

## Epilogue

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On 25 March 1601, the beata Maria de San Miguel was paraded through the streets of Mexico City upon a horse, naked to the waist, and wearing a halter and gag. In the same year, Mexico's eleventh convent opened — or, more appropriately, closed — its doors. The end of Marina's unusual career path is also our terminus. Marina was surely not thinking about the history of feminine religion in her city as she underwent the humiliation prescribed for her by the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Yet a metaphorical connection suggests itself. At the beginning of the period studied here, semi-religious women were brought to new Spain as royally-sponsored missionaries. By 1601, they were evidently of interest to authorities only when they transgressed.

The city's cloistered convents, meanwhile, had grown dramatically. By 1601, Zuazo and Zamora would have had to roam far through the spreading city to see all the houses of the "brides of Christ" who had consecrated themselves to God." When these houses underwent exclaustation in the nineteenth century as a result of liberal reforms, their buildings were sold or rented and the streets they had once enclosed were opened in a secular reversal of the ritual of encerramiento. But Mexicans of the nineteenth century did not immediately accept this desanctification of urban space. Voting with their feet, capitalinos avoided using the streets that had been opened, which they saw as "places sanctified by the virtues of their inhabitants." <sup>1</sup> [*lugares santificados por las virtudes de sus moradores*] Some of the convent buildings, though in desirable locations, had a difficult time finding occupants and remained vacant for some time after exclaustation. <sup>2</sup> The inhabitants of nineteenth-century Mexico City, then, understood the importance of convents to the urban landscape and experienced unease at the liberals' (ultimately successful) efforts to diminish the key role within it of religious structures.

These chapters have argued that women's institutions were an important part of Mexico City from its earliest incarnation as México-Tenochtitlan, and that beaterios, convents, and recogimientos played a key role in the transformation from Mexica city-state to viceregal capital. The effort to transplant feminine monasticism, an important part of Spanish identity (particularly but not exclusively among the elite) nonetheless was constantly forced into a dialectical relationship with the indigenous past and present. The first attempt at a quasi-monastic institution for women, the beaterio and colegio de niñas indias, was a failure because it failed to attract the support of the settler elite; the protection of women was a cherished Spanish cultural norm, yet this protection does not seem to have extended to indigenous women. The colegio de niñas indias also seems to have failed because of its personnel. The missionary effort required uncloistered women; yet uncloistered women posed problems within the Spanish cultural milieu, easily falling into the contemporary European stereotype of the disobedient and disorderly

"wandering woman." In a sense, then, settler society confronted not only a new American reality but all the ambivalences of its own European past. <sup>3</sup> And if "colonial situations breed confusion," <sup>4</sup> the Spaniards brought with them a repertoire of responses to such situations that included the creation of religious institutions as an antidote to anxiety and an expression of triumph.

The foundation of La Concepción in 1540 expressed the change in feminine monasticism from missionary endeavor—as exemplified in Zumárraga's dream of convents in every native community — to possession of the settler elite. And yet neither this foundation nor those that followed it in the next four decades were typical of the patrimonial foundations that flowed from every new fount of wealth tapped in Europe. Instead, between 1540 and 1582, the foundation of monastic and quasi-monastic institutions for women was so important that a wide variety of institutions were founded as cooperative efforts in which the urban government took a leading role. I have argued that the role of the cabildo and the unitary and public character of foundations in this period relate to the need to "sanctify the city." But after the massive epidemic of 1576-1581, which itself transformed Mexico City and the attitudes of settler society, foundations of women's institutions took another dramatic turn, becoming more recognizably "colonial."

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As foundations of women's institutions became more typically colonial, so too did women's experience of religious life. The fluidity typical of early colonial society <sup>5</sup> was also reflected within the walls of women's institutions. As we have seen, the character of such institutions was fluid. *Recogimientos* became convents, and *colegios recogimientos*. Even in the houses that maintained their basic character, change was constant if only because of the precarious finances and incessant building typical of the foundational period. Fluidity was perhaps even more prevalent in the lives of semi-religious women, who remained free from the cloistering and obedience vows of their religious sisters and were therefore both less protected and less constrained. Both groups of women remained bound by their need to live within a community whose assessments and surveillance (whether informal or formal) were constant and powerful.

And yet one is struck by the power both groups of women attempted to claim and obviously sometimes commanded. While Colonial Latin America is no longer seen as a realm of monolithic male privilege, <sup>6</sup> the voices of these sixteenth-century women have the power to surprise. The *beata* Marina de San Miguel describes her unorthodox sexual life and her pleasure in it; <sup>7</sup> the Sánchez sisters argue for their privileges as foundresses of Santa Clara and deny churchmen the authority to rule them. The nun Elena de la Cruz pronounces on the dictates of the Council of Trent; her sisters, more orthodox but just as insistent, remind the king of their role as *exempla* for the Indians and as those who pray for the monarch's soul. There is no evidence that the religious and semi-religious women of Mexico City's sixteenth century ever doubted their own importance to the society in which they lived.

And they were important. This study has argued that women's monastic and quasi-monastic life were an integral part of the creation of a Spanish colonial society, paralleling and expressing the fortunes and aspirations of the conquerors and their descendants. The period between 1530 and 1601 was decisive for the shaping of women's religious life in the capital — and women's institutions themselves shaped the hispanizing city. The "chosen plants" who established women's religion in Mexico City stood at the heart of the colonial endeavor.

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### Notes:

**Note 1:** Marroquí, op. cit., II, 109. [Back.](#)

**Note 2:** Ibid., 109-110. Santa Clara, notably, had apparently lost the respect of many of the city's inhabitants and was relatively easily rented, while the (more strictly observant) Capuchina convent remained impossible to rent for some time. [Back.](#)

**Note 3:** On this point, see Sampson Vera Tudela, op. cit., 99. [Back.](#)

**Note 4:** Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517-1570* (Cambridge, 1987), 127. [Back.](#)

**Note 5:** For a discussion of "fluidity" as it relates to women's roles in the early colony, see Asunción Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society," in Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America II, Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 321-55; 354. [Back.](#)

**Note 6:** See Susan Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press New Approaches to the Americas, 2000), 178: "The culture of patriarchy was never as absolute in reality as it was in theory." [Back.](#)

**Note 7:** In fact, any trace of women's sexuality is hard to find: "If women ever regarded sexual intercourse as a pleasurable act or a source of enjoyment, no records attested to such feelings." See Asunción Lavrin, "Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma," in Asunción Lavrin, ed., *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 47-92; 62. [Back.](#)

[Escogidas Plantas: Nuns and Beatas in Mexico City, 1531-1601](#)