutions that were profoundly affected by the Bourbon reforms included the convents of New Spain. While the nuns in discalced convents had been living very simple lives since their founding in New Spain, nuns in other convents had luxuries such as private cells, precious ornamentation for their habits, and gourmet foods such as chocolate. When the House of Bourbon took over the Spanish Crown, both clerical and secular authorities felt that convents had become too lax in their management of the sisters. They began to institute reforms in convent lifestyle that aimed at a simpler and more communal lifestyle, known as *vida común*. *Vida común* mandated that all nuns share dormitory spaces, a kitchen, and that few to no servants or *donadas* live in the convents with the

68. *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*, s.v. "Trade and Markets: Bourbon New Spain," by Pedro Pérez Herrero, accessed July 28, 2013, http://www.credoreference.com.libproxy.unm.edu/entry/routmex/trade_and_markets_bourbon_new_spain.

veiled nuns. In proposing these rules in the 1760s, the authorities sought to overhaul convent life and make the nuns return to their professed vows of poverty.

Both the Church and convents fell within the reach of Bourbon reform. Stephanie L. Kirk writes that the decadence of calced communities, and the so-called “irrationalities of women,” did not fit under the “rational, masculinist project of the eighteenth-century reformers.”⁶⁹ Convent reforms offered one way for the Church to control its convents, while the Spanish Crown was pleased with the opportunity to rein in certain institutions affiliated with the very powerful Catholic Church. While *vida común* was publicized as a way to make sisters live lives consistent with their professed vows, two authors argue that it was actually a poorly veiled attempt to establish masculine control of the females in the convents.

Stephanie Kirk and Asuncion Lavrin both write that the attempted enforcement of *vida común* was one way for the male clergy and secular authorities to manage what they viewed as sisters rebelling by living outside of professed vows. Lavrin writes that in the correspondence between the nuns and their superiors, “there were clearly delineated viewpoints that reflected the nuns’ feelings as opposed to the masculine desire to impose order and extract obedience.”⁷⁰ Male clergy felt the desire to control the convents in such a way as to drastically change the mode of life to which the nuns were accustomed. This was not just because of the desire to make them conform to their vows of poverty.

69. Stephanie L. Kirk, *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007), 86.

70. Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 302.

According to Kirk, nuns produced an anxiety in the administrators, which made male clergy and officials impose their will over the convents with a “pervasive and unquenchable desire.”⁷¹ Despite this challenge from male authorities, certain nuns began to question *vida común*. As many *vidas* were published during this period of *vida común* being forced upon the nuns, the nuns who the *vidas* eulogize represent a challenge to the masculinist standards of the age. The Bourbon Reforms sought to keep nuns in place, submissive to the Catholic Church and male authorities. The nuns in the *vida* portraits occupy a third space where they show certain female qualities while taking on male occupations. I examine how the *vidas* challenged gender norms in my discussion below. While the *vida* portraits themselves do not directly challenge the status quo of the Bourbon Reforms, the actions of the sisters depicted in them subtly defy the expectations of women and nuns in the Novohispanic era.

In short, *vida común* under the Bourbon reforms represented a major upheaval for the sisters in convents. While it was disguised as a measure to make orders more holy, scholars point out that it was a male attempt to take back control from the nuns. Male authorities felt that the convents were growing too strong against the Catholic Church and civic government. *Vida común* was an attempt to quell the sisters in their attempts to grow even more powerful against the male hierarchy. While the nuns had varied success in their attempts to rally against *vida común*, their efforts echoed the power that was present throughout their *vidas*. Challenging the rule of the Church as well as secular authorities is one way the sisters utilized their skills in leadership and knowledge to assert

71. Kirk, *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico*, 84.

their worth. I further discuss how nuns utilized their skills in my discussion on the vidas below.

CHAPTER FIVE
VIDA PORTRAITS: FORMAL, CONTEXTUAL, AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Introduction

Printed portraits feature prominently in *vidas*, often on the first few pages of the book. These portraits offer an introduction to the *vida*'s subject and show important activities in which the nuns participated. The text below the image offers more details about the sister's life. These portraits are the first place in the *vida* where the third gender is created, and the context surrounding it revealed. While printed nun portraits all belong to the same genre, each portrait uses different framing and compositional techniques. They also differ in the primary action of the nun that is portrayed. The activities of the nuns in the portraits often refer to the primary undertakings or roles of these individual nuns in their respective convents. The different styles evident in the portraits throughout the eighteenth century may also reflect changing societal norms that influenced how nuns were depicted in their *vidas*. The Bourbon Reforms sought to keep sisters in place under the watchful eye of male and ecclesiastical authorities; *vidas* and their portraits subtly challenged standards set by these authority figures. While not directly confronting the church and government leaders, nuns transform gender roles in their portraits and *vidas*, beginning to occupy a space of third gender.

There are three main formal elements that define these portraits: the framing, the action of the nun, and how much of the subject's body is shown in the portrait, such as half-length or full-length. Portraits are framed or unframed - being framed meaning that there

is a "frame" engraved surrounding the portrait of the nun (see **Figure 4**). Unframed portraits contain no framing and include the subject within a quotidian background, usually an interior convent space. The action of the nun in the portrait also differentiates the types. In the survey of portraits I conducted for this thesis, there are three main action types: study/desk, devotional, and mortifying. Study/desk portraits show the subject by a desk or with objects of study and learning, such as a book or quills. Devotional portraits show the nun in an act of prayer or with a rosary, a clear reference to their constant prayer and reflection in the convent. Mortification portraits are those that show the nuns reflecting on tools used for self-mortification and penance. Oftentimes, they are shown with skulls that refer to ridding one's body from sin during the mortal, fleshly existence. While the portraits sometimes reference other actions, there is a primary activity that is the focus of each portrait. The last formal element is half- versus full-length portraits. In my analysis of three printed images, these three formal elements vary. However, despite the differentiation in the individual portraits, the themes of battling individual sin and occupying masculine roles are common to all of them.

Formal and Contextual Analysis of Vida Prints

Examining printed portraits of nuns through formal analysis followed by a textual analysis of the vidas will allow me to develop a more thorough view of how nuns begin to purify and establish themselves in masculine roles in their respective convents. The three images I discuss showcase different aspects and types of nun portraiture, although there is crossover between the types of portraiture discussed above.

Sor María de San José is a half-length portrait of the penitential type, with a focus on mortality and self-mortification. *Sor Sebastiana Josepha* includes similar themes as *Sor María de San José*, but the full-length kneeling pose of the subject refers to devotional action. *Madre María Anna* is a half-length, framed portrait in which the subject is depicted with objects of authority, classifying it as the study/desk type portrait.. A formal analysis of the portraits allows me to tease out details that show how the nuns rid themselves of female sin and build identities that included masculine roles. The accompanying text of the vidas reinforces the messages of the images and helps explain the relationship of the portraits to their social context. Lastly, comparing the text and the image allows me to show how they complement each other in developing a third space in which the nuns lived.

Sor María de San José

Sor María de San José (Image 1), a 1723 engraving from New Spain by Francisco Sylverio, from *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph, religiosa agustina recoleta, fundadora en los conventos de Santa Mónica de la ciudad de la Puebla, y después en el de la Soledad de Oaxaca* by Sebastián de Santander y Torres, depicts a New Spanish nun standing in a darkened interior space with several religious objects clustered together on a table in front of her.

The objects in the portrait of Sor María de San José focus on the importance of living a life dedicated to prayer and Jesus, while rejecting sin and other worldly temptations. The prominent figure of a crucified Jesus highlights Sor María de San José's devotion and spiritual marriage to him. The pain that Jesus suffered on the cross is also an important part of Sor María de San José's life. The scourge shown in the portrait replicates in Sor María de San José's own life the pain of Christ and allows her to imitate Christ's suffering. When she was able to repent for her sins, Sor María de San José could prepare herself for the life after her fleshly mortal existence, whose death was represented by the human skull posed below the figure of Jesus on the crucifix. Read together, these objects on the table in front of Sor María de San José reflect her holiness and the Christian ideals by which she lived.



Figure 9 *Sor María de San José*. Francisco Sylverio, eighteenth century. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

Figure 3, Francisco Sylverio, *Sor María de San José*, Engraving, New Spain, 1723.

The imagery concentrating on Sor María de San José's mortification, Jesus' suffering, and the temporary fleshly existence of this world distinguish this print as the nun portrait type focused on mortification. Her pose and the setting constantly refer back to the model of ideal Christian existence. She gazes reticently at the objects in front of her, in a pose of quiet devotion and piety. It is also significant that Sor María de San José is enclosed in a

convent, a location that allows for the creation of an ideal, female Christian life. This reflection on prayer, self-mortification, and eternal life are activities that should be completed by a nun in the Viceregal era, in order to repent and purify herself of sin. The text in the cartouche at the bottom of the image also reinforces the virtue of her life, stating that she was indeed a cloistered nun in a convent. Sor María de San José rejects all forms of sinfulness, including that which was inherent in her female body. Her vestment shows this very denial of her body. Her wimple and habit obscure her female form, and thus her sinfulness. She shows that her body is less great than her devotion to Jesus by donning the modest habit and wimple. She also battles against sin through multiple practices including prayer, mortification, and a minimal lifestyle. These activities are clearly referenced in her printed image. Through her portrait, Sor María de San José shows her holiness and a model of ideal Christian existence for other nuns to follow.

Sor María de San José is portrayed as extremely pious because of her pose and the objects surrounding her in her portrait. This quality were very important for a colonial nun. Because art in the printed medium was seen as infallible during the Viceregal era, as discussed above, the printed portrait of Sor María de San José was viewed as a true rendering of her personage and qualities. Her downcast eyes and placement among objects of religious importance highlight her role as a modest Christian nun, highlighted by her confessor in her vida. Downcast eyes show Sor María de San José's modesty through control of her gaze and actions⁷². Each object in turn, as well as her pose,

72. Sebastián de Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph, religiosa agustina recoleta, fundadora en los conventos de Santa Mónica de la*

emphasize her holiness and battle against sin. It is these qualities of Sor María de San José that would merit memorialization in a printed text such as the *vida*, which came from her confessional writings. Her writings included an account of the founding of a convent in Oaxaca and spiritual exercises for worship of the Virgin Mary⁷³. Other nuns, and potentially some wealthy secular women, would read and see the image in concert with the text and strive to emulate Sor María de San José's model of female Christian perfection.

But what is it that other nuns were actually reading, and seeking, through text and image from Sor María de San José? Reading the text in the *vidas* lets the reader know more about the holy life of Sor María de San José. Sor María de San José's portrait reflects actions and holiness described in her *vida*. In one of the first instances narrated in the text of *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph, religiosa agustina recoleta, fundadora en los conventos de Santa Mónica de la ciudad de la Puebla, y después en el de la Soledad de Oaxaca* by Sebastián de Santander y Torres, the author recounts Sor María de San José's bodily mortifications and penance from a young age. Sor María de San José would practice these exercises in order to achieve a higher state of holiness, rid herself of sin, and bring herself closer to God. From a young age, before having entered the convent, known because of the description of her "pequeñi[t]o cuerpo,"⁷⁴ she would

ciudad de la Puebla, y después en el de la Soledad de Oaxaca (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de M. de Rivera, 1723), 70.

73 . Asunción Lavrin, "Female Visionaries and Spirituality," *Religion in New Spain*, Stafford Poole and Susan Schroeder, eds. (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2007), 167.

74. Sebastián de Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph, religiosa agustina recoleta, fundadora en los conventos de Santa Mónica de la ciudad de la Puebla, y después en el de la Soledad de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de M. de Rivera, 1723), 44.

practice bodily mortification with the use of cilices that she had inherited from her deceased father. Santander y Torres describes her self-mortification and penance: “De estos cilicios de cordas se aplicaba dos a los muslos y dos a los brazos todos los días desde...que se levantaba...hasta que el hora de comer...”⁷⁵ Sor María de San José would also practice penance by carrying herself with eyes downward at all times and speaking only when absolutely necessary.⁷⁶ These qualities and actions are reflected in her printed portrait because of her humble pose and downcast eyes. An instrument for self-mortification is shown plainly on the table, referring to the numerous instances of her bodily mortification in her vida, both before and during her cloistered life. Her calm pose and demeanor also reflect the strength of her character that was necessary to overcome the spiritual battles she had fought in her cloistered life, and as the leader in the foundation of other convents.

After Sor María de San José entered the convent of the Augustine order, she founded two other convents in Puebla and Oaxaca, New Spain. These endeavors would challenge Sor María de San José. Santander y Torres describes battles with the demons that she and other nuns suffered in their mission to found new cloisters. Some of the challenges Sor María de San José and her other founders faced included a statue of the Virgin becoming covered in dirt and loud, disembodied voices that bothered the novices in the new convent.⁷⁷ However, she also suffered personally because, according to Santander y Torres, Sor María de San José “...padeció mucho más que todas, no solo porque su

75. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 44-45.

76. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 56-57.

77. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 206-10.

ardentísima charidad sentía lo que afligía a sus compañeras...sino también porque a su profunda humildad.”⁷⁸ However, Sor María de San José overcame these obstacles through fervent prayer and concentration on God, so much so that her biographer noted the “...especialidad...de su oración.”⁷⁹

Constant prayer, reflection, and writing ultimately allowed Sor María de San José to find peace and reticence in God, despite battles with Satan and other demons.⁸⁰ The printed portrait of Sor María de San José shows this calm demeanor gained from constant prayer, and indicates that she reached a higher stage of holiness through her continual battles and fervent prayer. The lessons written about in her vida are contained in her portrait, and the viewer could learn how to model herself after them, from both text and word. Her concentration in the image focuses particularly on the crucified Jesus, and her biographer notes how this symbolism held a special place for Sor María de San José.

While prayer to God, the Virgin, and other saints was a crucial aspect of any nun’s life, Sor María de San José’s biographer places particular significance on the importance she held for the crucified Jesus and his blood shed for worldly sins. Santander y Torres describes the constant fervor that Sor María de San José felt for Jesus’ dying for her and others’ sins on the cross.⁸¹ This love for Jesus is reflected in the portrait of Sor María de San José as she focuses on the figure of the crucified Christ. This would also encourage

78. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 208.

79. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 246.

80. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 262.

81. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 344-46.

the reader of the text to concentrate their own mind on the holiness of Jesus and the cross, in emulation of Sor María de San José.

Ultimately, the portrait of Sor María de San José reflects qualities and events from her life that are encompassed in the text. However, what do reading these together begin to tell us about how her gender would have been perceived? Sor María de San José rejects her female flesh and sinfulness through a multitude of Godly actions, and in doing so begins to rid herself of part of the burden of being a woman. In her vida, Sor María de San José started to loosen the bonds that fastened her to both her female identity and inherent sinfulness that came with being a woman in colonial New Spain. Through continuous discipline in prayer, mortification, and a cloistered life, Sor María de San José was able to achieve a life free from original sin that secular women of her gender carried. After she was able to rid herself of female sin, Sor María de San José began to take up male roles and qualities including serving as a leader in the foundation of two convents, and being a desirable model of piety, as both text and image describe. Typically only males were able to exemplify this saintly "...life of self denial, hard work.... [and] exceptional zeal in the service of God."⁸² Sor María de San José began to reach this masculine stature that Donahue-Wallace describes, through denial of her female flesh. Examining other nuns of the New Spanish colonial era will show how they also rejected the sinfulness of their female flesh, and take up male roles presented through text and image.

82. Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*," 108.

Madre María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio

Madre María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio (**Figure 4**) is a 1758 print made from an engraving by José Benito Ortuño from New Spain. The engraving is located in the bound book *Vida de la venerable Madre María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio* by Joseph Bellido. The print shows Madre María Anna Agueda within a flowered frame, holding a book and quill.



Figure 4, José Benito Ortuño, *Madre María Anna Agueda*, Engraving, New Spain, 1758.

In contrast to the portraits of Sor María de San José and Sor Sebastiana, the portrait of Madre María Anna suggests that she is an important leader, with the quill and book as symbols of her leadership.⁸³ While her habit and rosary tell us something of her identity, it is also necessary to examine the text of her biography to learn more about her life and

83. Jennifer Eich, *The Other Mexican Muse: Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio (1695 – 1756)*, (New Orleans: UP of the South, 2004), 230.

the deeper significance in her portrait. She poses with a quill and a bound book – most likely related to her leadership role as the founder and first prioress of a convent and extensive theological writings. A book and quill to write with would have undoubtedly been useful tools for this leadership calling. On account of these details, Madre María Anna’s portrait belongs to the study/desk type. To understand more about this role, and its significance for Madre María Anna’s portrait, it is necessary to turn to her biography, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio* by Joseph Bellido.

Madre María Anna’s biographer writes that after she was elected to prioress by the grace of God, she undertook the duties and worked “...arrancando, plantando, y edificando”⁸⁴ the nuns and the cloisters. Bellido continues that Madre María Anna “...compuso todas las Oficinas...atendio á todas tuviessen que hacer, y en que trabajar...”⁸⁵ The book and quill in Madre María Anna’s portrait refer back to her leadership role and the duties that she undertook as the first prioress of the convent she founded. Books and quills were considered “objects of administration,”⁸⁶ as offices of leadership such as Madre Maria Anna’s were typically reserved for males in the Viceregal era. Through these roles, Madre María Anna begins to step out of the female gender with which she was born and undertake a male occupation. However, she did not reach this masculine station without sacrifice, as her biography details.

84. Joseph Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Mexicana, 1758), 108.

85. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 108.

86. Donahue-Wallace, “Bajo los tormentos del tórculo,” 107.

Bellido discusses how Madre María Anna began to cleanse herself of sin in order to bring herself closer to God, and thus serve more effectively in her role as prioress of the convent. Madre María Anna completed many activities in order to prepare herself for her role as prioress and leader in a community of godly women. She began from a young age by practicing penance and teaching herself lessons concerning God. Bellido writes that as a young woman, Madre María Anna “Era muy inclinada á la leccion, leyendo quantas vidas de Santos podia conseguir.”⁸⁷ From this same young age, Madre María Anna began to practice mortification, a practice that continued for her entire life. Rather than using normal cilices, Madre María Anna used some that were “...mas terribles, y horrorosos; porque eran de afileres, cuyas agudas puntas...usando todos...segun los tiempos, y las oportunidades.”⁸⁸ Throughout her life, much like Sor María de San José and Sor Sebastiana, Madre María Anna also purified herself and practiced habits becoming to a nun who would take an active leadership role in a convent.

Madre María Anna’s biographer describes qualities throughout her vida that show the holiness and lack of sin in her lifestyle. Through multiple types of mortification and other penance, she became known for her “...Modestia, Silencio, Mansedumbre, y Paciencia.”⁸⁹ Bellido describes multiple works and deeds that exemplified these qualities and concludes that for Madre María Anna, “...todo es prueba de una iuencible [sic]

87. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 37.

88. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 38.

89. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 186.

paciencia, todo una suma paz, que parecia no tener passiones, sino ser un Angel venido del Cielo.”⁹⁰ It is as if, through her works, God and heaven were showing favor upon her. She showed devotion to Jesus through multiple acts that allowed her to live a life free of female sin and occupy a leadership role in her convent in a way that was often only attributed to male clergy members. Bellido writes that Madre María Anna “...tuvo la dicha de criarle con la memoria de la Passion de Jesu-Christo; y alli esta fue su mas sazonado pan quotidiano en toda su vida.”⁹¹ Bellido continues that Madre María Anna did not follow unworthy examples in her life, rather she kept her sights on Jesus as an example and through the “...afrentosa muerte de Jesus, por esto salieron tan fructosos los passos, y obras de su vida.”⁹² With her devotion to Jesus as the daily bread of her life, God in turn endowed her with gifts that benefitted her and her convent on account of her leadership. She did not, however, reach this prestigious role easily.

Like Sor María de San José and Sor Sebastiana, Madre María Anna regularly practiced harsh penance and mortification to rid her body of the burden of female sin. Although not shown in the portrait that accompanies her biography, the text of Madre María Anna’s vida thoroughly details the penance she practiced from her childhood onward and the favor God saw in it. Through these self-inflicted punishments and grace from God, Madre María Anna was able to overcome the confines of her gender and raise herself to a position of masculine authority as a leader of a convent. This station is reflected in her

90. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 190.

91. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 217-18.

92. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverenda madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 218.

portrait as she is shown with objects associated with a leadership role of a nun in a convent. In this role, Madre María Anna had to “...construct both material and spiritual edifices.”⁹³ Such a quality of leadership was usually not seen in nuns. Her battle with her sinful flesh and leadership role allow Madre María Anna to exist in a space of third gender. The portraits and biographical texts of Madre María Anna, Sor Sebastiana, and Sor María de San José all detail the different modes of penance, prayer, and mortification that allowed each nun to battle against the burdens of her female flesh and take on gender roles that were typically unavailable to secular women in New Spain. Reading these three images and text in concert will allow us to see what gender meant for nuns in New Spain, and how their existence in a space of third gender was portrayed to the audience reading their vidas.

Sor Sebastiana Josepha

Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad (**Figure 5**) is a 1765 print from an engraving by Joseph Morales in the *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad, religiosa de coro, y velo negro en la religiosissimo [c]onvento de señoras religiosas clarisas de san Juan de la penitencia de esta ciudad de Mexico* by Joseph Eugenio Valdés from eighteenth-century New Spain. Sor Sebastiana Josepha is shown in the print kneeling in front of a crèche with the Christ

93. Eich, *The Other Mexican Muse*, 230.

child inside. Depicted behind her is a shelf with books and writing elements, and a window lets light into the interior space. `



Figure 5, Joseph Morales, *Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santisima Trinidad*, Engraving, New Spain, 1765.

Sor Sebastiana Josepha is shown kneeling in a pose of devotion in front of the figure of the Christ child and the instruments of self-mortification. Her pious pose, with hands clasped in prayer, begins to convey the sense to the reader that she lived a life steeped in

devotion with constant reflection on the holiness of Jesus. It also classifies her portrait as the devotional type, as her pose of prayer is the primary action. The portrait also references self-mortification. This reflection of Sor Sebastiana Josepha's holiness was manifested in several ways in the print, including references to prayer and mortification to help cleanse the body of female sin. While she is shown in a cloistered, enclosed environment the light shining through the window and cast upon her shows the light of God's favor for her life lived in constant holiness. The crucifix and print of a crucifix on the wall behind Sor Sebastiana also show her devotion to her vows and life of holiness. The books and pens on the shelf point to erudite activities she would practice in the convent, such as writing. Her vestments, the quintessential nun's habit, show that she lived her life dedicated to the holy vows she professed. The text in the lower part of the image affirms her identity and holiness of her life. Like Sor María de San José, Sor Sebastiana's portrait shows her as a nun living a holy life devoted to prayer and living a more divine life. Nuns would then see this image and read the text of Sor Sebastiana's vida to seek a holy model to emulate.

In the *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad, religiosa de coro, y velo negro en la religiosissimo [c]onvento de señoras religiosas clarisas de san Juan de la penitencia de esta ciudad de Mexico* by Joseph Eugenio Valdés, nuns could find text and image that together chronicle the life of Sor Sebastiana, which they would then strive to emulate. Like Sor María de San José, the vida of Sor Sebastiana chronicles her continual battles to overcome sin with bodily mortification and prayer. Her penance was documented by Valdés in her biography. Before Sor Sebastiana

entered the convent at a young age, she constantly persecuted herself through bodily mortification, so much so that she had "...debilidad de su cuerpo, y extenuación de vigores."⁹⁴ This penance, according to Valdés, resulted in "gloria suya"⁹⁵ for God on behalf of Sor Sebastiana. She continued to bring this glory to God through her constant prayer and reflection, also chronicled by Valdés.

Sor Sebastiana's biographer chronicles how she would pray from a young age, and even after entering the convent would constantly practice "la oración mental," contemplating "...la Essencia de nuestro Señor Dios, Sus Divinos Atributos, Sus propiedades, Sus perfecciones, Sus obras, Sus misterios, y Sus beneficios."⁹⁶ This prayer, like the mortification, allowed Sor Sebastiana to continually rid herself of her inherent female sin in order to become closer to God. These actions are reflected in her printed likeness. She peacefully admires a replica of the Christ child, one of the many "[m]ysterios" her biographer described. This action reflects the prayer and contemplation of the baby Jesus that was greatly admired in her vida. Sor Sebastiana's dedication to the image of the Christ child focuses on her ability to constantly repent for the female sin her body carried. The instruments she used for self-mortification, the cilice and scourge, are shown beneath the sculpture of the baby Jesus. Showing these instruments in conjunction with her

94. Joseph Eugenio Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad, religiosa de coro, y velo negro en la religiosissimo [c]onvento de señoras religiosas clarisas de san Juan de la penitencia de esta ciudad* (Mexico: Impresa de la Bibliotheca mexicana, 1765), 34.

95. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 34.

96. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 269.

contemplation of Jesus reflect to the viewer how she began to overcome the imperfections of her sinful, womanly flesh.

Like Sor María de San José, Sor Sebastiana also faced battles with Satan that made her stronger. In particular, according to Valdés, the devil blocked Sor Sebastiana's prayer practices. Sor Sebastiana's battle with the devil became so difficult at points that sometimes Satan "...oprimía todo el cuerpo de manera, que llegó algunas noches a faltarla la respiración, y quedar casi sufocada..."⁹⁷ However, Sor Sebastiana overcame these obstacles in such a strong manner that she was worthy of being compared with the brave ways of "...Varones ilustres de el Testamento Nuevo,"⁹⁸ such as Job. This battle she won with Satan and other demons serves to further highlight the strength of her conviction to purity and living a life devoted to God.

In the print, God's favor seems to almost shine on Sor Sebastiana through the window of a cell, seemingly highlighting her holiness. In fact, Valdés describes her as having "Angelica Pureza, con que dotó el Cielo."⁹⁹ She achieved this, according to her biographer, through her constant mortification and penance.¹⁰⁰ This favor seems to appear in her portrait through the light cast upon her as she gazes peacefully at the Christ child. Through mortification and penance, even triumphing in battles with the Devil, Sor

97. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 287.

98. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 286.

99. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 185.

100. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 186.

Sebastiana seemed to find favor with God. She reached this status by denying her female sin and flesh through mortification and penance, in such a way that she was described as “varonil” by Valdés.¹⁰¹ Through this, Sor Sebastiana began to take up masculine roles and qualities. Her portrait shows how Sor Sebastiana battled against her female flesh to exist in a space of third gender, where she is a female existing in male roles and spaces, transcending the boundaries of both genders. Reading text and image together in the *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad* shows the reader how Sor Sebastiana began to move away from female sin and become closer to God with masculine qualities, like Sor María de San José. Sor Sebastiana’s vida also shows the reader ways to get closer to achieving ideal Christian womanhood. An examination of a third print and vida will show how this pattern continues in a different conventual role.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Kelly Donahue-Wallace discusses how women were burdened by the inherent sin of their flesh and female bodies. Cloistered nuns; such as Sor María de San José, Sor Sebastiana, and Madre María Anna Agueda; were able to find an escape from the sin of female flesh through various forms of mortification, penance, and prayer. While these portraits differ in their composition and subject, they all convey a message of piety, the importance of fulfilling duties faithfully, and leadership. As Donahue-Wallace highlights, the confessors who rewrote vidas helped diminish the presence of sinful female flesh in the works of the

101. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v. m. sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*, 285.

sisters: “Since notable and exemplary nuns had overcome their biological hurdles, their biographers employed lengthy descriptions of their strategies for doing so to stimulate pious emulation.”¹⁰² But what did such description do to the perceived gender of the nuns: keep them in a female body or allow them to move toward a space of third gender where they fulfilled hybrid male and female roles?

The biographies of Sor María de San José, Sor Sebastiana, and Madre María Anna all document a journey toward a constant battle for a sinless life. As Donahue-Wallace discusses in “*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*,” the biographers emphasized how nuns battled the burden of female flesh that male clerics did not have to carry. More so, nuns’ written *vidas* included the same standards as the *vidas* of male clerics. This means that the nuns remembered in these *vida* were regarded on a similar level as that of male clerics. This contributes to the idea of nuns moving into a space of third gender in their *vidas*.

Although each of these *vidas* differs in its exact composition, they represent a formulaic construction of gender. These portraits do include elements that the nuns use to masculinize themselves by continually battling against sin. While it is clear from “*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*” that these female portraits do depict items such as books and instruments for self-mortification, tropes frequently seen in Novohispanic portraits of men, what can be said of ideal Christian womanhood, as Donahue-Wallace describes, that is presented in these portraits?¹⁰³ Additionally, after the thorough inclusion of

102. Donahue-Wallace, “*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*,” 110.

103. Donahue-Wallace, “*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*,” 132.

masculinizing elements in text and image discussed above, do the nuns presented in these portraits occupy a truly female space or one that is a third gender?

Reading the images and text in concert showcases the nuns' rejection of female flesh and sinfulness. This is accomplished through elements included in text and image, such as penance and prayer, mentioned in the vidas, and also shown in the vida portraits. After the various steps of purification have been completed, the nuns begin to take on masculine roles of leadership and achieve a state of holiness typically only available to men.¹⁰⁴ When they take on these roles, the nuns begin to construct a more holy personage, as the biographers describe, where they live a life that is worthy to be emulated because of their holy deeds for God. This is the "type" that Donahue-Wallace discusses in "Bajo los tormentos del tórculo" – no individual is represented, rather the nuns in these vidas follow a formula with slight variations. This type includes nuns participating in penance, prayer, and leadership; all modeled in various styles throughout the portraits. These literary and visual ideations of the same formula represent the model of "exemplary Christian womanhood,"¹⁰⁵ as Donahue-Wallace terms it. However, as shown through analysis and discussion of the portraits above, the nuns do not occupy a solely female space.

While the portraits do include feminine aspects, the text of the vidas shows how the nuns waged a continual battle against sin from a young age. The three nuns discussed above hid much of their female figure underneath a habit and veil; however, they also struggled

104. Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*," 108.

105. Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*," 120.

against their female sin through varieties of penance and prayer. Sor María de San José, Sor Sebastiana, and Madre María Anna Agueda were all chronicled in the *vidas* as having struggled with sin from a young age and worked to overcome the burden of female sin through penance and prayer. The images in the *vidas* reinforce these ideas. The depiction of cilices, crucifixes for contemplation, and symbols of prayer show the struggle of the sisters from a young age and through their time in the convent. The objects and form of the sisters in the prints relates to gender because they highlight that while the nuns could never do away with their femininity, they struggled with the sin that was a constant burden to their gender. They hid much of the female form with their habit and veil, and tried to rid themselves of sin through penance and prayer. It is these practices that let them exist in a not fully feminine, but not quite masculine space.

While the text highlights certain parts of diminished femininity in the portraits, the text also leaves out facts that affect the reading of the portraits. The *vidas* recount the continual struggle that these sisters faced in their battle against sin – and the portraits do not oftentimes depict the physical pain required of this struggle. These struggles drew blood and physical ills on the part of the nuns. From a young age, Sor María de San José wore two cilices on her thighs from a young age as part of her continual struggle to rid herself of feminine sin.¹⁰⁶ Madre Maria Anna Agueda also fought in this same battle using cilices as well. However hers were sharpened so much as to be described as “terribles” by her biographer.¹⁰⁷ Sor Sebastiana Josepha also sacrificed physical pain to

106. Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable madre María de San Joseph*, 44.

107. Bellido, *Vida de la venerable muy reverence madre Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio*, 38.

on her journey to find a sinless life. She prayed so fervently that she struggled with great physical ills to get closer to God.¹⁰⁸ These physical struggles are not shown in the vida portraits; without this depiction, the nuns are not read as more masculine.

If these physical battles themselves were depicted, undoubtedly including blood and images of pain, the nuns would likely be seen as less peaceful and more forceful. Such elements would have further defeminized the nuns as they progressed in their battle against sin. If a viewer only saw the image, they would not understand the complete narrative of the sisters' struggle against sin toward a less feminine existence. While the vida portraits show a peaceful, untormented view of the sisters in many ways, the text of the vidas reveals a much more tumultuous existence. The three portraits also differ in their levels of masculinity.

The portraits offer different levels of femininity and masculinity, and show how sisters could be depicted in levels of masculine light. Madre Maria Anna Agueda is the most masculine in both her face and upright pose. While there is softness in her features, namely her chin and cheeks, her nose and eyes form a much more pronounced line. Her upright pose and serious expression also let the viewer know that she is engaged in serious intellectual activity. There are few hints of religious adoration other than the rosary in her portrait. These features tell the viewer that Madre Maria Anna Agueda is in a serious leadership position, one that would also befit a male member of the church. At the other end, Sor Sebastiana Josepha is much more feminine than Madre Maria Anna

108. Valdés, *Vida admirable, y penitente de la v.m. sor Sebastiana de la SS. Trinidad*, 34.

Agueda. Her female form is still apparent underneath her habit and her face is soft around her smile. Her large eyes stare in adoration at the Christ Child. Sor Sebastiana Josepha's position appears much more submissive than that of Madre Maria Anna Agueda. While the tools of erudition are still in the portrait, they take a background to Sor Sebastiana Josepha's adoration of the Christ Child. Sor María de San José strikes a balance between the other two sisters. She has a serious pose like Madre Maria Anna Agueda, but admires a crucifix in adoration like Sor Sebastiana Josepha. What these differences reveal is that there are nuances in the space of third gender created by these sisters, and that each sister existed in this space individually rather than as part of a larger, cohesive group.

Looking at different levels of masculinity in the portraits of Sor María de San José, Madre Maria Anna Agueda, and Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santisima Trinidad show that each nun defines her own space of third gender with her actions in both portrait and text. Rather than each sister using the same formula to achieve a status of existing in the third gender, they arrive in this space through different combinations of prayer, writing, and penance. However, they collectively represent the action of themselves and other sisters who move into the space of third gender. Many different actions can lead to the same "varonil" position of sisters in their vidas. Together they represent the space of third gender for cloistered nuns during the Novohispanic era, even though they all arrived there different ways.

Form and meaning are ultimately what allow the nuns to define this space of third gender. From outfit to accouterments, the forms in the portraits help to define the space of third gender. Beginning with the garments they wear, sisters hide much of their female form underneath a habit and whimple. Hiding their feminine form underneath the habit begins to take away some of the fleshly sinfulness associated with females and their bodies. The sisters are further distanced from femininity with the accessories in the portraits. By posing with tools typically used for masculine tasks of leadership, education, and mortification, the sisters further move into the space of the third gender. Books, quills, and whips allow the sisters to distinguish themselves as more separate from their socially constructed female gender than they would be if living secular lives. Because it is Novohispanic society that placed ideas on sinfulness on the female body and its form, using socially acceptable activities that were more masculine, nuns were able to step further away from the typical female identity of the era. The forms of their dress and accessories in the portraits further emphasize the space of third gender in which they lived.

While the nuns did not live a totally sinless life, they struggled to improve themselves to a point where they could be perceived in a space of third gender – not totally female, not yet male. While they strove to emulate the ideal woman, the Virgin Mary, the only sinless female, in doing so they found a new space and identity.¹⁰⁹ While somewhat ironic that following a female ideal led the sisters to a space that was not totally female, this pursuit

109 . Pope Pius IX , “Ineffabilis Deus,” Catholic Library, Church Documents, 1854. http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pi09id.htm

of Mary granted them a much richer life than living merely as a cloistered nun. They were able to lead, educate, and serve as role models for other nuns. The portraits help convey this message and establish the space of the third gender.

Printed portraits of nuns from New Spain ultimately present a third gendered space where the subjects occupy male and female roles, including serving as community leaders and becoming models of firm devotion toward God. These positions were usually held by men in both secular and religious Viceregal society, except in these few documented cases of extraordinary nuns. In text and image, the nuns are nearly stripped of their female identity – sin is taken away with penance and even the body is hidden underneath a shapeless habit. After these marks of gender considered defining in New Spain have been done away with, the nuns began to take up duties and roles typically associated with males. Sor María de San José, Sor Sebastiana, and Madre María Anna founded convents, led whole communities, and served as models of piety and holiness. In this, they were not just models for females to follow - they occupied a third gendered space of ideal Christianity, the “type” created through text and image in the *vidas*. Nuns did have to overcome burdens of the female flesh, but after this they were able to fulfill positions where they transitioned between a female identity and completed male roles and tasks. Nuns could represent a form of ideal Christian womanhood, but they also moved beyond that into a third space between the two.

An important question is what the existence of the nuns in a space of third gender means for society-wide constructions of gender in New Spain and the audience who read these

vidas. Because prints were believed to carry truth, the ways in which nuns were represented in their portraits would be perceived as true, including the masculine roles they were able to occupy. This would mean that nuns were seen as occupying an space of third gender because of their ability to undertake masculine offices, outside of typically female roles. Thus, they were publically differentiated from the typically Viceregal norms expected of the female gender. This opens up new questions of gender and how gender was constructed and received in both secular and religious circles in New Spain, clearly an opportunity for further research.

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION: SYNTHESIS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Synthesis

Printed nun portraits offer a complex and layered view of how gender was presented to other sisters in convents and the religious public in the Novohispanic era. Up until recently, these prints were not considered of the same quality as other Viceregal portraiture. However, they are able to tell the viewer and modern audience about other ways gender may have been interpreted in New Spain outside of the standard male/female dichotomy. Kelly Donahue-Wallace has opened up a new branch of research in New Spanish art history with her examination of printed portraits of both male and female clergy. As Donahue-Wallace notes, this dichotomy might not have been so clear-cut in New Spain. She writes that female clergy members were able to overcome their “biological hurdles” in order to become more like the less sinful male clergy members.¹¹⁰ On account of this ability to shed sinful flesh through *vidas*, New Spanish nuns were read in their biographies as having ascended past the normal challenges that secular women confronted. However, to achieve this, a complex set of institutions and societal ideals were at work in forming the public perception of New Spanish nuns. It is important that we ask what were the most influential causes that ultimately affected how nuns were seen in *vidas*?

110. Donahue-Wallace, “*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*,” 110.

Religion governed nearly all facets of life in New Spain. It dictated how individuals moved in society and interacted with one another. Families were able to judge their place in society based on their religious lineage, and how “faithful” families were to the Church. Blood purity was an important factor in judging which individuals could hold certain positions and who could be admitted to certain institutions, including convents. The strength of religiosity of families, and of individuals in those families, was judged by blood purity. Having pure Christian lineage meant that the family had no ancestors who were Moors, Jews, or who had been convicted of heresy. It was usually these families who were aristocratic *criollos* or *peninsulares* who were leading society and making the laws in New Spain. Blood purity laws also governed who could enter into convents, with only young women who could prove a spotless familial religious record being able to enter the convent. Religion and power also presented in many other ways in New Spain, including in portraits.

Portraits were another means of conveying power in New Spain. Affluent individuals in New Spain would often commission portraits in a display of power to the larger community. Criollo or peninsular men would have portraits painted that showed themselves with proclamations declaring titles with land ownership, while dressed in expensive, imported fabrics. These portraits were often hung publicly and served as reminders of power to the general population. Portraits of wealthy women also functioned as similar announcements of status. Women would be shown with expensive European furniture and dressed in similar fabrics as men in their portraits, in a similar display of power. Nuns also utilized portraits, but for different reasons.

Nun portraits included many varieties and served many purposes in New Spain. These types included crowned nun portraits, anniversary portraits, death portraits, and printed vida portraits. Crowned nun portraits were done right before a novice nun professed her final vows. In these portraits, she was shown wearing a crown, holding flowers, and wearing her habit and veil. These paintings would hang in the house of the family whose daughter professed, serving as a reminder not only of the daughter's virtue, but of the family's faith, power, and wealth. Anniversary portraits were staged in a similar manner to profession portraits – nuns wore crowns, held flowers, and often dolls of the Christ child or other religious accessories. These portraits were completed to commemorate the twenty-fifth or fiftieth anniversaries of the nuns taking the veil. They would hang in the convent to serve as a reminder of virtuous living and dedication for the other nuns living in the convent. Death portraits would often serve a similar role in the convent. After a sister who lived an admirable life passed away, the convent would commission a portrait of her lying on her deathbed, oftentimes with a crown or flowers like in profession and anniversary portraits. The last type of nun portraits is the printed images that are included in vidas, or biographies, of the nuns' lives. These portraits often took on a very different tone than profession, anniversary, and death portraits.

In vidas, the account of a life of a nun rewritten by a confessor would be accompanied by a portrait that would highlight daily aspects of a sister's life in the cloisters. These portraits seem quite ordinary when compared with the elaborate profession and anniversary portraits. While the nuns who were memorialized in the vidas lived

exceptional lives, their portraits recorded quotidian undertakings in the cloisters. Some of these portraits alluded to tasks like writing, reading, prayer, and even mortification. These activities were the ones that would keep the cloisters and church running. Cloisters did not differ much in the tasks completed in them, although some ran with much more austerity than others. Certain convents like the Carmelites forbid certain luxuries like jewelry and chocolate, while other orders like the Benedictines had sisters with private cells and ornate jewelry and fabrics. These small details would often be pictured in the printed portraits in the vidas. The viewer could often learn about the sister's order, her role, and what she would do during her life in the convent. For example, another sister from colonial Mexico, Sor María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz, would be seen as a civic leader in her cloisters because of accessories in her portrait, according to Kelly Donahue-Wallace.¹¹¹ These accoutrements included quills, parchment, and books; all signs of her good leadership. She also has a print behind her of the Virgin of the Pillar, a sign of her dedication to her faith. What these objects tell the viewer are the activities in which Sor María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz participated in during her time in the convent. This was not just true of Sor María though; printed nun portraits highlighted many important aspects of life in the cloisters.

Daily life in Novohispanic convents consisted primarily of prayer, reflection, and general housekeeping duties required to keep the convent running. These are frequently reflected in vida portraits in which the nuns are shown praying, cleaning, and completing administrative duties. However simple it may appear, convent life was not without its

111. Donahue-Wallace, "*Bajo los tormentos del tórculo*," 107.

controversies. The Church as well as the Bourbon rulers of Spain sought to change convent life beginning in the 18th century. Leaders in the Catholic Church and in Spain felt that the nuns were taking too much leeway with their vows, and were taking advantage of them by living in luxury with private cells and *donadas*, female servants that lived in the convent. Many of these effects of the Bourbon Reforms would be felt through the convents.

Although the biggest religious controversy of the Reforms was expelling the Jesuits from all Spanish territories, the effects would trickle down to the convent level. The Bourbons began enforcing a much more simple and plain lifestyle for the non-ascetic cloisters. This reform was known as *vida común*. It consisted of common spaces for sleeping and eating, whereas in many orders the nuns had previously lived in private cells with their own servants. However, *vida común* was a thinly veiled attempt at controlling women, according to Asunción Lavrin.¹¹² Both religious and civic leaders sought to control nuns through these reforms. While they were followed in some ways, *vidas* represent a rebellion against *vida común*. In *vidas* and the printed portraits, nuns demonstrated not only their piety, but their intelligence and the admiration they enjoyed for their singularity within their own communities. Through their written confessions, nuns showed themselves as authority figures while demonstrating subservience to the religious authorities and confessors. This double-pronged approach to their *vidas* showed their skills as effective communicators, but more importantly as acceptable role models for other sisters in the Catholic Church.

112. Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 302.

The Bourbon Reforms also upset many of the nuns used to living in luxury, including the possession of private cells, along with jewelry to wear over their habits and delicacies like chocolate to drink. Many of the sisters protested against the changes instituted in their way of life, and fought against the patriarchal standards that the Church and government attempted to impose upon them. This was upsetting to many nuns because they placed great value on their traditional ways of living. For the sisters, traditions were as important as prayer, intellectual improvement, and companionship. They viewed the Bourbon attempts at instituting *vida común* as uprooting their day-to-day lives, which consisted of routines on which the sisters placed great value. The daily rituals and goings on in a convent tell us much about where the nuns placed value. From the time they entered the convent, nuns were in a constant lifestyle of prayer and penance. While many nuns lived a life of austerity before entering a convent, life inside was clearly regulated.

Life for sisters was highly ritualized from the beginning at initiation ceremony. At the start of the novitiate period, nuns would act in prayer and reflection toward God in every action. While prayers and singing were scheduled at different periods throughout the day, there were other important outlets for additional worship. It could come in many forms, such as writing, self-mortification, and convent leadership. The *vidas* showed how sisters would use their daily activities as a way to honor God. The portraits of Sor Sebastiana, Sor María de San José, and Madre Maria Anna show how the activities of nuns were intertwined with dedication to God. Their daily activities, like reading and leadership, are displayed to show how they were close to God in every part of their life. It was in these

displays that nuns began to show their importance and why confessors considered them worthy of being role models.

Vidas proclaimed nuns as role models for other sisters and the larger religious community, but they also showed the nuns as establishing themselves outside of simply being female role models as they became more general religious role models for readers of both genders, even the confessors themselves. In choosing to commemorate certain nuns, confessors had to see something worthy of admiration and permanent commemoration in printed word and image. It was this admiration and commemoration that began to separate nuns from other Novohispanic women.

The tasks that filled the lives of these sisters are what allow them to begin to exist in ambivalent space in New Spain. As nuns began to take on typically “male” tasks, shown in vida portraits, the purely female identity they hid under their habits began to shed as they took on tasks outside of their socially assigned gender role. By disregarding typically feminine tasks and taking on leadership roles, nuns were able to show themselves in a masculinized light through clerical and leadership tasks that would usually be reserved for males. In accomplishing such tasks, nuns began shedding their purely female identities. Adding male qualities and disregarding female ones is how nuns began to exist in an ambivalent space that questions the bases of gender in New Spain. While this complicated notion of gender did not extend outside of the convent to most of Novohispanic society, nuns were viewed in this context because of how they were perceived to be role models for other females in colonial Mexico. Because women were

viewed as sinful, they were rarely suitable role models for other females. However, because nuns were able to rid themselves of this sin, they were portrayed by the Catholic Church as worthy of admiration.

The multiple facets of these portraits; including text, imagery, and medium; create a unique opportunity for nuns in New Spain. These images create spaces where notions of gender are complicated in a way that enables nuns to leave their female sex behind. Because nuns have rid themselves of the sin that was seen as inherent in females in colonial Mexico, they are seen as worthy role models for other nuns and women because they do not carry the burden of unholy flesh. Self-mortification, prayer, and reflection permitted nuns to leave this encumbrance behind and take on tasks that would be hindered by sin. Reading, writing, and leadership of a convent community; responsibilities normally belonging to men; were also completed by nuns. Because of the lack of female flesh and more masculine responsibilities, sisters created a third gendered space where they have no official gender.

By taking on these actions such as leadership, writing, and penance in adoration of God nuns exemplified “ideal Christian womanhood” in prints. Ironically, it was through roles that were typically only assigned to males in Novohispanic Mexico that sisters (or any woman) could achieve the type of ideal Christian womanhood that Kelly Donahue-Wallace highlights. This ideal Christian womanhood discussed by Donahue-Wallace is the space of third gender in which the sisters memorialized in *vidas* exist. This irony only further complicates the male/female gender dichotomy in New Spain. While at first

glance it appears that male and female are the only two categories for gender in New Spain, the prints of nuns show that this is not the case at all. Gender is much more complex beyond male/female as my discussion of vidas and their accompanying prints elucidates. Thankfully, this openness leaves many more opportunities for gender in New Spain to be researched, both in and outside of the convent walls.

While the sisters of New Spain offer one potential opportunity to study gender in its many forms during the Novohispanic era, it is but one part of a multifaceted discussion of gender in colonial Mexico. Other women offer opportunities for research. Women were frequently persecuted by the Inquisition. Women depicted in secular portraits are another opportunity for research. There is much more to be gleaned from these portraits and learned about these women's lives, for it is doubtful that they were as static as they appear in these paintings. Printed portraits of nuns are just one door to study gender roles and religion in New Spain, and while my research has revealed some about a space of third gender, it is only another step in research of Novohispanic Mexico.

Further Research

Nuns in vidas and their lives in the convent undoubtedly merit further research. The first step in this research would be a more expansive survey and analysis of vidas of colonial Mexican nuns. While many of these vidas are located in libraries and archives throughout the Southwest and the rest of the United States, many more primary sources are likely to be found in Mexico City and other large cities where convents were founded. Archival

research in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Puebla would expand the knowledge and context of nuns and their vidas.

While a survey of vidas is important, the audience who read the vidas is also paramount to studying their influence in Viceregal New Spain. While the confessors would read the vidas, and eventually rewrite them, the intended audience of these rewritten vidas can give us more context regarding their meaning and trajectory. While it is very likely they were read by other veiled nuns and novices, the question of secular audience still remains. Learning more about the greater distribution of vidas will help to determine the spread of their influence, and how they might encourage religiosity among laywomen and even entrance to the convent for some young girls. This is most likely accomplished through more research regarding prints and distribution, which can be found in a variety of research settings including journals and archives.

Indubitably, vidas constituted an important part of religious and social life in Colonial Mexico. While access to more vidas is crucial for research, sociohistorical knowledge will also benefit any more investigation into nuns' vidas. Vidas tell researchers about a unique sect of life in New Spain, one that was profoundly influential in Novohispanic society. Convents constituted an elite and reclusive sect of New Spanish life, one that was indicative of greater values and trends. What is without doubt though, is the importance of the nuns who were role models for many others in New Spanish society.

Table 1: Nun Portrait Types

Name of Nun	Year of Engraving	Framed/Unframed	Primary Action	Length
Sor María Ynés de los Dolores	1729	Unframed	Devotional	Half length
Madre María de Jesús de Agreda	1731	Unframed	Study/Desk	Half length
La Virgen Mariana de Jesús	1732	Unframed	Mortifying	Half length
Madre Josepha Petra Juana Nepomucena	1758	Unframed	Profession	Full length
Madre María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio	1758	Framed	Study/Desk	Half length
Josepha Antonio de Nuestra Señora de la Salud	1765	Unframed	Mortifying	Full length
Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad	1765	Unframed	Devotional	Full length
Madre María Ignacio de Azlor y Echeverz	1793	Unframed	Study/Desk	Full length
Francisca de San Joseph	18th C.	Unframed	Devotional	Half length
Sor María de San José	18th C.	Unframed	Mortifying	Half length

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