

Chapter 5

TRANSATLANTIC CIRCULATION OF OBJECTS, BOOKS, AND IDEAS IN MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY MEXICAN NUNNERIES

DORIS BIEŃKO DE PERALTA

IN THE LATE sixteenth century, Agustina de Santa Clara, a Dominican nun from the convent of Puebla de los Ángeles in New Spain, claimed that she had a vision of Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). While she was in ecstasy, the Carmelite future saint appeared to Agustina “in a very green and delightful meadow where there were lots of herons, among which she had seen Mother Teresa of Jesus.”¹ It is impossible to know exactly how this nun had heard of Teresa. Perhaps news had arrived via some printed book or manuscript, or through word of mouth; or perhaps through some contact with the Carmelite friars, who had been present in Puebla since 1586. We could even hypothesize that she had heard about Teresa through the priest Juan Plata, the Dominicans’ confessor, who came from Toledo to New Spain in 1585.²

Agustina’s visions are unusual in content because we know no other mention of Teresa of Ávila being associated with “a green meadow with herons,” but this may be because it is such an early depiction of Teresa.³ This may be why we do not find typical features of the Carmelite saint in Agustina’s visions (for example, the transverberation scene with the angel piercing her heart with an arrow). It is almost certain that images showing Teresa of Ávila were unknown at that time in New Spain.⁴ What is more, we know this may not be an orthodox source, because of Agustina’s persecution in 1598 as a heretical *alumbrada* (illuminated mystic). Nevertheless, her vision of “Mother Teresa”

1 Inquisition trial of Agustina de Santa Clara, 1598: Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación, Inquisición, vol. 180, exp. 2, fol. 213.

2 The inquisition trials of Agustina de Santa Clara and her confessor Juan Plata have been analyzed by Huerga, *Historia de los alumbrados*, 3:637–91.

3 This vision is probably an allusion to Paradise. The heron was a symbol of perfection since “perfect males are like the heron”: Francisco Marcuello, *Primera parte de la historia natural* (1617), 102. I would like to thank Mayela Flores Enríquez for this reference.

4 Bieńko de Peralta, “Madre y Escritora.”

Doris Bieńko de Peralta (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico) gained her PhD in 2015 in History and Ethnohistory from the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico. After a period as assistant professor of medieval history at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (2001–2004), she then became professor of colonial history there. She is active in various scholarly societies: the Grupo de Estudios sobre la Mujer en España y las Américas (pre-1800) (GEMELA), the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), and the Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliófilos (CONDUMEX).

indicates that references to the future saint in the *creole* imagination appeared very early, even before her beatification in 1614.

This example offers a glimpse of just how fluid the spread of representations and practices was in the Spanish empire at that time. Thanks to the circulation of people, artistic objects, books, and ideas, the inhabitants of the viceroyalty were intensely involved in the culture of the empire; and the nunneries, although subject to the vow of strict enclosure, were also deeply engaged in transatlantic communication.⁵ These forms of communication have special importance if we take into account the specific features of female monastic foundations. It is worth bearing in mind here that, during the sixteenth century and through till the mid-seventeenth, no nunnery in Mexico was founded directly by nuns from Spain.

The first female monastery in New Spain and the Americas, La Concepción, was founded in Mexico City around 1540 and it had its origins in a *beaterio* called Madre de Dios run by various secular women who had not taken permanent vows.⁶ Its creation came about thanks to the petitions of fray Juan de Zumárraga (1468–1548), bishop and later archbishop of Mexico.⁷ Between 1531 and 1536, various retreat houses were founded in Mexico City and in nearby villages in the hope of evangelizing the indigenous girls and providing a Christian education to the daughters of “Indian” nobility, so called “cacique Indians.”⁸ Setting up schools of primary education for indigenous girls soon failed, since, according to the words of Zumárraga himself, the indigenous men refused to marry the graduates. This was because the Christian, Spanish form of education the young women received “taught them to be idle, and they thought little of their husbands nor did they want to serve them”; this contrasted with native ideals under which women should “provide for” their husbands.⁹ So, the Mexico City retreat house under the tutelage of secular women gradually turned into a convent of the Order of the Immaculate Conception. Although the first profession of vows in this convent occurred in 1541, the official confirmation of its founding was only issued by Pope Gregory XIII until 1578.¹⁰

Later monasteries were founded in the same manner, or were started by nuns from other Mexican convents, even if they came from another religious order. For example, in Mexico City Conceptionist nuns founded both Hieronymite and Discalced Carmelite con-

5 For the relevance of these cultural contacts, see Rodríguez Moya, Fernández Valle, and López Calderón, eds., *Arte y Patrimonio en Iberoamérica*. Also see comparative studies from a transatlantic perspective: Vollendorf and Wray, “Gender in the Atlantic World” and Díaz and Kirk, “Theorizing Transatlantic Women’s Writing.”

6 The foundation of this convent is traditionally designated as 1540: Amerlinck de Corsi and Ramos Medina, *Conventos de monjas*, 31–32. Also Martínez Cuesta, “Las monjas en la América Colonial,” 575–76.

7 Amerlinck de Corsi, “Los primeros beaterios novohispanos.” See also Pérez Vidal’s article in this volume.

8 Barreto Ávila, “Beatas medievales educando princesas nahuas,” 37–38.

9 Juan de Zumárraga, “Carta de 2 de junio de 1544,” in García Icazbalceta, *Don Fray Juan Zumárraga* (1947), 176.

10 Amerlinck de Corsi and Ramos Medina, *Conventos de monjas*, 32. See also the article by Pérez Vidal in this volume.

vents in 1585 and 1615 in turn. Although initially the intention of such institutions was to provide an education for indigenous girls, they were soon transformed into a shelter for the daughters of conquistadors. Only Spanish women, *creoles*, and a few *mestizas* professed as nuns during the first two centuries after the Spanish conquest.¹¹ The *mestiza* descendants of Emperor Moctezuma took their vows in the Conceptionist convent in Mexico City.

By contrast, during the first two centuries of the colonial era, indigenous women were excluded from participating in convent life as professed nuns; they could only enter those institutions as servants. We know of one exception. An “Indian” from the nobility, Luisa de Tapia, granddaughter of El Conín, an Otomi chief who helped the Spanish in the conquest, founded the Santa Clara Convent of Querétaro (1607) and entered as a black-veiled nun. She even went on to become abbess of a convent where both *creole* and Spanish women could profess.¹² Aside from that exception, it was not until 1724 that the first convent for “Indian” nobility was founded in Mexico City, following the First Rule of St. Clare. More convents werethen founded in Antequera (now Oaxaca) and Valladolid (now Morelia).

Despite restricting the possibility of being a nun to women of Spanish origin, in the first century after the conquest numerous convents were founded. By the mid-seventeenth century in New Spain, five religious orders—Conceptionist, Dominican, Poor Clare (Franciscan), Hieronymite, and Discalced Carmelite—had founded twenty-nine convents, all of them originating from a *beaterio* or some pre-existing house in New Spain.¹³ Professed nuns from Spain had almost no influence on the foundation of Mexican female monasteries before the mid-seventeenth century.

It was not until 1665 that Spanish Capuchin nuns from Toledo arrived in Mexico for the first time.¹⁴ However, there was one previous episode of contact with Iberian nuns. In 1620, Jerónima de la Asunción (1555–1630), from the reformed branch of the Poor Clares, passed through Mexican territory with her sisters, making a stopover during her trip; her purpose was to found a convent in the Philippines.¹⁵ Her opinion of the nuns of New Spain was not entirely favourable. We know this because on the way from the port of Veracruz to Mexico City, the Spanish nuns intentionally avoided staying at the monastery of their order in Puebla, where their *creole* sisters had prepared a recep-

11 The exclusion of indigenous women from religious life has been analyzed by Díaz, *Indigenous Writings from the Convent*, 33–40.

12 It is worth noting that Luisa de Tapia, who, together with her father, had the right to choose three *capellanas* to enter the convent without a dowry, imposed the condition that these be Spanish and not indigenous: Ramírez Montes, *Niñas, doncellas, vírgenes eternas*, 53–55.

13 By the end of the colonial era in New Spain, fifty-eight convents had been founded. So, by the mid-seventeenth century, half already existed. Aside from the previously mentioned orders, Capuchin, Augustinian Recollect, Bridgettine, and Order of Mary convents were founded at later dates.

14 In the mid-eighteenth century, nuns arrived directly from Spain to Mexico: the Bridgettine Order in 1743 and the Order of Mary in 1753. In total, only three orders sent professed nuns from Spain to New Spain to found convents.

15 Bieňko de Peralta, “Los impresos novohispanos,” 216–19.



Figure 5.1: Reliquary containing a piece of St. Teresa's flesh. Private Collection of the Carmelite Nunnery, Puebla, Mexico. Unless otherwise indicated, all images in this chapter are reproduced courtesy of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

tion for them.¹⁶ After arriving at the capital, Jerónima and her nuns chose to stay in the monastery of Santa Isabel for half a year, even though there were two other Capuchin monasteries there (Santa Clara and San Juan de la Penitencia). This decision might be explained by the assumption that the nuns from the convent of Santa Isabel were more austere, while the others were considered “spoiled” or “relaxed.” That opinion reflects the Spaniards’ longstanding belief that the climate of New Spain largely determined the characteristics of all its inhabitants, including those of European ancestry. Before leaving New Spain to continue their journey to the Philippines, Jerónima and her nuns spent a mere three days in each of the other two monasteries, an uns subtle signal, if we read between the lines, of the attitude of the Spaniards towards the *creoles*.¹⁷

Almost half a century later, Capuchin nuns from Toledo, who arrived in the Americas in 1665, also sometimes complained about the Iberian Spaniards in the New World and their descendants, the *creole*, in their letters to Spain.¹⁸ Apart from these two examples, there is no other evidence in the sixteenth or seventeenth century of any direct contact

¹⁶ Letona, *Perfecta religiosa*, fol. 29v.

¹⁷ Letona, *Perfecta religiosa*, fol. 41r.

¹⁸ Alba González, “Presencia de América en Toledo,” 191–94.

between *creole* and Spanish nuns. And of course, we may assume there was some friction and antagonism between them.

The situation was very different in the male orders. Here the first friars were always sent directly from Spain to implement foundations. Furthermore, *creole* friars could travel to Spain as representatives of their order. In male communities there was constant exchange with the arrival of new friars from Europe. Disputes over leadership arose between Spaniards and *creoles*, and the authorities had to implement “alternating” or rotation of offices between the two groups.¹⁹ This situation did not occur in women’s communities: nuns were almost entirely *creole*, and only a few Spaniards who came to the New World with their families ever took the vow. Due to the large number of *creole* nuns no opposing factions between *creoles* and Spaniards formed.

These peculiarities—the absence of a direct link with Spanish nunneries and the lack of any transatlantic intermingling—hindered the transmission and reproduction of charism and specific practices of various orders. Although the lack of direct contact with Spain caused a rapid creolization of female monastic communities, multiple ties with Europe remained. This was due to the circulation of printed books, manuscripts, images, and relics, as well as oral transmission which often involved preachers or friars from the nuns’ own order. Various sources provide samples of this deep interaction.

The Carmelite nuns of Puebla, whose convent was founded in 1604, still possess a small piece of St. Teresa’s flesh, a relic that arrived from Spain in 1615 [Fig. 5.1], even before her canonization (in 1622). Aside from the evident devotional aspect, because it had to do with a relic of the order’s reformer and a future saint, possessing it legitimized their own order while offering a link to its female branch in Spain. According to chronicles it was sent by their Propositus General, Fr. José de Jesús María.

Some of the nuns experienced visions from the moment they contemplated this relic. The Carmelite chronicler, Agustín de la Madre de Dios, affirms that this piece of flesh was from St. Teresa’s heart; this is how he described those experiences:

It is this heart that is like a window to the sky, since because of it one contemplates and distinguishes things of glory. One should also notice that these representations or visions, images, or figures, that in this part of the heart of glorious Teresa so many good and religious witnesses saw, were not like those of a paintbrush that can be seen in painting but were of bas relief as if printed with a seal, and it is certain that with a seal they were imprinted, and that it was Christ’s seal.²⁰

Occasionally the reliquary was shared with other nunneries in Puebla, a situation described by the Conceptionist nun, Agustina de Santa Teresa, who wrote that in 1632 they had an opportunity to contemplate St. Teresa’s flesh.²¹

Around that time, the convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Mexico City also had access to another relic with the “flesh of Our Holy Mother Teresa de Jesús,” thanks to viceroyn doña María Ana Riederer de Paar, Marchioness of Guadalcázar. The relic

19 Rubial García, “Votos pactados,” 53–55.

20 Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro Escondido*, ed. Báez Macías, 316.

21 Archivo Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione dei Riti, Processus, vol. 46: Agustina de Santa Teresa, *Vida de la venerable madre María de Jesús ...*, fols. 182 and 193.

was also considered to have miraculous qualities. On one occasion, one of the convent founders, Sister Inés de la Cruz, became gravely ill. Her *creole* companion, Mariana de la Encarnación, stole a tiny part of the relic of St. Teresa's flesh and put it in a drink she served to the sick nun. The effect was almost immediate. Inés fell asleep "for about four or five Creeds" and then woke up completely cured.²²

More evidence of transatlantic ties and the circulation of artistic objects from Spain to Mexico before the mid-seventeenth century involves our aforementioned Conceptionist nuns in Puebla. One of them, María de Jesús Tomellín (ca. 1582–1637), requested from her sister, doña Isabel de Campos Tomellín, who was living in Seville, an image of the infant Jesus, elaborated by the "best artisan." While the sculpture was being made in Spain, the nun performed various spiritual exercises in her Puebla convent, "asking Our Lord God that the image be very perfect and devout."²³ Once the small sculpture arrived, it was placed in the arms of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and nicknamed "Niño Gachupín" due to its peninsular origin.

Sometimes communication with Spain was even less conventional. Fray Agustín de Vetancurt states that Sr. Luisa de Santa Catalina (ca. 1594–1642), from the Poor Clares convent of Puebla, had "spiritual meetings" with her Spanish contemporary, the famous nun of Carrión, Abbess Luisa de Ascensión (1565–1635).²⁴ Communication by spirit and by bilocation was then considered possible, strange though it seems today.²⁵ Similar beliefs are reflected in the chronicles of the Carmelite nuns of Puebla. Their convent, founded in 1604 out of a *beaterio*, was the first female Carmelite house in the Americas. In the manuscripts of the first generation of nuns, it is said that they could not wear the coif properly, because they lacked the knowledge how it was done. According to chronicles, the situation required the intervention of the spirit of St. Teresa of Ávila, who appeared to Ana de San Alberto, Carmelite prioress of Caravaca in Spain, and suggested that she send a sample of a coif to the nuns of Puebla. On the first journey the object was lost, but the Spanish nuns sent a coif a second time, along with a letter describing the apparition.²⁶ This last anecdote illustrates the daily problems *creole* women communities faced in their attempt to accurately recreate Western monastic models.

While general regulations of individual behaviour and communal organization were outlined in the Rule and the Constitutions of the Order, many aspects of daily life, like the coif, were not detailed enough, and this led to misunderstandings. In areas which lacked written regulations, the *creoles* often inserted their own customs. The *creole* nuns reproduced practices learned in their families, like the tradition of drinking chocolate or atole

²² Mariana de la Encarnación, *Relación de la fundación del Convento antiguo*, ed. Ramírez and Llanos, 53.

²³ Archivo Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione dei Riti, Processus, 131, vol. 50: Testimony of Isabel de San Matías, 1691.

²⁴ Agustín de Vetancurt, "Menologio franciscano de los varones más señalados," in *Crónica* (1697), 4.

²⁵ Tar, "Flying through the Empire."

²⁶ Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro Escondido*, ed. Báez Macías, 315. Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 153–54.

(cornmeal), something criticized by the small number of Spaniards in the Mexican nunneries.²⁷

Exceptions were made. For example, the Discalced Carmelites could not have enslaved women due to the austere nature of their Rule; but with the permission of the bishop, the Carmelites of Puebla were allowed to have a couple of female “black slaves” brought directly from Africa.²⁸ A similar situation happened in a Discalced Carmelite convent in Mexico City where, in 1636, a black enslaved woman called Lucrecia was bought. In addition, the nuns had a male slave.²⁹ While in some orders, like the Conceptionists or the Hieronymites, nuns were allowed personal enslaved servants, the most austere orders should not have copied that custom. In the case of the Carmelites, evidence indicates that the enslaved people belonged to the community. Perhaps for that reason the authorities did not consider it as contravening the rule. Female monasteries were partially a reflection of their society and could not fully escape its influence. Despite these local circumstances, the *creole* nuns were self-proclaimed heiresses of the Spanish communities.

In the absence of direct interaction, cultural transmission of Western European models of monastic life had to be through letters, printed books and manuscripts, objects and images that were brought or reproduced from the Old World, and the advice of people who had had contact with Spanish nuns. The role of monks and priests, as a source of information about Iberian religious women must have undoubtedly been significant. But we know about influence from elsewhere, for example from the viceregal court. The previously mentioned Marchioness of Guadalcázar, doña María Ana Riederer de Paar, since the time she lived in Spain, was fond of the Carmelite Order and had even spent time with Spanish nuns. When she arrived in Mexico City, she supported the Conceptionist religious women who were in the process of founding a Carmelite convent. The marchioness helped its creation in 1615; she attended the ceremony of the taking of habits, and she became an assiduous visitor, particularly because it was very close to the viceregal palace. She even took on the role of prioress during the first months because, as the *creole* nuns confirmed, she had direct experience of Spanish Carmelite life: “The marchioness came in every third day to act as prioress, examining our clothes, coif, habits, and the bedding, because she had been in one of our Spanish Carmelite convents before.”³⁰

Few means of communication leave traces in sources. For this reason I shall focus on the most tangible aspect of this transatlantic dialogue: the presence of books about European nuns in New Spain’s nunneries and their reception among *creole* religious

27 Mariana de la Encarnación, *Relación de la fundación del Convento antiguo*, ed. Ramírez and Llanos, 20. Alba González, “Presencia de América en Toledo,” 191. Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 274. Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 190.

28 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 308–21.

29 Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación, Indiferente Virreinal, exp. 4, caja 6267: *Libro de gasto de las carmelitas descalzas del convento de San José de la ciudad de México 1635–1664*, fol. 43. I am grateful for this information provided by Silvia Patricia Olguín Rodríguez.

30 Mariana de la Encarnación, *Relación de la fundación del Convento antiguo*, ed. Ramírez and Llanos, 123.

women. We can see their influence in their writings, the oldest of which are from the first half of the seventeenth century. From these manuscripts we know that *creole* nuns were devoted to women like St. Teresa, St. Gertrude, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Lutgarde, or Juana de la Cruz, who was also known as St. Juana, despite never being canonized.³¹

Let me focus on nuns as writers whose printed works circulated during that time in New Spain. St. Teresa of Jesus, better known as Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), was the most influential model for Spanish and *creole* nuns. The dissemination of her works in print (from the first publication in 1588) presumably made her the more influential, later reinforced by her growing popularity, thanks to her early beatification (1614) and swift canonization (1622). The great promotion of St. Teresa can be partly explained by the fact that, until then, the Spanish Empire did not have a holy woman of Spanish origin, except for some martyrs from Early Christianity or from the initial Muslim presence on the peninsula. Her popularity was such that there was even an attempt to proclaim her as patroness of Spain, alongside the apostle St. James, an idea that, at the time, caused great controversy.³²

The dissemination of Teresa's works in Europe and in Latin America was related to the spread of Carmelite reform. But Teresa of Ávila became a model for nuns broadly, beyond simply the Carmelite sphere. Teresa's writings, among them her *Life*, were circulated and read, both in print and in manuscript copies. Female readers from Mexico, as we learn from their memoirs, were directly inspired by her writings to found the first American Carmelite convent.³³

In nuns' manuscripts from the seventeenth century, not just among Carmelites, St. Teresa is often referred to as a model writer, reformer, and mystic. We find many allusions to her in descriptions of nuns' visions, in which she is represented with a book, quill-pen, and ink reservoir in the act of writing her own books, or a "book of the lives" of the very same colonial nuns, almost as if the saint were their secretary. An example is the visions of María de Jesús Tomellín (ca. 1582–1637), a Conceptionist nun, told by her friend, Agustina de Santa Teresa (ca. 1601–1668).³⁴ These depictions lend legitimacy to the practices of colonial nuns. The image of Teresa as writer is also found in colonial paintings, almost as frequently as the scene of transverberation, sometimes even combining two scenes into one, as in an anonymous colonial-era picture from the Carmelite nuns' private collection [Fig. 5.2].

Thanks to the profuse circulation of her books in the Iberian world, the Teresian ideal quickly became an important marker for women writers. The nuns and lay *beatas* incorporated her experiences into their own lives, and took Teresa's writings as a stylistic ideal. This shows that the spread of autobiographical writings in New Spain, in the first half of the seventeenth century, was stimulated by the circulation of Teresa's writ-

31 Bieñko de Peralta, "Voces del claustro," 166–72.

32 Rowe, *Saint and Nation*, 77–106.

33 Bieñko de Peralta, "Madre y Escritora," 103.

34 Agustina de Santa Teresa, "Vida de la venerable madre María de Jesús," fols. 198–99. Also Bieñko de Peralta, "Madre y Escritora," 113.

Figure 5.2: Anonymous, *Transverberation (or Ecstasy or Piercing) of St. Teresa*. Oil on canvas, eighteenth century. Private Collection, Carmelite Nunnery, Puebla, Mexico.



Figure 5.3: Anonymous, *St. Gertrude Nursing the Baby Jesus* (detail). Oil on canvas, eighteenth century. Parish of Soledad, Mexico City.

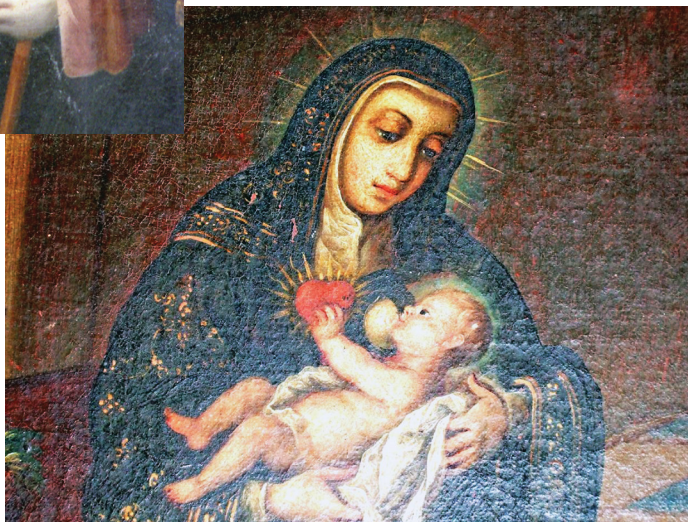


Figure 5.4: Juan de Villegas and Pedro Rafael Salazar, *St. Gertrude Nursing the Baby Jesus* (detail). Oil on canvas, eighteenth century. Parish of San Martín Texmelucan, Puebla, Mexico.

Figure 5.5: Possibly Andres Lagarto, *Nun's Shield Showing the Virgin, St. Joseph, St. Francis, St. Gertrude, and St. Catherine*. Watercolour on vellum, tortoiseshell frame, early seventeenth century. Private Collection, Puebla, Mexico.

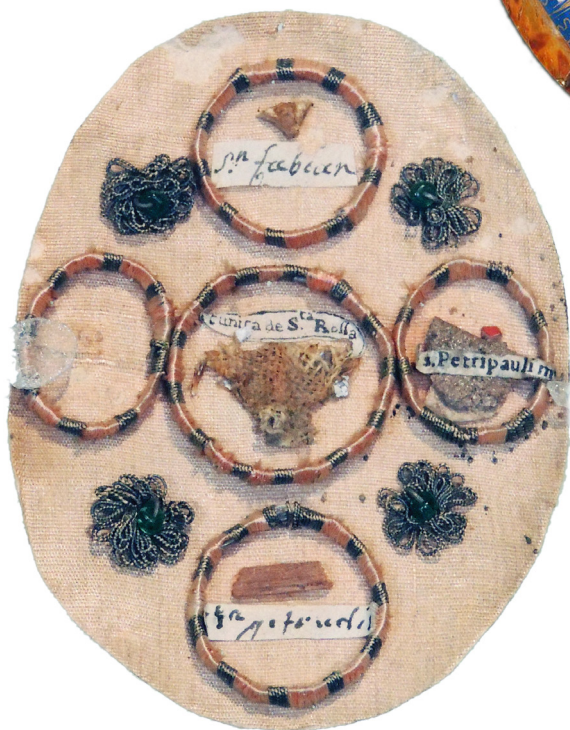


Figure 5.6: Reliquary of saints Fabiana (top), Perpetua, Rosa de Lima, and Gertrude (bottom). Probably eighteenth century. Museo de Arte Religioso Ex Convento de Santa Mónica, Puebla, Mexico.



Figure 5.7: Miguel Cabrera, *St. Gertrude (Santa Gertrudis)*. Oil on canvas, 1763, 43½ × 34¾ inches (110 × 88 cm). Gift of Laura and Daniel D. Boeckman in honour of Dr. William Rudolph, Dallas Museum of Art, 2006.37.

ings. However, hers was not the only autobiographical work widely referenced in New Spain at that time.

Another important model for colonial nuns was St. Gertrude the Great, also known as Gertrude of Helfta, a German Benedictine nun from the thirteenth century. The first Spanish translation of Gertrude's writings came to light at the beginning of the seventeenth century.³⁵ Although little known in Northern Europe at that time, she became important in Spain due to links with Teresa of Ávila. In the prologue to the Spanish edition of Gertrude's works, Teresa is mentioned several times. In one reference, Teresa is strongly linked to Gertrude because of their shared experience of transverberation. References to Teresa in Gertrude's book helped to remove suspicions of heterodoxy from Teresa's reputation and accelerate her canonization. Echoes of their association survived in eighteenth-century colonial paintings in which they appear together.³⁶

Gertrude of Helfta was reinvented in Spain and its colonies as the counterpoint of Martin Luther, simply because Spanish biographers inaccurately assigned both of them the same birthplace (Eisleben in the Harz mountains of Saxony). In addition, she got conflated with Gertrude of Hackeborn, which was reflected in her being representing as the ideal abbess and a sister of St. Mechtilde of Hackeborn.³⁷

In New Spain the popular belief in the sanctity of Gertrude was so great that preachers of the time regarded her as second only to the Virgin Mary. Some went so far as to claim that, if Jesus had not been born from the Virgin Mary, God would have chosen Gertrude to be Jesus' mother. For this reason, we find depictions of the German nun nursing the Baby Jesus [Figs 5.3 and 5.4]. In the sources we find descriptions in which Gertrude becomes pregnant for a few days and she gives birth to Jesus.³⁸

From a very early date, Gertrude was widely known among the Carmelites, the Conceptionists, and the Hieronymites.³⁹ We even have an image of her dating from the second decade of the seventeenth century [Fig. 5.5]. It is an example of an "imagen de pecho," or alternatively a "nun's shield" (a circular plaque worn on the chest by some Mexican female orders), possibly painted by Andrés Lagarto and belonging to Francisca de los Reyes according to the inscription on the back.⁴⁰ Gertrude, clothed in a black Benedictine habit, appears together with the Virgin Mary, St. Catherine, St. Francis, and St. Joseph. She is holding a shepherd's crook and a palm, and inside her heart we can see the Baby Jesus, an allusion to her mystical pregnancy.

Gertrude's reappropriation by the colonial nuns is present in both heterodox and orthodox imaginations. We know this from inquisitorial inquiries from 1615 against Juana de Espíritu Santo, a Carmelite novice from Puebla. She was denounced because of

35 For a discussion about the Spanish translation and circulation of Gertrude's writings, see Carvalho, *Gertrudes de Helfta e Espanha*.

36 Rubial García and Bieñko de Peralta, "La más amada de Cristo," 7–10.

37 Carvalho, *Gertrudes de Helfta e Espanha*, 38. Rubial García and Bieñko de Peralta, "Santa Gertrudis la Magna," 111–12.

38 Rubial García and Bieñko de Peralta, "La más amada de Cristo," 22–26.

39 Rubial García and Bieñko de Peralta, "Santa Gertrudis la Magna," 120–23.

40 Tovar de Teresa, *Un rescate de la fantasía*, 176–77.

her frequent visions and ecstasies. In one of them, she experienced a mystical marriage with Jesus; St. Gertrude and St. Teresa were her godmothers. The German nun placed several rings onto Juana's fingers, a symbol of matrimony.⁴¹ This description clearly links Teresa and Gertrude, as we have just seen in various paintings and documents.

At around the same period, we find yet another mention of Gertrude in the autobiography of Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio (1575–1636), a Hieronymite nun from the San Jerónimo monastery in Mexico City. In one of her numerous visions, she saw “the glorious Saint Gertrude” as a celestial intercessor attempting to obtain forgiveness for the sinners of the world.⁴² Also, among Conceptionist nuns, her role as mediator and model was stressed. We can see this in writings concerning the previously mentioned María de Jesús Tomellín from Puebla. In these documents she encourages other nuns to read Gertrude's works.⁴³ Documentation from the same convent tells us that the nuns there possessed a relic of St. Gertrude. We also know the nuns celebrated St. Gertrude and St. Teresa on the same day.⁴⁴ In fact, the collection of the Museo Exconvento de Santa Mónica in Puebla contains a deteriorated reliquary with the relics of St. Gertrude together with other saints: Fabiana, Perpetua, and Rosa de Lima [Fig. 5.6]. This may be the very same relic mentioned in those documents.

While Teresa was a contemporary model for *creole* nuns, the works of St. Gertrude were an important tie to the medieval intellectual heritage. In colonial paintings Gertrude, like Teresa, was frequently represented as a mystical writer [Fig. 5.7]. These two saints became influential models for *creole* nuns writing their own memoirs.

Other lesser-known models exist too. One of these was Ana María de San Joseph, whose autobiography was first printed in Salamanca in 1632 and reprinted in New Spain a mere three years later [Fig. 5.8].⁴⁵ The exemplar preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia has a marginal note that confirms its conventual provenance; it belonged to Carmelite nuns, probably from Mexico City [Fig. 5.9]. An abbreviated version of the same book was reissued again in Mexico in 1641.⁴⁶ So, in addition to the circulation of images and books in the New World originating from Spain, sometimes European books were quickly reprinted in New Spain and incorporated into conventual library collections.

We might ask ourselves, why would this book in particular be reprinted in New Spain? Some of Ana María's visions were of special interest to *creole* readers. On various

41 Inquisition trial of Juana de Espíritu Santo, 1615: Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación, Inquisición, vol. 310, exp. 2, fols. 54–86.

42 Austin, University of Texas, Benson Latin American Collection, MS G 94: María Magdalena Lorravaquio, *Libro en que se contiene la vida de la madre María Magdalena ...*, fol. 54.

43 Agustina de Santa Teresa, “Vida de la venerable madre María de Jesús,” fol. 183r.

44 Agustina de Santa Teresa, “Vida de la venerable madre María de Jesús,” fol. 183v.

45 Niño, *A la serenissima infanta sor Margarita de la Cruz....* The first Mexican edition with the same title was printed by Bernardo Calderón in 1635.

46 The second Mexican edition: Ana María de San Joseph, *Vida de la venerable virgen* (Mexico City: Francisco Robledo, 1641).



Figure 5.8: Title page of Juanetín Niño, *A la serenissima infanta sor Margarita de la Cruz, religiosa descalza en su Real Convento de Descalzas Franciscanas de Madrid. En razón del interrogatorio en causa de la venerable virgen sor Ana María de San Joseph, abadesa de la misma orden y provincia de Santiago* (Salamanca: Jacinto Taberniel, 1632).

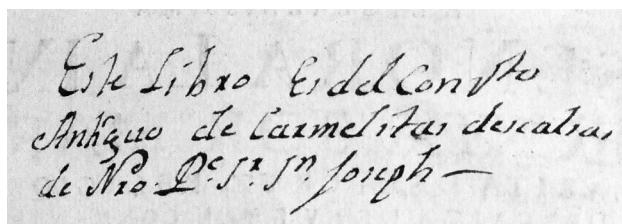


Figure 5.9: Handwritten annotation on verso of title page, "Este Libro Es del Convento Antiquo de Carmelitas descalzas de Nuestro Padre Señor San Joseph." From Juanetín Niño, *A la serenissima infanta...* (Salamanca: Jacinto Taberniel, 1632). Images courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

occasions she relates her spiritual journeys to Japan and to the West Indies. An angel accompanies her as she baptizes and teaches catechism to the indigenous peoples:

Sometimes I found myself among a crowd of Indians from different nations, with Christian doctrine in hand, and they were kneeling while they listened to it One time, among many, this saintly angel took me to some Indian lands, and he gave me a glass in the form of a goblet, and it had oil that overflowed; and with his finger that he wet there, he made the sign of the cross on foreheads, and then he made me kneel, and I taught them the Christian doctrine; this happened to me a few times.⁴⁷

These are some of the earliest accounts of spiritual journeys to the West Indies; other Spanish nuns like Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534), Luisa de la Ascensión (1565–1635), and María de Agreda (1602–1665) describe similar experiences.⁴⁸ Their narrative exploits reflect the general religious concern of the time, and the desire these women had to participate in missionary enterprises.

To summarize, I would like to highlight the principal characteristics of printed autobiographies circulating in New Spain. All of the authors were nuns, abbesses, or prioresses who were considered exemplary. Some were canonized and many others were expected to be beatified. Their *Lives* were considered to be models for religious women. The presence of these ideals allowed individual female writers to legitimize their own autobiographical efforts. Their influence is confirmed by the presence of books found in nuns' libraries, and also in the *creole* nuns' own manuscripts, and in their visionary experiences.

Thanks to this transatlantic dialogue involving books, objects, and images, the inhabitants of Mexican nunneries were able not only to participate in but also to reapropriate the culture of Imperial Spain.

⁴⁷ Ana María de San Joseph, *Vida de la venerable virgen*, 82 and 103.

⁴⁸ Tar, "Flying through the Empire." Also Lundberg, *Mission and Ecstasy*, 186–214.

Bibliography

Unpublished Primary Sources

- Libro de gasto de las carmelitas descalzas del convento de San José de la ciudad de México 1635–1664*. Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación, Indiferente Virreinal, exp. 4, caja 6267.
- Lorravaquio, María Magdalena, *Libro en que se contiene la vida de la madre María Magdalena, monja profesa del Convento del Señor San Jerónimo de la Ciudad de México*. Austin, University of Texas, Benson Latin American Collection, MS G 94.
- Relación de lo que pasó en el convento de las Madres Carmelitas Descalzas de San José de la ciudad de los Ángeles con un pedacito de carne del tamaño de una uña de la mano de la carne de Nuestra Santa Madre Teresa de Jesús*. Puebla, Archivo del Convento de San José y Santa Teresa.
- San Matías, Isabel de. *Testimony*, 1691. Archivo Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione dei Riti, Processus, 131, vol. 50.
- Santa Teresa, Agustina de. *Vida de la venerable madre María de Jesús escrita por la madre Agustina de Santa Teresa, monja profesa del convento de la Limpia Concepción de la Madre de Dios de la Puebla de los Ángeles*. Archivo Segreto Vaticano, Congregazione dei Riti, Processus, vol. 46.
- Trial of Agustina de Santa Clara, 1598. Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación, Inquisición, vol. 180, exp. 2.
- Trial of Juana de Espíritu Santo, 1615. Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación, Inquisición, vol. 310, exp. 2.

Secondary Literature

- Alba González, Emilia. "Presencia de América en Toledo: aportación cultural y social. El establecimiento de las Capuchinas toledanas en Nueva España." PhD diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1998.
- Amerlinck de Corsi, Concepción, and Manuel Ramos Medina. *Conventos de monjas: Fundaciones en el México virreinal*. Mexico City: Grupo Condumex, 1995.
- Amerlinck de Corsi, María Concepción. "Los primeros beateríos novohispanos y el origen del convento de La Concepción," *Boletín de Monumentos Históricos* 15 (1991): 6–21.
- Barreto Ávila, Diana. "Beatas medievales educando princesas nahuas: el monasterio de la Madre de Dios." In *Vida conventual femenina, siglos XVI–XIX*, edited by Manuel Ramos Medina, 37–54. Mexico City: Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, 2013.
- Bieñko de Peralta, Doris. "Los impresos novohispanos sobre religiosas clarisas españolas en el siglo XVII." In *Monacato femenino franciscano en Hispanoamérica y España*, edited by Mina Ramírez Montes, 213–22. Querétaro: Estado de Querétaro, 2012.
- . "Madre y Escritora: santa Teresa en las visiones de las monjas novohispanas (siglo XVII)." In *De Ávila a las Indias: Teresa de Jesús en Nueva España*, edited by Manuel Ramos Medina, Mario Sarmiento Zúñiga, and Jesús Estrada Montes de Oca, 45–56. Mexico City: Centro de Estudios de Historia de México/Fundación Carlos Slim, 2016.
- . "Voces del claustro. Dos autobiografías de monjas novohispanas del siglo XVII." *Relaciones* 35, no. 139 (2014): 157–94.
- Carvalho, José Adriano Moreira de Freitas. *Gertrudes de Helfta e Espanha. Contribuição para estudo da história da espiritualidade peninsular nos séculos XVI e XVII*. Porto: Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica, Centro de Literatura da Universidade do Porto, 1981.

- Díaz, Mónica. *Indigenous Writings from the Convent: Negotiating Ethnic Autonomy in Colonial Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010.
- Díaz, Mónica and Stephanie Kirk. "Theorizing Transatlantic Women's Writing: Imperial Crossings and the Production of Knowledge." *Early Modern Women* 8 (2013): 53–84.
- Encarnación, Mariana de la. *Relación de la fundación del Convento antiguo de Santa Teresa*. Edited by Clara Ramírez and Claudia Llanos. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2015.
- García Icazbalceta, Joaquín. *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga, primer obispo y arzobispo de México: estudio biográfico y bibliográfico. Con un apéndice de documentos inéditos o raros*. 3 vols. Mexico City: Andrade y Morales, 1881. New edition, edited by Rafael Aguayo Spencer and Antonio Castro Leal. 4 vols. Mexico City: Porrúa, 1947.
- Gómez de la Parra, José. *Fundación y primer siglo: crónica de primer convento de carmelitas descalzas en Puebla, 1604–1704*. Edited by Manuel Ramos Medina. Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana y Comisión Puebla Quinto Centenario, 1992.
- Huerga, Álvaro. *Historia de los alumbrados, III: Los alumbrados de Hispanoamérica, 1570–1605*. 3rd vol. of 4. Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1986.
- Lavrin, Asunción. *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.
- Letona, Bartolomé de. *Perfecta religiosa. Contiene tres libros*. Puebla: Viuda de Juan de Borja y Gandia, 1662.
- Lundberg, Magnus. *Mission and Ecstasy: Contemplative Women and Salvation in Colonial Spanish America and the Philippines*. Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Mission Research, 2015.
- Madre de Dios, Agustín de la. *Tesoro Escondido en el Monte Carmelo Mexicano, mina rica de ejemplos y virtudes en la historia de los carmelitas descalzos de la provincia de la Nueva España descubierta cuando escrita por fray Agustín de la Madre de Dios, religioso de la misma orden*. Edited by Eduardo Báez Macías. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986.
- Marcuello, Francisco. *Primera parte de la historia natural y moral de las aves*. Zaragoza: Juan de Lanaja y Quartenet, 1617.
- Martínez Cuesta, Ángel. "Las monjas en la América Colonial, 1530–1824." *Thesaurus: Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo* 50 (1995): 572–626.
- Niño, Juanetín. *A la Serenissima infanta sor Margarita de la Cruz, religiosa descalza en su Real Convento de Descalzas Franciscanas de Madrid. En razón del interrogatorio en causa de la venerable virgen sor Ana María de San Joseph, abadesa de la misma orden y provincia de Santiago*. Salamanca: Jacinto Taberniel, 1632.
- Ramos Medina, Manuel. *Místicas y descalzas: fundaciones femeninas carmelitas en la Nueva España*. Mexico City: Grupo Condumex, 1997.
- Ramírez Montes, Mina. *Niñas, doncellas, vírgenes eternas. Santa Clara de Querétaro*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005.
- Rodríguez Moya, Inmaculada, María de los Ángeles Fernández Valle, and Carme López Calderón, eds. *Arte y Patrimonio en Iberoamérica: Tráficos transoceánicos*. Castelló de la Plana: Universitat de Jaume I, 2016.
- Rowe, Erin Kathleen. *Saint and Nation: Santiago, Teresa of Avila, and Plural Identities in Early Modern Spain*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.
- Rubial García, Antonio. "Votos pactados. Las prácticas políticas entre los mendicantes novohispanos." *Estudios de historia novohispana* 26 (2002): 51–83.

- Rubial García, Antonio and Doris Bieñko de Peralta. "La más amada de Cristo. Iconografía y culto de Santa Gertrudis la Magna," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 25, no. 83 (2003): 5–54.
- . "Santa Gertrudis la Magna. Huellas de una devoción novohispana," *Historia y Grafía* 26 (2006): 109–39.
- San Joseph, Ana María de. *Vida de la venerable virgen sor Ana María de San Joseph, Abadesa del Convento Real de Descalzas y Provincia de Santiago de Salamanca*. Mexico City: Francisco Robledo, 1641.
- Tar, Jane. "Flying through the Empire: The Visionary Journeys of Early Modern Nuns." In *Women's Voices and Politics of the Spanish Empire*, edited by Jennifer Eich, Jeanne Gillespie, and Lucia Harrison, 263–302. New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2008.
- Tovar de Teresa, Guillermo. *Un rescate de la fantasía: el arte de los Lagarto, iluminadores novohispanos de los siglos XVI y XVII*. Mexico City and Madrid: El Equilibrista and Turner Libros, 1988.
- Vetancurt, Agustín de. "Menologio franciscano de los varones más señalados." In *Crónica de la Provincia del Santo Evangelio de México*. Mexico City: Doña María de Benavides Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1697.
- Vollendorf, Lisa and Grady Wray. "Gender in the Atlantic World: Women's Writing in Iberia and Latin America." In *Theorising the Ibero-Atlantic World*, edited by Harald Braun, Kristy Hooper, and Lisa Vollendorf, 97–116. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

