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Review/Reseña

Stephanie Kirk, *Convent Life in Colonial México. A Tale of Two Communities*. Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2007.

Exploring Nuns in New Spain through the Lens of Clerical Misogyny and Male Domination

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This book uses literary analysis of Mexican texts from the 1600s and 1700s to suggest that two separate communities existed within female convents in New Spain. Kirk defines the two communities as "the bonds, alliances, friendships, and micro- and macro-communities of different kinds" created by nuns within the convent, "that stood in opposition to the controlled community that

the Church authorities attempted to impose from outside" (13). Kirk argues that a coerced community does not really represent a true community, which must be voluntary. Kirk makes the excellent point that existing scholarship emphasizes well-documented male communal bonds and organizations, under a lingering assumption that true friendship between women rarely exists in the past. She notes that it is especially difficult for scholars to recognize non-sexual bonds between women.

Kirk's book fits into three fruitful recent trends in the study of gender in colonial Latin America: scholarship on convent life and its broader implications, exploration of inquisitorial sources, and the analysis of texts produced by colonial Latin American women. Although the pioneering work of Asunción Lavrín, Josefina Muriel, Electa Arenal, Stacey Schlau and even Octavio Paz's *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe*, began these lines of scholarship decades ago, I would argue that a true boom has taken place in the last decade. Some noteworthy works include Kathryn Burn's *Colonial Habits* (1999) on convents in colonial Cuzco; Kathryn Joy McKnight's *The Mystic of Tunja* (1997), on the writings of a nun in New Granada; Nancy van Deusen's edited translation of the writings of Ursula de Jesús, an Afro-Peruvian mystic; Martha Few's *Women Who Lead Evil Lives: Gender, Religion and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (2002); Kristine Ibsen's *Women's Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (1999); and Kathleen Myer's *Neither Saints nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* (2003).

None of these books concentrates on New Spain, but from 2004 to 2006, at least three excellent but very different books were published, all engaging with topics closely related to *Convent Life in Colonial México*. These books are: Nora Jaffary's *False Mystics: Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial México*, Ellen Gunnarsdottir's *Mexican Karismata: The Baroque Vocation of Francisca de los*

Ángeles (both of these in an excellent "Engendering Latin America" series, published by University of Nebraska Press), and, most relevant to Kirk's book, Margaret Chowning's *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent* (2006). It must be noted that these three authors' interpretations diverge significantly from Kirk's. For example, the inquisition persecuted the "false mystics" because they seemed threatening to the Catholic hierarchy, but the mystics viewed themselves as good Catholics. Jaffary writes, "focusing on these mystics' rebelliousness meant ignoring significant elements of their spiritual and social conventionality" (xii). Kirk tends to interpret nuns' writing and actions as subversion—she generally views Baroque Catholicism as mired in an eerie obsession with death, offering no sensual or community-building attractions for women (45), although scholars have emphasized that building a community to pray for the fate of one's soul was one of the primary features of the Mexican Baroque era.[1] In fact, the idea of building smaller corporate groups, especially by those who could not hold official positions of authority, is a fundamental trait of the Baroque Church in Mexico as well as New Spain in general. Lastly, Chowning warns historians to avoid the "pro-convent" or "anti-convent" bias (11-12). Kirk's work falls into the pro-convent side of the debate, acknowledging internal convent politics in passing, but generally emphasizing the positive nature of the voluntary community formed among nuns as a bulwark against the misogynist Church.

The goal of the book, that the creation of non-sexual bonds and communities between women deserves historical and literary treatment, is a well-observed point. Kirk draws on several theoretical and documentary sources to effectively argue this thesis. However, the development of this argument in *Convent Life in Colonial México* does have its strong and weak points. Perhaps what I perceive as

[1] I argue this in my book *Black Blood Brothers* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2006).

weaknesses, and the interpretive discrepancies I mentioned above, relate to biases inherent to the historical vs. literary approach to texts. Thus, the criticisms I offer mainly come from a historical approach and should not be taken as negative criticisms of this work as literary analysis.

The first lines of the Introduction of *Convent Life* emphasize, through a citation from Revelation 12:6—written on a plaque in the Mexico City cathedral—that the colonial Mexican Church desired women to live in pious solitude. Immediately, the reader thinks of the colonial axiom, "*obedezco pero no cumplo*, [I obey but I do not comply]": godly solitude might have been the ideal, but in the colonies, and probably the metropolis as well, such ideals were impossible to enforce. Scholars are well aware of the fact that tradesmen, servants, market-sellers, male clergy and laymen and women frequently interacted with nuns. Kirk herself presents examples of the openness of convent life (81). This is the difficulty of setting up proscriptive sources as straw men—it is hard to know if didactic sources represented people's lived experiences or even their perceptions of authority or if these sources actually affected anyone involved at all.

The rest of the introduction traces the history of the process of stricter enclosure for female religious, a history of frustrated plans. Emphasizing the Post-Tridentine era as "a period of masculinist reform" is not incorrect, but then pushing this to say that "there was to be no active role for women" takes it too far, not allowing for constant exceptions such as Teresa of Avila, Rose of Lima, Sor María de Agreda, of course Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, other lesser known figures such as Ursula de Jesús, and the women Kirk herself discusses. With so many exceptions, it could be said that Trent was not a monolithic reform. Kirk argues that her goal is "to show how Mexican nuns challenged the prescriptions the male ecclesiastic authorities laid down. By examining these acts of subversion, we

can…[expose] weaknesses and anxieties in an ecclesiastical power structure that was deemed to be monolithic and all encompassing" (8). She hopes that by looking at non-prescriptive texts, she can find ways the nuns acted as historical agents.

Drawing from Ibsen's work, Kirk observes that hagiography of female colonial saints tends to emphasize women as unique, lonely figures in conflict with their surroundings, valorizing their physical penitential practices as opposed to the community formed around them (11). Rose of Lima exemplifies the idea of Baroque bodily suffering, but so do male saints, such as Peter Claver. The stories of the lives of male saints also show some conflict with those around them, but the fact that Rose of Lima and male saints had a group of people working for their canonization also proves they were surrounded by a devout community, typical of the Baroque era.

Chapter Two analyzes two works by Antonio Núñez de Miranda, famous for being Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's confessor, stressing his obsession with nuns' physical bodies and the obliteration and death of these bodies. Kirk interprets Núñez de Miranda's works as calling for nuns to literally become sacrificial virgins and to accept a death in life. Foucault is the main theoretical influence—both the structure and the content of Núñez de Miranda's advice books directed at nuns reveal the Church's desire for total control and power over nuns, negating any communities, agency or bonds women might form amongst themselves. This chapter also touches on the erotic fascination that convents have held in the Iberian world, and the close symbolic association convents have with brothels, leading to satirical writings on nuns since the time of the Arcipreste de Hita's *Libro de Buen Amor*.

At the beginning of this chapter, Kirk argues that the symbolism of the convent as "a community of virgins [that] wiped away both past and future sins of those that lived *extramuros*, at least in the male imagination (…) held no power for women" (17).

The numerous last wills and testaments made by women and stored in Mexico City's notarial archives, asking to either be buried in a convent, or to have the prayers of nuns said for their souls, certainly disproves this sweeping statement.

Chapter Three combines analysis of an inquisition case involving a nun called Sor María Josefa Ildefonsa de San Juan Bautista and several more proscriptive texts from sources such as Teresa of Ávila, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and the Mexican archbishop Francisco Aguiar y Seixas. The main theme in this chapter is the "discourse surrounding the phenomenon of *mala amistad* that reveals the Church's fear of the implications of these same-sex relationships" (52). Although the inquisition continued to question Sor María Josefa for several years, most of the documentation appears to deal with her possible mental illness, not details of the *mala amistad* she might have had with a servant. Kirk assesses Teresa of Ávila's warnings about friendships among nuns as actually a rhetorical use of irony, that instead showed her solidarity with fellow nuns, who had to convince authorities that they were not subject to factionalism. Sigüenza y Góngora's *Paraíso Occidental* presents examples of virtuous nuns who rejected personal ties. In 1693, Aguiar y Seixas issued edicts warning against *malas amistades* among nuns in his archdiocese. Kirk ties these several sources together by suggesting that the Church's fear of female sexuality and passion was behind both the official statements and the continuing questioning of Sor María Josepha and descriptions of her mental illness.

Chapter Four engages with the topic of Chowning's *Rebellious Nuns*, the struggles surrounding the late eighteenth century imposition of *vida común* on Mexican nuns. The hopes were that this approach would save money by making nuns live more communal lives, sharing a dining hall, laundry and servants, as opposed to the standard custom of each nun living in her own private apartment

within the convent. The fact that male clergymen struggled against rebellious nuns to force this sense of community certainly highlights Kirk's point regarding the validity of an involuntary vs. a voluntary community. Kirk again uses a Foucaultian analytical framework, emphasizing that the imposition of the reforms was really about male power. A more detailed engagement and give-and-take with *Rebellious Nuns* would have added to this chapter. Instead, Kirk disagrees with Chowning's argument that that convent reform, at least to some degree, came from Enlightenment ideals and internal active Mexican engagement in religious change. Both of these observations are accepted historical interpretations of change over time in the colonial Latin American Church and Catholicism in Latin America. Kirk dismisses these interpretations in a rather hasty fashion (86) and moves on to discuss sources that are quite distant to the dispute over the *vida común*, such as Christine de Pisan (in order to present colonial Mexican convents as another "city of women") and French sources on nymphomania. This chapter specifically looks at nuns' complaints over the reform coming out of Puebla, while Chowning describes a case study in San Miguel el Grande (Allende), but the two cases deserve closer comparison.

The last chapter brings the book to a fruitful conclusion, in an extended discussion of a literary group formed by the New Spanish *Virreina* and a group of Portuguese nuns, in order to promote the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who also participated. These women never met, but instead created a long-distance community through literary collaboration and created a collaborative *Casa de Placer*, a utopia for intellectual women. Their output never portrayed Sor Juana as a unique or bizarre figure—they normalized the idea of a female intellectual. This chapter solidifies Kirk's observations about the need to de-eroticize friendships between historical women and to explore "female intellectual alliances and communities…and to

demonstrate their effectiveness as tools against the prevailing fictions of misogyny—both then and now" (175).

By combining analysis of literary sources, proscriptive texts and historical documents, Kirk makes a thought-provoking contribution to our understanding of community-building among colonial Latin American women. However, as her book and many other scholarly sources demonstrate, the Baroque Church was not monolithic. The history of New Spain is so compelling because it does provide so many examples of diverse local interpretations of Catholic belief and practice.