

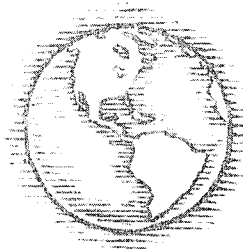
Religion in New Spain

Edited by

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CHAPTER NINE

The Indigenous Nuns of Corpus Christi

Race and Spirituality

MÓNICA DÍAZ

One of the rare available writings by an indigenous nun is a biographical account of the founding abbess of Corpus Christi, the first convent in colonial Mexico for indigenous women. The account, which is addressed to the author's confessor, ends with a vague report of a mysterious occurrence. The writer recounts that the father of a Spanish novice who had been accepted into Corpus Christi had made preparations to kill the indigenous nuns who were living there. He had set up a ladder to climb the wall of the convent, yet the night he planned to enter and kill the nuns, someone murdered him in the winery. The writer concludes and glosses the anecdote by stating that she and her fellow indigenous nuns suffered very much while Spanish nuns and novices lived among them.¹

The episode recounted by the nun of Corpus Christi—which in 1724 became the

first convent to allow indigenous women of colonial-era Mexico to enter as nuns—illustrates the racial conflicts that existed within and surrounded the convent. The existence of Corpus Christi incurred strong opposition from various people who doubted the spiritual and intellectual capacity of Indians. Some religious authorities, with the support of powerful lay people in colonial society, demonstrated their opposition by allowing Spanish nuns and novices into the convent. The Spanish nuns clashed with the indigenous nuns, generating more vigorous animosity on all sides.

The animosity, however, had roots in a longstanding debate about race in New Spain and began to emerge even before Corpus Christi first opened its doors, when the convent for indigenous women was merely a possibility for public consideration. At that time, different factions of the religious

authorities formulated and expressed conflicting positions on the question of indigenous women's capacity to become nuns. The debate that took place reveals the importance that race had for the Spanish population. Spaniards propagated their ideology of racial hierarchy "that placed the Spaniards on top, *castas* (individuals with mixed racial backgrounds) in the middle, and Indians and Africans at the bottom," and organized society accordingly.² The exercise of Spanish superiority was at stake in the opinions of the individuals who fervently opposed convents for Indians.

Racial ideologies in the colonial period were fused with gender ideologies. The opening of the first convent for indigenous women in Mexico City focused controversy on indigenous women and exposed the gendered dimensions of racial beliefs. According to Kristine Ibsen, during the colonial period in Spanish America, "man was associated with the soul, spirit, and reason, and woman with the body, carnality, and sinfulness."³ Because, in addition, the "qualities" and the "nature" of the indigenous people remained the subject of debate, Indian women experienced a double alienation by virtue of their sex and their race "from any place in the spiritual hierarchy, and particularly from such an exalted one as religious profession."⁴

In what follows, I analyze three documents that allow us to glimpse the complexities of the racial debate and conflicts that took place in colonial Mexico as a consequence of the opening of Corpus Christi. First, I examine the hagiographical account of Catharina Tegakovita, an indigenous woman from New France. The

account appeared in Spanish translation in Mexico as part of the defense of indigenous women's spirituality. Second, I analyze two chapters of the *vida* of Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, a nun who once lived among the indigenous nuns in Corpus Christi. The priest who wrote the biography intended to document an exemplary life, yet he indirectly mentions the racial conflict that was provoked by the presence of Spanish nuns and novices in the convent. Last, I consider one part of a document recently found in the archives of Corpus Christi. The manuscript is a group of biographical accounts entitled *Apuntes de algunas vidas de nuestras hermanas difuntas* (Notes about the Lives of Some of our Deceased Sisters). The accounts are the products of at least three different handwritings, all by anonymous authors. Surface linguistic clues indicate that all of the writings came from a feminine hand, and at least one of them from an indigenous hand.

For each of the three documents, my analysis is intended to draw out the racial, gendered, and spiritual concerns that guide the authors. Ultimately, I show that the interplay of gender and genre takes a principal role in the construction of the authors' arguments. The identity and position of the author relate closely to the sorts of rhetorical framework that are employed in addressing questions of spirituality and race.

Historiography

The last decades have seen the creation of a new subfield within colonial studies, which is at times referred to as "conventual writing," according to Kathleen Myers.⁵ The first important works written in the 1960s

and 1970s about religious women coincided with the feminist politics and the interests of scholars in writing a history of women.⁶ In the 1980s, the discoveries of key documents written by women allowed a new space for research and analysis, where the boundaries between history and literature blurred. Colonial studies have since aimed for interdisciplinary scholarship. Important works published in the 1990s, such as Jean Franco's *Plotting Women* and Schlau, Arenal, and Powell's *Untold Sisters*, compiled previous research on conventual writings in the canon of literary studies and enriched textual analysis with historical contextualization. Myers states, "One of the driving forces behind these broadening trends was the push to discover and analyze new sources that told the stories of previously voiceless people in traditional literary and historical studies."⁷

Scholars have pursued attempts to recover the voices of indigenous women from the colonial period—previously voiceless people in traditional studies—but they have not yet uncovered the documents that would provide direct access to indigenous women's perspectives. Individuals working in the field of conventual writings have used numerous documents about indigenous nuns in order to understand and develop a history of these women, without the need of autobiographical accounts, as scholars have done for many *criolla* nuns.⁸ By identifying the several filters of gender and racial domination in documents written about indigenous women by others rather than the women themselves, scholars have endeavored to draw out the voice of the voiceless. These efforts, however, have had limited

success, and we continue our quest for clear proof of the intellectual life of indigenous women in the colonial period.

The indigenous nuns of Corpus Christi were literate and expressed themselves in writing, as did many other women in colonial Mexico, inside and outside of the walls of the convent. In the introduction to *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, Susan Schroeder argues that the indigenous nuns "did know Latin, and some definitely knew how to write, as is apparent in their petitions, licenses, and other record books."⁹ Ann Miriam Gallagher states that indigenous nuns "were instructed in Christian doctrine, all could read Latin for the Divine Office, and all had attained some proficiency in the domestic arts."¹⁰ Their writings, however, are not easy to find since they were neglected because of gender and racial biases.

Until now we have only one known manuscript from the convent of Corpus Christi, a series of anonymous biographies about some indigenous nuns in the convent and others about the *criolla* founders. The manuscript was published by Josefina Muriel in 1963, entitled *Las indias cacicques de Corpus Christi* (The Noble Indian Women of Corpus Christi). The manuscript was written in the third person, and most likely it was composed by a priest basing his writings on biographies, or *vidas*, written by the nuns in the convent.¹¹ Although Muriel believes that indigenous nuns wrote the manuscript she found, scholars in the field have begun to suggest the contrary by describing the different kinds of rhetoric usually used by priests in their writings and by the nuns in their written confessions or *vidas*.¹² Moreover, scholars have shown that

priests would adapt the writings of the nuns without giving them any credit for their work. Asunción Lavrin mentions that the interest in making of them exemplary and didactic compositions was used to justify the intellectual appropriation and the disclosure of the confidences exchanged in a relationship that was supposed to be direct, personal, and secret.¹³ Jean Franco also studies the process by which the nuns' writing goes from private to public. She states that the language of the writer nun had to be polished by the lettered priest, since the language of the women was considered rustic. Consequently, the priests usually edited the nuns' compositions.¹⁴ Immediate proof that the manuscript published in 1963 was not written by the nuns is the recent finding of the original texts in the archives of the convent. This important finding changes and contributes to the body of work that has been done on the subject.

A number of important studies followed Muriel's initial research on the founding of Corpus Christi. Asunción Lavrin has analyzed the conflicts in the convent during its first years as well as the racial divergences within the convent.¹⁵ Ann Miriam Gallagher wrote her doctoral dissertation in 1972 about the family background of the indigenous nuns of Corpus Christi and another convent in Querétaro, and has an article on the same subject.¹⁶ Elisa Sampson published a book in which she studies the debate that surrounded the founding of the convent for Indian women and the different kinds of images that were constructed for these women.¹⁷ Mariselle Meléndez wrote an article about the racial identity constructed in the manuscript about the indigenous

nuns of Corpus Christi, and María Justina Sarabia Viejo treats a similar subject using materials from the General Archive of Indies in Seville.¹⁸ All of these works have greatly contributed to the knowledge of one of the most important occurrences in New Spain, the acceptance of indigenous nuns into a convent.

Convents began appearing in Spanish America thirty years after the conquest. Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of New Spain, asked the crown to send Spanish nuns to establish centers of Christian life among the female indigenous population, but Charles V opposed the idea since according to him it was too early in the process of the conquest.¹⁹ Although some of the first missionaries instructed indigenous girls in the Catholic faith, the nunneries founded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were for Spanish and criolla women. Church authorities believed that indigenous people could not comprehend the meaning of monastic life. For much of the early colonial period, they restricted indigenous women to the role of servants or *donadas*²⁰ within convents. Finally, in 1724 Viceroy don Baltasar de Zúñiga, marquis of Valero, and clerical authorities established the convent of Corpus Christi in Mexico City, a convent for indigenous noble women. Clerical authorities believed that the nobility would be better educated and more prepared for monastic life than other Indians. Moreover, the authorities believed that there was a large group of Indians who wanted to profess, and they wanted to limit the number of candidates. In 1737, the convent of Cosamaloapan, the second for indigenous women, appeared in Morelia; and

in 1782, the convent of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles was opened in Oaxaca. Early in the nineteenth century, the marquis of Castañiza, director of Mexico City's former Jesuit school for indigenous girls of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in Mexico City, transformed it into a convent. This convent was the first to open to indigenous women regardless of social class in 1811.

Gendered Racial Beliefs

A convent for indigenous women had not been allowed before 1724, and the opening of the convent signified a change in racial and gender politics in the religious arena. Previous research has shown that the transition was not easy and not immediate, and even despite the change of politics, groups continued to fight to restrict indigenous women to servile roles. The entry of indigenous women into the convent was in reality part of a continuous negotiation between the indigenous nobility, priests, and colonial authorities. The negotiation did not end when the convent opened its doors; rather, it continued and involved the indigenous nuns as active participants. The first convent was intended only for members of the indigenous nobility, who maintained a special position of power, particularly during the first years of the colony. They allowed the Spaniards to interact with the rest of the indigenous population, the *macehuales* (commoners), by filling the roles of intermediaries between the colonizers and colonized. In their positions as intermediaries, they had privileges that distinguished them from the rest of the Indians, yet they did not have the same social and economic status as the Spaniards. Indigenous nobility remained

racially inferior to Spaniards in colonial society and in the religious hierarchy.

Indigenous noble men were able to participate in religious life earlier than indigenous noble women. Although not in a monastery per se, the indigenous nobility was able to learn Christian devotional practices as well as to read and write in Latin, Nahuatl, and Spanish. Louise Burkhart writes that the Colegio de Santa Cruz at Santiago Tlatelolco, founded in 1536 by the Franciscans, had as its primary goal an "educational program to train assistants who would help the friars attain the language skills they needed to preach to the rest of the native population."²¹ In reality, as Burkhart explains, the training of the Colegio de Santa Cruz became empowering to members of the indigenous nobility; they not only learned to speak Latin and Spanish in addition to Nahuatl, but also "had been taught to reason according to Western as well as Nahua logical principles and to construct arguments according to Western as well as Nahua rhetorical arts."²² Initially, Franciscan friars thought about training the Indians for the priesthood, but they backed away from that idea, "not because they lacked intellectual ability but because they were overendowed with sensuality."²³

By the time the convent of Corpus Christi was open, indigenous men were allowed to become priests, but indigenous women had few opportunities in the colonial church. There were convents that allowed indigenous girls to enter in order to receive an education and to learn about Christianity, yet they could not become nuns. When church authorities had to give a reason for their opposition to indigenous

women becoming nuns, they mentioned the problem of sensuality, which had previously been assigned to indigenous men. Asunción Lavrin summarizes, "The ugly double-headed monster of intellectual ineptitude and sexual incontinence which had stalled the process of acceptance on indigenous men in the clergy revisited the scene to taint the process for women."²⁴ Allan Greer argues that "according to their detractors, the *indias* lacked one other, indispensable virtue: constancy. Presumably the vows of poverty and obedience posed no difficulty to humble native women; rather it was the vow of chastity that was at issue."²⁵ When the debate was opened to several priests' opinions about the ability of indigenous women to become nuns, the Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans responded that the convent for Indian women was necessary and that many of these women had already shown the capacity to live a religious life in the convents for Spaniards and criollos.²⁶ The Jesuits, although not all of them, were against the indigenous convents.

In the midst of the debate about the ability of native women to become nuns appeared a document that would argue in favor of indigenous nuns. In 1724, to counterbalance the negative campaign against the new convent, Juan de Urtassum published a hagiographical account about an indigenous woman from New France, entitled *La gracia triunfante en la vida de Catharina Tegakovita*.²⁷ The original account was authored by Francisco Colonec and translated from the French by Juan de Urtassum, a Jesuit. The translation appeared in a three-part volume in New Spain. In the first part of the work, Juan Ignacio de Castorena, who

was vicar-general of the Indians, wrote a *Parecer* in which he defended the capacity of indigenous women to become nuns. The second part is the biography of Catharina in the form of a hagiographical account, and the last part consists of several short accounts of indigenous women who had been known to lead exemplary lives. With regard to the racial debate of Corpus Christi, the first and last parts of the Spanish version of *La gracia triunfante* are the most important ones. The hagiographical account of Catharina appears merely as an exemplary life of an Indian in support of the agenda that Urtassum and Castorena shared. The translated account of Catharina was the result of the two men's efforts to present convincing evidence that indigenous women could be chaste and pure. They defined the spirituality that indigenous women needed to enter the convent in terms of chastity, purity, and continence.

Because the main point of contention was the lack of chastity among indigenous women, Castorena attempts to defuse the debate in the first part of the book: "The reason seems convincing, as it is noticeable, founded on the Scriptures and Fathers in what the Holy Spirit dictated to the pen of the wise man: Nobody can be pure if God does not make him chaste. We owe the gift of continence to your mercy."²⁸ In this paragraph, Castorena argues that the favor of God is required in order to be chaste. According to him, if God grants that favor to religious men and women in all parts of the world, then he would not deny that favor to indigenous women. He contends that chastity or continence does not come from human will but from divine favor and

that one racial or gender group cannot be excluded from God's will.

In the third point of the apology, Castorena goes on to contest the criticisms and reasons that were given to oppose the foundation of Corpus Christi. Against the idea that indigenous people could not comprehend the meaning of religious monastic life, Castorena argues, "I ask, didn't they have the ability to go from the ignorance of our holy mysteries to the knowledge of them? Then why wouldn't they have the ability to go from the knowledge of the mysteries and obligations of being a Christian to the knowledge of the Evangelical advises?"²⁹ Castorena argues that the indigenous people were capable of understanding the mysteries of Christianity and becoming Christians, and that same capacity would allow them to understand the duties of monastic life. During the time of the debate, the indigenous women to whom they were referring had been Christians for generations. There was not much chance of a false Catholic among them, according to Castorena.

The second part of *La gracia triunfante* presents the life of Catharina Tegakovita, an Iroquois Indian.³⁰ Catharina's main virtue is her purity. Her parents attempted to persuade her to marry, but she resisted because her love of purity was stronger. The hagiography states that her people persecuted her until she left her village. After her departure, she took her first vow: the vow of chastity. The narration, in the style of a hagiographical account, touches on particular topoi such as the sufferings and pains that Catharina endured with happiness and patience. The life of Catharina Tegakovita was a pretext for writing extensively and

with precise examples about the virtues of indigenous women. The third part, which starts in chapter six, begins with the following explanation: "Herein a brief notice of the exemplary life of some of the Indians of this New Spain is given; and in particular of the continence, which they professed, and which they maintained until their blessed death."³¹

Urtassum includes in the last part of the volume short narratives about the lives of several indigenous women who had lived a life of chastity. The cases of exemplary indigenous lives that Urtassum offered in *La gracia triunfante* were taken from other texts; maybe the most recognized ones are of Petronila de la Concepción and Francisca de San Miguel, which are included in *Paraíso occidental*, written by don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. None of the indigenous women featured were nuns because they were not yet allowed that privilege. Like Catharina, they were women who lived according to the model of perfection found in hagiographies and who adhered to a secret vow of perpetual virginity. Magdalena de Pátzcuaro, for example, had experiences similar to those of Catharina. She was sick and offered her vow of chastity in return for healing. Later her parents tried to have her marry, but she refused because of her vow. "She concluded her prayer by making a vow of perpetual virginity to her [Mary's] Holy Son, proposing in virtue and imitation of Him, to preserve her body whole and without stain for the rest of her life."³²

The book, then, not only demonstrates that there were indigenous women who were worthy of being nuns because they could remain chaste during their entire

lives, but also became part of the central racial debate in which the proponents of the convent endeavored to change the images of indigenous women and portray them as chaste as other religious women. *La gracia triunfante* was a piece of religious literature that challenged the gendered racial beliefs that religious men had about indigenous women. Through the work, the two Jesuit authors were able to present new images of these women and influenced the founding of the first convent for indigenous women.

Suffering as Spirituality

Another example of religious literature that is part of the racial debate is the *Vida de la venerable Madre Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad*.³³ The argument of this work is more subtle than that of *La gracia triunfante*, and the purpose of the author was different from that of Urtassum and Castorena. In reality, this *vida* was not intended to make a direct contribution to the debate, but it has a chapter that comments on the racial tensions caused by the presence of a Spanish nun in the convent for indigenous nuns. The *vida* demonstrated that predominant perceptions of indigenous women had not changed completely in the colonial setting and that conflicts between races continued even after the founding of the convent. The *vida* of Sor Sebastiana Josepha is particularly important because she was one of the criollas accepted into the convent of Corpus Christi. The *vida* written by one of her confessors is based on letters and spiritual accounts that she wrote. For this reason, the content of the *vida* is important not only for what was taken from Sebastiana's writings but also for the position that the priest takes

in the conflict, since he rewrote the nun's experiences leaving the reader with a modified version of what Sebastiana in fact wrote. Chapter fourteen of the *vida* describes the entry of Sebastiana into Corpus Christi, and chapter fifteen explains briefly her time at the convent and her eviction from it.

Fray Joseph Valdés expresses his sadness over Sebastiana's departure from the convent, presenting Corpus Christi and the nuns as a place of perfection and virtue. He is sympathetic to the indigenous nuns, and does not express opposition to the expulsion of Sebastiana from the convent. The combination of loyalties to both the indigenous nuns and the Spanish nun is surprising. Fray Joseph narrates the unfortunate chapter of Sebastiana's life in Corpus Christi without negatively portraying the indigenous nuns.

Fray Joseph starts the chapter by praising the convent: "The convent, I say, religious, penitent, austere, and exemplary of noble religious ladies of Corpus Christi in where they live to heaven and die to the world; the caciques that come from all over this kingdom as candid doves flying to their nest and royal dovecote."³⁴ Beginning in the first paragraph, fray Joseph enumerates the several virtues of the convent and stresses the noble character of the inhabitants. He suggests that the indigenous nuns attained perfection because of the extremely austere and regulated life that they pursued, and he recounts that Sebastiana tried to conform to their austere way of life. Fray Joseph goes on to assert that it is more admirable to be the "weak sex" (*el sexo débil*) and practice such penances and mortifications on their bodies, while living happily and walking with ease. The question of chastity does not

figure into his description of the indigenous women's spirituality. Instead, suffering and mortification are the key elements of his narrative.

Sebastiana took the veil in the convent of Corpus Christi. She did not have money to pay the dowry to get into any convent but she had a sponsor who paid for her to be a Bridgettine nun. But in that convent they would only give her the white veil and her inclination was to be able to participate as a black-veiled nun. Through another intercessor, the Marquise of Salvatierra, Sebastiana got into Corpus Christi. "The Commissary General having given license, although with resistance and with the nuns' disgust because they did not want to accept Spaniards. But in the end, with the intercession of several people and the persuasion of the prelates, they accepted three back then, and among them our venerable Sebastiana, about whose virtue they have heard much news."³⁵

There were more than a couple of people who were opposed to maintaining the indigenous character of the convent of Corpus Christi, even though it had been decided by a royal *cédula* (mandate). The admission of Spaniards into Corpus Christi created great turmoil,³⁶ but little is known about the reaction of the indigenous nuns when the Spaniards entered the convent. One of the biographical accounts included in the *Apuntes* gives voice to one of the nuns who saw her convent in danger of being lost to the Spanish government, as had happened with the convent of Santa Clara in Querétaro, which accepted the daughter of the cacique Diego de Tapia as a nun. He was the main benefactor of the convent

and his only request was to see his daughter as a black-veiled nun. His intention was to make that convent one that would accept indigenous women; but no other indigenous woman was ever accepted, and it remained a convent for criollas.³⁷ In the *vida fray* Joseph mentions this occurrence: "And going back to what happened for her eviction, it is good to remember that having founded this convent as it was founded with the finality of receiving in it only noble Indians and not wanting to receive Spaniards because they [the Indians] were fearful to end up without this convent, as they had lost another one."³⁸

In the biographical account of the *Apuntes*, the writer takes as her mission the narration of some episodes from the life of Sor Petra de San Francisco, one of the founding nuns and first abbess of Corpus Christi. Sor Petra was a criolla nun who came from the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia and who was, according to this biographer, very kind to the indigenous novices and nuns. The anonymous writer does not limit herself to the account of Sor Petra's life and virtue, rather she takes advantage of the opportunity to write and be read by an ecclesiastical authority in order to relate the truthful version of the conflicts in Corpus Christi. The writer uses a candid and colloquial style. She writes as if she was speaking to the reader, who in this case is *Vuestra Paternidad*, surely the confessor of the nuns at the moment. In that style, she offers the following portrayal of Sor Petra: "She would give us our good lashes and then if we were crying she would caress us and she would tell us: This is over my children. They gave more lashes to our husband and did worse

things to his majesty.”³⁹ In this anecdote, the narrator recounts that Sor Petra would severely punish the nuns of the convent when they made a mistake and then talk to them lovingly. She would give them another opportunity to behave properly, but the narrator suggests that they usually would err again and receive reprimands from Sor Petra. The lesson that Sor Petra wanted to teach them was that their sufferings could not be surpassed by Jesus’s suffering. The idea of suffering as an essential element of spirituality, which was implied in the *vida*, is mentioned as the teachings of Sor Petra.

When the biographer finishes recounting the life of Sor Petra, she continues writing about the racial conflicts in the convent. The writer clarifies that the founding nuns—all of them criollas—were not the ones who caused trouble for the indigenous nuns, but were the nuns that Father Navarrete admitted into the convent once Sor Petra died. The biographer directly addresses the racial conflict, unlike fray Joseph in the *vida*. Fray Joseph refers only to the need for Sebastiana to leave the convent because Corpus Christi was never intended for criolla nuns and that the indigenous nuns were afraid of losing the indigenous character of their convent; he never explores the problems between the two racial groups. The narrator of Sor Petra’s life in the *Apuntes*, by contrast, more closely relates racial concerns and spirituality.

In colonial documents, the relation between gender and genre is a clear one. By comparing the style of fray Joseph and that of the anonymous female biographer of the *Apuntes*, we can find obvious distinctions that were related to the gender of the writer. Several critics have studied the

stylistic differences of *vidas* written by men and those by women. For example, Kathryn McKnight argues that the men who wrote *vidas* usually do not indicate a confessional relationship as the basis for their context, reveal little internal conflict, and contain quite a bit of self-affirmation. In addition, the writings were clearly intended for publication, which marked a great divergence between male and female writing production.⁴⁰ The last characteristic can be considered symbolic of the different public and private spaces that women and men occupied. The *vida* written by a nun as a request from her confessor, belonged to the private arena, and even when it circulated among the priests in order to be published, it had to go through the editorial revisions of the confessor. The texts written by men could be composed with the purpose of being published, and men could choose from a different variety of genres, most of which were forbidden for women.

The style of the *vidas* found in the *Apuntes* differs in important ways from that of *Las indias caciques de Corpus Christi* by Josefina Muriel. As I mentioned before, the biographer of the *Apuntes* is able to combine spiritual commentary or a hagiographical style with the racial discussion—with issues that would not be part of a hagiographical account. The *vidas* in the manuscript published by Muriel are clearly hagiographical; their style is rigid and formulaic, and their language is polished and sophisticated. Clearly, the texts were written with the purpose of being published, and most likely a priest wrote them. All the accounts are composed to portray exemplary lives, models for readers to follow. With the *Apuntes* in hand,

we are able to compare the two sets of texts and discover differences in style and content that lead us to believe that the *Apuntes* were the basis for the manuscript published by Muriel. Moreover, we find clear linguistic clues that let us know that the writer or writers were indigenous nuns.

It is difficult to assert that all of the biographers were indigenous, but we can be sure of the one writing about Sor Petra because of the content of her account. As she writes in describing the true conflict between the Spanish nuns and the indigenous nuns: "And, our father, even when they say that our founding mothers created a war, no it was not like that, it was not until our mother closed her eyes when Father Navarrete sent us another four nuns from the Convent of San Juan and other three novices, but these two ladies from San Juan were the ones who made the war."⁴¹ The author explains that these two criollas would constantly accuse the indigenous nuns of wrongdoing before Father Navarrete. Because of the accusations that the two nuns made, Navarrete would punish the indigenous nuns and take away their veils. The author claims that he also wanted to force the indigenous nuns to vote for the Spanish novices to become nuns in the convent. Navarrete, from what we know from this account and that of fray Joseph, was not convinced that the indigenous nuns should live in a convent without criolla nuns. Asunción Lavrin has analyzed a letter by the Commissary General Navarrete in which he admits that he has the lowest opinion of the capacity of the Indians to rule in any way or to direct themselves.⁴²

The nuns, however, did not accept what Navarrete requested because, according to

the author, "the mind-set of the sponsor of the convent was that it was only for Indians." The author states that the indigenous women had to endure the difficult situation created by the presence of Spanish nuns and novices until God allowed the arrival of a royal *cédula* and the papal brief that expelled the nuns and novices from the convent. Her comments suggest that the indigenous nuns were not only well aware that the conflict within the convent was a result of racial difference, but they also knew that people were supporting their cause outside the convent walls. The biographer finished her narration by telling the story recounted at the beginning of this work, ending with: "At last, our Father Navarrete stopped. And it was a lot, a lot that we suffered."⁴³

Her report about the suffering caused by the Spanish nuns and novices in the convent is brief, yet it is substantial enough to provide more information about the life of the indigenous nuns in the convent. Most of the information provided in this account was either erased or modified when the priest edited the text and rewrote it as the hagiography that was included in the group of texts published by Josefina Muriel. What we now know is that the indigenous nuns were in fact participating in the racial debates and conflicts that were part of Corpus Christi, in this case, by letting other priests know about their sufferings and problems—to assert the cause of their race in one of the few forums accessible to them.

Final Considerations

The materials examined in this work argued that indigenous women required two main virtues, chastity and suffering, in order to

be nuns. The authorship of the texts influenced the arguments stated in them. The two Jesuits, Juan de Urtassum and Juan Ignacio de Castorena, focused their attention on the virtue of chastity, which was a requisite of monastic life. The *vida*, although also composed by a man, was based on the writings of Sebastiana. That text and the biographical account of the indigenous nun stressed the virtue of suffering. For men, the most important issue was the control of the Indians' sexuality. For women in the convent, the main concern was to appreciate their suffering and to recognize a resemblance with their ultimate spiritual authority, Jesus, as Sor Petra had taught the indigenous women.

These three texts are windows through which we can appreciate the racial and gender negotiations that allowed the founding of Corpus Christi. Racial and gender ideologies were important overlapping elements in the arguments of the texts, but each of the authors takes different approaches. For Sebastiana and fray Joseph, the question of race was not as important as it was for the indigenous nun, who was affected directly

by it. The indigenous nun wrote her account with a specific reader in mind—a man, most probably a confessor. Consequently, a power relationship guided the production of this particular text, yet from the text emerges an example of a fearless nun who denounces the injustices committed by Father Navarrete and commends the great sufferings of herself and her sisters. In the first part of her account, in which she writes about Sor Petra, the nun most likely responds to the petition of the confessor or the abbess to write about her sisters who had passed away. In the last part of her account, in which she touches on the racial conflict in the convent, we can recognize an autonomous voice, the voice of one who wants to be heard. The biographer wanted to let her readers know about the conflict in Corpus Christi and the individuals involved in it. She wanted to make known that the Spanish nuns had caused the indigenous nuns to suffer. Ultimately, the indigenous women received their reward for their sufferings. The Spanish nuns and novices left the convent, and the indigenous women were left with a convent of their own.

NOTES

- My thanks go to Peter Guardino, Kathleen Myers, and Ethan Sharp for their valuable suggestions.
1. *Apuntes de algunas vidas de nuestras hermanas difuntas*, México, Convento de Corpus Christi.
 2. R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination, Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 4.
 3. Kristine Ibsen, *Women's Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 1.
 4. Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, "Fashioning a Cacique Nun: From Saint's Lives to Indian Lives in the Spanish America," in *Gender & History* 9 (1997): 181.
 5. Kathleen Ann Myers, "Crossing Boundaries: Defining the Field of Female Religious Writing in Colonial Latin America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 9 (2000): 151.
 6. Josefina Muriel, *Las indias caciques de Corpus*

- Christi* (México: UNAM, 1963); Asunción Lavrin, "Religious Life of Mexican Women in the XVIII Century" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1963); Ann Miriam Gallagher, "The Family Background of the Nuns of Two 'Monasterios' in Colonial Mexico: Santa Clara, Querétaro; and Corpus Christi, Mexico City, 1724-1822" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1972).
7. Myers, "Crossing Boundaries," 153.
 8. *Criollo* refers to a person of Spanish descent, born in Mexico. See, for example, Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, *A Wild Country Out in the Garden, The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999); Kathryn Joy McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja, The Writings of Madre Castillo 1671-1742* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).
 9. Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 9.
 10. Ann Miriam Gallagher, "The Indian Nuns of Mexico City's Monasterio of Corpus Christi, 1724-1821," in *Latin American Women, Historical Perspectives*, ed. Asunción Lavrin, 163 (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1978).
 11. The genre of the *vida* or "spiritual life" appeared in two different styles. It could be a confessional autobiography or a hagiographic biography; the first was usually written by the nun to her confessor, and the second could have been written by a nun about one or more nuns in the convent or by a priest about a nun or nuns.
 12. See, for example, Kathleen A. Myers, "The Mystic Triad in Colonial Mexican Nuns' Discourse: Divine Author, Visionary Scribe, and Clerical Mediator," *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 6 (1997): 479-524; Asunción Lavrin, "La vida femenina como experiencia: biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial," in *Colonial Latin American Review* 2 (1993): 27-51.
 13. Lavrin, "La vida femenina," 31.
 14. Jean Franco, *Las conspiradoras: La representación de la mujer en México*, trans. Mercedes Córdoba (México: El Colegio de México/FCE, 1994), 37.
 15. Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (México: Editorial Jus, 1995); Lavrin, "Religious Life." Lavrin's dissertation deals with the conflicts that took place in Corpus Christi between some of the Spanish founder nuns and the Indian ones. Later, fray Pedro de Navarrete, Commissary General of the Franciscan order, allowed more Spanish novices into the convent. She mentions a letter in which Sor María Teresa de San José, while abbess, wrote to the Council of Indies asking for the expulsion of three Spanish novices. Lavrin, "Indian Brides of Christ: Creating New Spaces for Indigenous Women in New Spain," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 15, no. 2 (1999): 225-60.
 16. Gallagher, "The Indian Nuns," 150-66; Gallagher, "The Family Background." In a phone interview that I had with Ann Miriam Gallagher she shared with me what a great experience she had when living with the nuns in Corpus Christi while doing her research. She had the opportunity to have complete access to that archive (they have moved to another convent) and used the records and books of entries that would give her the information she needed.
 17. Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, *Colonial Angels: Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico 1580-1750* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).
 18. Mariselle Meléndez, "El perfil económico de la identidad racial en los Apuntes de las indias caciques del convento de Corpus Christi," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 46 (1997): 115-33; María Justina Sarabia Viejo, "La Concepción y Corpus Christi. Raza y vida conventual femenina en México, siglo XVIII," in *Manifestaciones religiosas en el mundo colonial americano*, ed. Clara García Ayluardo y Manuel Ramos Medina, 179-92 (México: INAH, UIA, CONDUMEX, 1997).
 19. Lavrin, "Religious Life," 29.
 20. *Donadas* were laywomen who lived in the convent, primarily for educational reasons.
 21. Louise M. Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahua Drama from Early Colonial Mexico*

- (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 57.
22. Ibid., 59.
 23. Ibid., 60.
 24. Asunción Lavrin, "Indian Brides of Christ," 244.
 25. Allan Greer, "Iroquois Virgin: The Story of Catherine Tekakwitha in New France and New Spain," in *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas*, ed. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff, 235–50 (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). Even though the indigenous women described here were noble, they occupied a lower position than Spaniards in the social hierarchy and could therefore be considered "humble." Moreover, indigenous nobles were not necessarily rich; their nobility was due to their purity of blood and their heritage.
 26. Antonio Rubial, "La exaltación de los humillados. Indios y santidad en las ciudades novohispanas del siglo XVIII," *Actas del III Congreso Internacional de Mediadores Culturales. Ciudades mestizas, intercambios y continuidades en la expansión continental, siglos XVI–XIX* (México: CONDUMEX/INAH, 2000).
 27. *La gracia triunfante en la vida de Catharina Tegakovita, india Iroquesa, y en las de otras, así de su Nación, como de esta Nueva-España*, (Henceforth *La gracia triunfante*), México año de 1724, Biblioteca Nacional, Sala Mexicana.
 28. *La gracia triunfante*, Parecer.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Urtassum locates the province of the Iroquois to be on the border of New Mexico, he also argues that they were never conquered by the French.
 31. *La gracia triunfante*, 211.
 32. Ibid., 217.
 33. *Vida de la venerable madre Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS. Trinidad, Religiosa de Coro, y Velo negro en el Sagrado Convento de San Juan de la Penitencia de Religiosas Clarisas de esta Ciudad de México*, [Henceforth *Vida*] México año de 1765, Biblioteca Nacional, Sala Mexicana.
 34. *Vida*, 100.
 35. Ibid., 102.
 36. Lavrin, "Religious Life"; Muriel, *Conventos de monjas*; Sarabia Viejo, "La Concepción y Corpus Christi."
 37. See Gallagher, "The Family Background."
 38. *Vida*, 108.
 39. *Apuntes*, 7–8.
 40. McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja*, 56–57.
 41. *Apuntes*, 9.
 42. Lavrin, *Religious Life*, 30.
 43. *Apuntes*, 10.