EMBODIED AUTHORITY IN THE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF FOUR EARLY MODERN WOMEN FROM SPAIN AND MEXICO

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Christine M. Cloud, M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
2006

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Maureen Ahern, Adviser

Professor Elizabeth Davis

Professor Julia Watson

Approved by

Adviser

Spanish and Portuguese Graduate Program
Copyright by
Christine M. Cloud
2006
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of how four early modern Hispanic women religious constructed embodied authority through their fusion of different hagiographic models with their bodies and their lived bodily experiences within their spiritual autobiographical writing, or *vidas*, and in the process transformed the formulaic nature of the genre. Six chapters analyze the four distinct, complex autobiographical narratives of the Spanish religious Isabel de Jesús (1586-1648) and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566-1641) and the Mexican nuns María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muñoz (1576-1636) and María de San José, (1576-1636). The chapters explore how these four women accomplished this goal by talking back to enforced enclosure by re-defining their “unruly” or “unenclosed” feminine bodies in the interest of obtaining and/or justifying a position of religious and spiritual authority. The introductory chapter offers an explanation of the hypothesis, the theoretical framework and methodology, a summary of the chapters, and a review of the literature regarding the topic. The second chapter explores the revalorization of the maternal body of the Spanish Augustinian Isabel de Jesús. Chapter three discusses the transformation of the Mexican Hieronymite María Magdalena from sickness to authority through her embodied mysticism seen with “*los ojos corporales.*” Chapter four analyzes how bodies, space and authority are mutually constructed as the body of another Mexican nun, the Augustinian María de San José, is transformed into first a “Desert Mother” and
then later a “virgin bride of Christ.” Chapter five considers how the construction of remembered experiences of childhood bodily abuse transformed Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida* into a hybrid text that is both a spiritual autobiography and a trauma narrative. The final chapter offers an analysis of how the diverse ways in which each of the spiritual autobiographers made their textual bodies visible within their *Vidas* reflect their positions as multiple embodied subjectivities. It concludes with a discussion of the project’s contributions to the fields of Golden Age and colonial Hispanic literature.
Dedicated to my husband
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Maureen Ahern, and the members of my committee, Elizabeth Davis and Julia Watson, for the excellent courses in colonial women’s writing, female writers of the Golden Age, and women’s autobiographical theory that inspired this dissertation. I am also grateful to them for their unwavering intellectual support, encouragement, and enthusiasm which made this project possible, and for their patience in correcting both my stylistic and content problems.

I thank my husband Joel Cloud for his continual support during the duration of this project. Specifically, I am grateful for his willingness to edit multiple copies of the chapters and assist me with the digital formatting process. I also thank my children, Hayden and Lauren Cloud, for their love and understanding, and Dalina Brackens for her willingness to help me with childcare while I worked.

I am indebted to my parents, Rodney and Judy Henningsen, and my sister, Ann Al-Bahish, for their belief in the project and for their careful reading and editing of several of its components. I also thank my sister, Katie Henningsen, and my mother-in-law, Jean Cloud, for their belief in my abilities.

I am grateful for the patience, understanding and support of my colleagues in the Wittenberg University. In addition, I am indebted to my student research assistant, Chris Horrel, for his assistance with photocopying of sources and my copy editor, Susan Pavilkey, for her stylistic corrections.
VITA

January 3, 1973……………………………………Born-Wichita, Kansas, USA

1995………………………………………………. B.A., Texas Lutheran University

1998………………………………………………. M.A., The Ohio State University

1996-2003…………………………………………Graduate Teaching and Research
Associate, The Ohio State University

2003-present………………………………………..Instructor of Spanish, Wittenberg
University

PUBLICATION


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Spanish and Portuguese
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction: Reading for the Body in the <em>Vida</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Isabel de Jesús’s Revalorization of the Maternal Body</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. María Magdalena Muñoz’s Bodily Agency:</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing with “Los ojos corporales”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Body, Space and Authority in the <em>Vida</em> of María de San José</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Writing the Abused Body, Deconstructing the Hagiographic:</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I” in Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s <em>Vida espiritual</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conclusions</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: “READING FOR THE BODY” IN THE VIDA

INTRODUCTION

Finally, to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to recreate the world. Ann Rosalind Jones, “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l’écriture féminine.”

Introduction

All people inhabit material bodies. However, given that some bodies are considered more connected to their materiality than others, subjects are not all equally embodied. Throughout history women have been seen as being closely connected with their materiality because they inhabit bodies that bleed every month, expand and contract during pregnancy and childbirth, and express fluids while nursing. Men disassociate themselves from their corporeality more readily and thus have claimed the cerebral and spiritual realms. Because materiality is associated with sickness, death and decay, while the psychic and spiritual are linked to heaven and the afterlife, throughout the years the association of women with the corporeal has—at least in Western society—had an extremely negative effect on the position of women within the gendered social hierarchy.
This ultimately led to the adoption of the widespread and deeply seated view that women, because of their close connection with the permeable flesh, were especially susceptible to demonic influences, and thus needful of both physical and metaphysical enclosure (Lochrie, Ashton).

By the dawn of the early modern age, the idea that women had to be enclosed in order to mitigate their threat to the rest of society had already become deeply ingrained in the minds of Western European political and religious leaders, thinkers and writers. Because of the widely perceived disordered nature of their society, those living within Spain and Spanish America had become especially cognizant of the “threat” that “wandering women” presented (Perry, Merrim). The Protestant attack on the Church and the Holy Roman Empire, the dislocations of developing commercial capitalism, epidemics, famines, and seemingly continual warfare had left Spanish society in a chaotic state (Perry 23). In contact with an unfamiliar land and its “strange” inhabitants, Spanish Americans also saw their society as disordered. On both sides of the Atlantic wandering women became the scapegoats of a people desperate to reinstall order among the chaos; as if control of the disruptive female might restore a society turned upside by change and turmoil (Merrim 128).

1 There is some disagreement over just what constitutes the “early modern period.” In this dissertation the term will be used to refer to the period of time beginning with the mid sixteenth century and ending with the mid eighteenth.

2 Haliczer states in Between Exaltation and Infamy: Spanish Mystics of the Golden Age that this perception of chaos stemmed principally from severe economic problems and the many revolts and military disasters, both on land and at sea, that portended the breakup of the monarchy itself. These included the successful rebellions in Catalonia and Portugal in the spring and fall of 1640 and the decisive military defeats in the Netherlands, especially at the battle of Rocroi on May 19, 1643 (16).
Women were blamed for the vulnerable position of the Spanish empire, and, therefore, were subjected to a litany of misogynist treatises and discourses regarding their character. After The Council of Trent (1545-63) they were relegated to the enclosed spaces of the home, the convent and the brothel (Perry 23, Giles, *Women in the Inquisition* 10). Political and religious leaders reinforced the physical enclosure of women with a metaphysical one; women were told to be humble and obedient, and most importantly, chaste. In other words, they were advised to keep their souls and their bodies sealed up and “intact.”

Religion played a very political role in this period as it justified a gender system that supported the existing social order. Religious symbols of female martyrs promoted the belief that women should be self-sacrificing, giving themselves up to pain and humility for a higher cause. The Holy Virgin represented a standard of female perfection that no mortal could hope to attain, and the example of Mary Magdalene demonstrated that weak, sinful woman must assume the kneeling position of the penitent, which justified female submission and male domination (Perry 6).

In an atmosphere where the “broken sword” and the “wandering woman” (Perry 6) were considered to be lethal for in a well-ordered society, those women who refused to remain enclosed were subjected to considerable censure. They were singled out as the root cause of societal disintegration essentially because in an early modern Hispanic society where *limpieza de sangre*, (“purity of blood”), (a term used to describe family lines that were not mixed with Jewish or Moorish blood or in the case of Colonial Spanish America, indigenous blood,) was a requirement for social privilege, “women, and particularly women’s bodies, safeguarded the essence of social structures and order: lineage, inheritance, class and family” (Perry 23).
As a result of the fear and mistrust of the “wandering woman” early modern Hispanic women who wanted to rise to a position of spiritual exemplarity but who, either by choice or necessity, lived a life away from physical and/or metaphysical enclosure, faced a quandary. How were they to justify their public lives and/or unenclosed bodies to the masculine authorities who stood in judgment over them?

This dissertation hypothesizes that four women from Spain and Mexico, Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, attempted to resolve this seemingly intractable dilemma by using the spiritual autobiography (In Hispanic literary studies referred to as either the vida espiritual or its shorter version of vida.) as a platform on which to rhetorically construct their texts from their lived corporeal experiences in such a way as to make their personal histories “holy” instead of censorious. These four women’s fusion of the generic hagiographic formulations of the vida with their embodied experiences transformed the genre by personalizing its conventions and tropes. Their transformation of the generic spiritual autobiography into an idealized and fictionalized fusion of hagiography with material memories of experiences allowed them to exercise at least some degree of agency by authorizing their un-enclosed and/or un-intact bodies and lives. Thus, the subject of this dissertation is the manner in which the Spanish religious Isabel de Jesús and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza and the Mexican nuns María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muñoz and María de San José re-constructed their bodies within their spiritual autobiographical writing in order to achieve agency, and subsequently various forms and levels of authority.
Within this dissertation the textual body and “embodied autobiography” are read as sites in which all four of these very different women transformed their identities, and in the process found agency. They did so by fusing recalled memories with a wide variety of different hagiographic tropes in order to construct a wide array of empowering new forms of experience that led to the obtainment of spiritual authority.

Within her *Vida de la Venerable Madre Isabel de Jesús, recoleta Augustina en el convento de San Juan Bautista de la villa de Arenas. Dictada por ella misma y añadido lo que faltó de su dichosa muerte* (1675) [Life of the Venerable Madre Isabel de Jesús, Augustinian Recollect of the Convento de San Juan Bautista in the Village of Arenas. Dictated by her, with an Addition Telling of Her Blessed Death] the Spanish Augustinian nun, Isabel de Jesús, melded her biographical, biological experiences as a mother with the biblical image of “Jesus as Mother” in order to construct herself as a wise spiritual mother of all humanity. Isabél de Jesús could not write; however that did not stop her from finding embodied authority within writing. On the order of her confessor, she dictated her life story to a fellow nun; working together the two women eventually produced a *Vida* that consisted of three separate books: Book I (3-152) which narrates Isabel de Jesús’s life prior to entering the convent; Book II (153-398) which covers her years as an Augustinian religious; and Book III (399-470) which is one of her confessors, Francisco Ignacio, biographical re-telling of Isabel’s autobiographical account. This dissertation uses a photocopied version of the original 1675 manuscript obtained from the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.
The Mexican Hieronymite Madre Magdalena Muñoz used her *Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena, monja profesa del Convento de Sr. S. Jerónimo de la Ciudad de Mexico hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio, y de Isabel Muñoz su legítima mujer (1650)* [Book Containing the Life of Madre María Magdalena, Professed Nun in the Convento del Señor San Jerónimo of Mexico City, Daughter of Domingo de Lorravaquio and of Isabel Muñoz His legitimate wife], (which is folio # MS 1244 of the Nettie Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas’s Perry Castañeda Library) as a platform on which to fuse an incapacitated and wounded body with the hallowed images of the crucified, suffering body of Christ that she sees with her “ojos corporales.” Her personalized and embodied *imitatio Christi* allowed her to move from an abject space of sickness and disability to agency, and ultimately authority enabled through discourse.

Another Mexican nun, María de San José, within her twelve volumes and 2,000 pages of spiritual autobiographical writing— which were written over approximately three decades (1691?-1718?) and are currently owned by the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, (Spanish Codex 39-41)—combined the mutually constitutive technologies of body, space and subjectivity in order to carve a form of hermetic Desert Mother inspired agency out of the dry, windswept Mexican desert terrain. Kathleen Myers relates Volume I of the Mexican Augustinian nun’s rise to an autobiographically enabled position of authority in its original Spanish in *Word from New Spain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656-1719)* (1993) and
then later offers translated English selections of its Volumes I-XI in *A Wild Country Out in the Garden: The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (1999). All of the citations and the majority of the translations, referenced in this dissertation come from these two works.

Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza never finished her *Vida Espiritual*. She started it, however, in the hopes of transforming herself into a saintly being who had been preternaturally mature, wise, and good from birth, and was thus perfectly suited to take on an evangelical mission to England. Carvajal y Mendoza’s attempts to construct her spiritual autobiography, and through its creation an empowering new form of religious identity, are thwarted however by the inclusion of her abused body within her text. The trauma that the figure of her beaten body provokes puts obstacles in the path to agency of this woman religious and ultimately causes her to abandon her project. Her unfinished *Vida espiritual*, left to obscurity, is a silent testament to trauma’s power to cause spiritual life writing to exceed the limits of proscribed forms of spiritual autobiography.

Elizabeth Rhodes offers a bilingual edition of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida*, as well as some selections of her poetry, in *This Tight Embrace* (2000). Camilia María Abad also has an edition, *Escrítos autobiográficos* (1966) of the Spanish noblewoman’s various writings, including her autobiography. This dissertation, however, cites Rhode’s text in its study of the Spanish noblewoman because her edition is in both Spanish and English.
Review of and Departure from the Literature Related to the Spiritual *Vida*

Scholars working within the field of early modern Hispanic women’s religious literature are indebted to late medieval and early modern critics such as Carolyn Walker Bynum, Gerda Lerner, Jo Ann McNamara, Elizabeth Petroff and Laura Finke for their unearthing of Western European women’s long tradition of using visionary experience as a path to power. In works such as *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987) and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (1991) Carolyn Walker Bynum examined the ways in which mystics developed a means of transcending their own secondary status out of cultural representations of the body and technologies designed to contain and suppress it. This scholarship has been especially important to the study of the *vida*. Due to the work of these critics of medieval and early modern mysticism, many scholars now see that during this epoch in Western history, “women religious did not live and write in total isolation. They were aware of the existence of other famous mystics. Indeed they viewed themselves as part of a “tradition of exceptional religious women” and modeled their lives and writings after those of their predecessors (Finke 404).

Critics working within the genre of the spiritual *vida* also owe a tremendous debt to the many pioneers within the field of late medieval and early modern Hispanic women’s spiritual writings. One of the very first critics to offer an exhaustive study of the writings of Hispanic women religious was Josefina Muriel. With her *Cultural femenina novohispana* (1982), Muriel paved the way for a better understanding of the
stories that these women chose to tell about themselves whether it was through their spiritual biographies, poetry, or music. By treating such topics as mysticism and theology within these works, and by offering an exhaustive list of female colonial writers, Muriel’s work is an invaluable tool in the quest to uncover more information about the lives and works of colonial women religious. However, as inclusive as it may have been, Muriel’s study limited itself to Mexican women writing on the American side of the empire. This is generally the case with the other early critics within the field as well, including Anita Arroyo, Marie Cécile Bénassy-Berling, Georgina Sabat Rivers and Josefina Ludmer. In the 1989 publication of Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau’s Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works, Arroyo was the first writer to attempt a comparative analysis of the works from Hispanic women religious living on both sides of the Atlantic. Because of its focus on texts from both the Peninsula and the Latin American continent, Untold Sisters was the initial stepping stone into the discursive world that existed behind the early modern convent walls in both Spain and Latin America in that it sought to “contribute new pieces to the puzzle of women’s history [and] invite critical analysis, particularly with the application of a cross-grid of disciplinary and interpretative approaches” (Arenal and Schlau, Untold Sisters 412).

Because of these early critics, “what was once a neglected or even unknown body of works has turned into a boon for scholars,” specifically for feminist scholars who have studied these texts to analyze the role of women within the early modern period of Spanish and Spanish American history (Myers, “Mystic Triad” 480). Although the studies of these early scholars are critical to a better understanding of the vidas of Hispanic women of the early modern period, they are frequently overly descriptive in
nature and suffer from the tendency to read the life narratives as biography rather than autobiography. As a result, they offer scarce insights into the rhetorical strategies that Hispanic women religious used in the modeling of hagiographic scripts. One should tread with care when consulting these critics’ works to avoid reading the fictionalized autobiographical texts of the *vida* as biographical sketches. This would be problematic given that this type of reading assumes that “experience is unproblematically real and readable and can be captured transparently in language expressing the truth of experience” and ultimately makes “sweeping analogies between lives and texts” which no longer hold up in light of current knowledge of the fictive nature of autobiography (Smith and Watson, *Women* 9).

Another problem with some of these early readings of the *vida* is that they assumed that the feminine “I” within the text reflected a sort of universal feminine selfhood that was in a sense “discovered” and then “revealed” through the act of writing. Ironically, because the textual reconstruction of one’s identity provokes “a complex reconfiguration and redeployment of one’s identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 145) this type of reading has resulted in the failure to read these autobiographic texts as representing an effective form of resistance to the very ideological norms which would place, or in the case of early modern Hispanic women, “trap,” one within a previously prescribed subjectivity.

It is not surprising that most scholars working with the Hispanic *vidas* of the early modern period read them as biography rather than autobiography. After all, it has only been in recent years that “a growing number of postmodern and postcolonial theorists contend that the term ‘autobiography’ is inadequate to describe the extensive historical
range and the diverse genres and practices of life narratives and life narrators in the west and elsewhere around the globe” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 5-6). Despite the opening of the genre to “alternative” forms” of life-writing, such as the *vida*, unfortunately many scholars (beginning with Manuel Serrano y Sanz, who excluded all forms of introspective life writing from his 1905 study of Spanish autobiography (Goetz, “Spain” 869)) have been unable to overcome their bias against reading spiritual autobiographies as examples of autobiography. For example, Sylvia Molloy, whose well-founded criticism of the “neglect or the misunderstanding that has greeted autobiographical writing in Spanish America” (2) that continues to hold sway even today, has declared colonial texts such as the *vida* to be only “tangentially autobiographical” and thus excluded from the “canon” of Spanish American autobiography (Molloy 3).

Colonial texts may not exactly conform to modern notions of autobiography because they are “generally written in the first person, and characterized by their author’s ongoing process of self-construction and presentation” (Cloud 539). Such first-person texts may, therefore, be “framed in a wider sense of the process of an ‘autobiographical impulse’” (Ibsen 11) and, as such, read as autobiographical texts. For the many new scholars who are willing to see the “autobiographical impulse,” in the *vida*, the opening up of the autobiographical canon has had a profound effect. It has enabled these scholars to read the construction and performance of the “I” within the text as a site of resistance to early modern power structures, especially those related to the Catholic Church. This, in turn, has caused more recent critics to view the *vidas* as having resistive elements, or to use a term coined by Leigh Gilmore, a leading critic of women’s autobiography as “autobiographics.” Autobiographics are those aspects of self-representational writing
that “mark a location in the text where self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography” and which as “a reading practice, are concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self representation” (184).

Critics such as Kristine Ibsen (*Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America*, 1999), Katherine McKnight, (*The Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo 1671-1742*, 1997), Elisa Sampson Vera Tuleda (*Colonial Angels: Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico 1580-1750*, 2001) and Kathleen Myers (*Neither Saints nor Sinners*, 2003) working within the colonial field of “convent literature” (Myers, “Broader Canon” 259) have recently offered studies of how colonial women religious drew from this wide array of hagiographic scripts when constructing their autobiographical selves.

Elisa Sampson Vera Tuleda’s *Colonial Angels: Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico 1580-1750* (2001) offers an important discussion of how the New World cloister, in its theoretical distance from the world and its real submersion in it; in the silence vowed by its members and in their lived communication, writing and sociability—provided the space for the representation of what more usually remained silent: women and their creative role in colonial society (5).

According to Tuleda, due to the great need for rapid evangelization of native peoples, New World religious women were encouraged to write *vitae* modeled after the immensely popular St. Teresa that would be used for the purpose of creating new converts to the newly established Catholic Church in America. Thus, the Teresian tradition in the New World context constitutes an instance of a female tradition being deemed acceptable and indeed co-opted by the ecclesiastical and political hierarchies that
usually worked to marginalize such phenomena (Tuleda 16). In fact, not only was Teresa’s tradition deemed “acceptable” in the New World, it was glorified.

In Tuleda’s final analysis it is not altogether unexpected that the nun came to be seen as a hero of the New World narrative if one remembers the important role played by hagiography in supporting established values—both those of generic form and those of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Ultimately, this critic concludes that “if it becomes possible to write hagiographies of the New World in which women shine for their piety and orthodoxy, the piety and orthodoxy of this erstwhile pagan land is confirmed and along with it the success of the Spanish angelic mission” (Tuleda 29).

Another recent study of the writing of colonial religious women is Stacey Schlau’s Spanish American Women’s Use of the Word: Colonial through Contemporary Narratives (2001). Schlau points out that despite the fact that during the colonial period the female writer, imbued with Latin morals and notions of shame, might have been considered incapable of composing texts, there were in fact many women who used the written word to enact the “joining of voice and body as elements that will not only mark out a place for women in history but also begin to envision new utopias” (Schlau xxiii). Although these women may at first “seem to have little in common, all sought to maneuver through institutions and systems and insert themselves into the public life of their society using the written word” (Schlau xxiii). The way in which many of them did this was to follow the model of the “camino de perfección” (“the way of perfection”) outlined by St. Teresa’s Vida. For the colonial religious woman writer Teresa’s life, as represented in her writings, was a “how-to” manual that offered a blueprint for maintaining orthodoxy while expressing some aspect of the self. “Her success suggested
a path for early modern women religious, even if precise direction was not always clear or available to the vast majority of her spiritual descendants” (Schlau xxiii). Schlau examines how favorecidas or ilusas, through the use of varied modes of expression and behavior partly shaped by class, race, and gender, participated in public life through spiritual discourse and narratives that inevitably constituted a self-defense (Schlau 4).

The chapter “Wanted Dead or Alive: Autobiographical Narratives by colonial Nun Authors Gerónima Nova y Saavedra and Ursula Suárez” is especially useful because it attempts to demonstrate how women, especially those of certain classes, were often able to attempt to enter public discourse through the doors of the Catholic Church (Schlau 6).

According to Schlau, these women were so successful that, “a creole woman of means might go further and become a spiritual exemplar—such as Colombian mystic Madre Castillo (1670-1742) or the Chilean religious Ursula Suarez (1666-1749)” (Schlau xxii). Religious writers were successful in their quest for public renown and spiritual authority primarily because they took full advantage of the vida, an important mode of expression, to define their own subjectivity, within the boundaries provided by church and state. “Thus imitation, which began with Christ’s passion, concluded in concentric circles that permitted women to imitate other women” (Schlau xxii). Schlau argues that during the colonial period, “writing remained an important vehicle through which women might establish some authority, partly (though not entirely) freed of gendered norms and submission to male ecclesiastics” (Schlau 6). However, Schlau does not focus exclusively on autobiographical texts; nor does she place much attention on the creation of an idealized autobiographical “I” as an effective tool toward gaining public acceptance.
Katherine McKnight’s study of Madre Castillo entitled *The Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo 1671-1742* (1997) comes closer to approaching this element when she proposes that

the autobiographical narratives of Spanish and Spanish American religious women were not spontaneous and natural but carefully built out of complex narrative structures. The writers elaborated strategies of self-representation and applied sophisticated rhetorical skills in order to establish the authority of their narratives and of themselves as religious women and writers (McKight 25).

Yet, however accurate this statement may be, it is only made in support of the analysis of one particular colonial woman’s creation of an autobiographical self. What is now needed is a book-length analysis which would compare and contrast the ways in which colonial women used autobiographical writing to construct a potentially empowering fictive self.

This is what Kristine Ibsen provides us with in her incisive analysis of the colonial woman’s spiritual autobiography: *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (1999). Ibsen’s study offers a very thorough analysis of women’s personal narratives in colonial Spanish America, focusing in particular on the spiritual autobiography of the viceregal period. Through an examination of the autobiographical writings of María de San José (Mexico 1656-1719), Úrsula Suárez (Chile 1666-1749), Gerónima del Espíritu Santo (Colombia 1669-1727), Francesca Josefa de Castillo (Colombia 1671-1742) María Manuela de Santa Ana (Peru 1695-1793), Sebastina Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad (Mexico 1709-1757), and María Marcela de San José (Mexico
1776), the nature of female self representation is in Ibsen’s analysis addressed from the perspective of two fundamental and interrelated issues: “To what degree did the expectations of the intended and implied audiences shape these texts? What are the discursive strategies employed by each author to accommodate these conflicting demands?” (1) The ultimate goal of Ibsen’s study is to:

Examine the influence of the reader as representative of the dominant culture in the narrative construction of self and in the process show how in order to placate their readers and at the same time assert their own identities, whether for themselves or for potential readers, these authors developed certain linguistic stratagems that subtly undermined such power relations and challenged the official ideology that denied women access to the public sphere (1).

At first glance it would seem that Ibsen’s work is extremely similar in its conceptual approach to the objectives of this dissertation. In many ways both studies are alike in that they both attempt to offer a better understanding of the discursive strategies used by colonial women to write themselves so as to gain acceptance from their readers. However, despite this common characteristic Ibsen’s text and this writer’s analysis of the writings of female religious differ in many fundamental ways. This dissertation proposes dialogue with Ibsen’s work; to take up where it left off.

First, while Ibsen’s work focuses on the particular author’s awareness of and reaction to the reader’s expectations wherein the reader’s role becomes principle emphasis, this dissertation focuses on the actual process of the construction of autobiographical identity and thus is more engaged with the writer rather than with her audience or reader. It also analyzes the process by which women religious constructed their identities with less concern for the reasons for which they felt the need to do so. While Ibsen offers a well researched and carefully presented discussion of the
relationship between reader expectation and discursive strategy, this dissertation offers a study of the writing itself, the way in which the author employs “autobiography’s constitutive processes of subjectivity”—among which are memory, experience, identity, agency and embodiment—to create a new discursive self (Smith and Watson, Reading). Whereas Ibsen’s emphasis seems to be for the most part on the use of autobiography to elucidate cultural history and colonial female empowerment, this study is more focused on autobiography’s use of discourses of embodiment and the way that they are employed for personal gain by marginalized authors. Moreover, this dissertation is informed by current feminist autobiographical theory as it relates to the Hispanic world of the baroque whereas Ibsen barely makes mention of this theory. In fact, although vast, her bibliography includes only two of the most important recent works in feminist autobiographical theory: Sidonie Smith’s *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* (1987) and Leigh Gilmore’s *Autobiographics* (1993). This lack of a theoretical emphasis on the autobiographical explains why in many instances the events narrated in the *vidas* seem to be treated as factual occurrences, with the result that the author as narrator and the autobiography as a fictive story-telling occasion are not thoroughly addressed. It seems that Ibsen takes the texts as factual lives. Consequently, in Ibsen’s discussions, as in the analyses of many other colonial critics, the opportunity to study the autobiographic or “the ongoing process of self-construction” (Cloud) taking place within the text is missed. This study of the autobiographical within the text is where this dissertation takes as its emphasis the autobiographical occasion as a creative event based on the construction of an invented persona living out her life in the discursive space of a fictive text.
In addition to these differences in theoretical framework and conceptual approach—with the exception of María de San José—Ibsen uses different authors as the object of her study. Whereas she chooses to focus solely on cloistered women, this study compares and contrasts the works of women living within and outside of the convent. It strives to demonstrate how spatial differences as well as social distinctions affect the process of subjectivity construction. Specifically, this dissertation will demonstrate the ways in which the subjects’ places within the body politic influenced the manner in which they chose to construct themselves autobiographically. This study examines narratives by women as far apart on the social spectrum as Isabel de la Cruz, a Spanish peasant woman, María de San José an impoverished criolla, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, a privileged Spanish noblewoman, and María Magdalena Muñoz, a relatively affluent but bed-ridden Mexican recollect. For conclusions, this analysis of these women’s vidas will show that while gender is an important factor in autobiographical identity formation, it is just one of the points of subjectivity that must be taken into account to thoroughly “map” the creation of a fictive self. Other factors that must be considered are social class, ethnicity, physical-health, maternity and geographic location (Pile and Thrift 2).

Kathleen Myers takes up the subject of the constructed nature of the spiritual vida in her recent book Neither Saints nor Sinners (2003). She traces the origins of early modern Hispanic feminine spiritual writing, or vidas, as a “genre,” back to the Vida of St. Teresa de Jesús. St. Teresa of Ávila had reached a position of great fame and considerable authority after she wrote her spiritual life story. Thus her Vida inspired many Hispanic women religious to write there own particular vidas in the hope that they
would reach a position as lofty as hers. Myers states that in order to monitor the actions of these new female religious examples, by the mid-seventeenth century the Church authorities—just as they had done the previous century with St. Teresa—began to use spiritual writing as a vehicle for control of the actions and ultimately to judge the orthodoxy of the spirituality of the women within the church who had managed to gain acclaim and even fame for their spiritual endeavors. Written at the behest of their confessors and/or other figures of ecclesiastical authority for the purposes of separating the “unorthodox” from the “orthodox,” the writing of the *vida* for most early modern Hispanic women on both sides of the Atlantic was essentially an act that Myers qualifies as coercion (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners* 11) because women religious wrote under the vow of obedience. If their *vidas* were deemed to be supportive of church doctrine others would use them as models for behavior. This in turn would cause the authors to be considered as a “*perfecta religiosa*” or an ‘ideal religious woman’ a follower of the “*camino de perfección*” in the model of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa de Jesús.

In Myers’s final analysis, although the writing of the *vida* was an act of surveillance by the Spanish Catholic church (and thus an example of the implementation of institutional power over the feminine subject) it opened the door to new articulations of empowering identity. It was a “how-to” manual that offered a “blue-print for maintaining orthodoxy while expressing some aspect of the self” (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners* xxiii). It could also be seen as an act of resistance that generated a variety of re-inscriptions of the life of the “*perfecta religiosa*” and through them a vast array of new “life paths” that were then “re-scripted” by church authorities eager to use their lives to
further the colonial evangelization process. Given that the vida offered these women a platform on which to construct a new and empowered identity that at times even challenged official church doctrines, although to church leaders it represented a tool of power, to the women who re-worked it, it was at the same time an act of resistance (Myers, Saints nor Sinners 15).

Myers’s analysis of the “the lively interaction between rules for behavior and between women’s own lives and the Church’s reinterpretation of these lives” is an exceptionally valuable contribution to the genre of literatures at large in that it highlights the ability of early modern Hispanic women’s life writings to “represent the range and interrelatedness of women’s life representations” (Myers, Saints nor Sinners 15). This study departs from Myers’s, however, because it studies both colonial and peninsular subjects. Myers emphasizes how colonial women like Catalina de Erauso and Ursula Suárez wove different intertexts into their writing, (such as the soldier’s autobiography and the picaresque into their life writing). In contrast, this dissertation focuses on how the representation of the body and bodily experiences both enabled and disabled the different hagiographic models that early modern women employed.

Thus far, not many colonial critics have broached the themes of the body and textual embodiment. Recently, however, Jennifer Eich has offered such a study in The Other Mexican Muse: Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio (1695-1756) (2004). Chapter two of this study, “Transforming Personal into Sacred Authority,” of the colonial mystic features a particularly interesting study of the female body made visible in the spiritual vida. In this chapter’s analysis, Sor María transforms personal experiences into
sacred authority through the use of rhetorical strategies of agency grounded within corporeality. Specifically, she empowers her feminine body and its fluids by connecting them with the power infused by God, and transferred to man, located in the Virgin Mary’s milk. Eich’s fascinating study of Sor María’s textual construction of authority through a discursive connection of her body with that of the Holy Mother is an important first step toward reading for the body within the colonial text. What is now needed is a book length analysis that explores the multiple ways in which different Hispanic women religious from both sides of the Atlantic construct authority through their wide variety of remembered experiences lived through their material bodies. This dissertation seeks to offer such a study.

To date there are still not that many works that study colonial and Golden Age women’s’ spiritual autobiographies. There are, however, a few monographs that study texts written by women religious living on both sides of the Atlantic. Stephanie Merrim’s *Early Modern Women’s Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1999) attempts to “tease out and articulate commonalties between seventeenth-century women writers and equally to open a gateway to further comparative work and place studies of Sor Juana in a wider milieu of seventeenth century women’s issues that would do more justice to the Hispanic perspective” (Merrim xiii). Her comparative approach to the texts of colonial and peninsular women provides new insights into the ways in which the “conquest” and colonization of the New World transformed not only the role of the religious women of the period, but also their perception of themselves and their place within the greatly expanded world which surrounded them. This dissertation proposes to
establish further evidence of these very important transformations that were taking place in the Americas and their intimate relationship with the writing of religious women living on both sides of the Atlantic.

The bibliography related to Golden Age female writers of spiritual autobiography is diverse. Scholars such as Ruth El Saffar, *Rapture Encaged: The Suppression of the Feminine in Early modern Europe*, 1994; Anne Cruz, *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain*, 1992; Mary Giles (“The Discourse of Ecstacy: Late Medieval Spanish Women and their Texts,” 1996) have added to the discussion of female resistance to Golden Age Spain’s power structures through their analyses of female religious literature of the Golden Age, especially as it relates to mysticism, as another privileged site in which women found alternatives—such as Jesus as Mother for example—to the rigidly inscribed gender norms that prevailed. Through their extraordinary efforts, the Golden Age religious community itself—especially as it relates to mystic discourse—has become a space of possibility in that it is now seen as a place in which the repressed feminine of early modern Spanish religious writers was able to find expression.

Recently, many Golden Age critics working with spiritual *vidas* have pointed out that they are highly constructed texts in which an identity is at once constructed and then solidified through performance within autobiographical writing. This has had important implications for the way in which they are studied. Some of the most important of these newer studies involving the *vida* as a genre are those of distinguished Golden Age critics. Among them, Jodi Bilinkoff studied the identity construction of early modern Hispanic religious women in her article “Confessors, Penitents and the Construction of Identity in
Early Modern Spain” (1993); Rainer H. Goetz, (Spanish Golden Age Autobiography in its Context, 1994); Margarita Levisi, (Autobiografías del Siglo de Oro, 1984); Nicholas Spaduccini and Jenaro Talens (ed), (Autobiography in Early Modern Spain, 1988) and James Fernández (Apology to Apostrophe: Autobiography and the Rhetoric of Self-Representation in Spain, 1992). Goetz, who contends that “Golden Age literary confessions laid the foundation for the modern genre of the autobiography” (Goetz, “Spain” 826), has been particularly innovative in his studies of the Golden Age vida as a platform for the construction of identity.

Not surprisingly, some of the most important Golden Age studies involving the vida have focused on St. Teresa de Jesús. One the most influential of these works is Alison Weber’s Teresa de Jesus and the Rhetoric of Humility (1990). Weber makes the argument that “Teresa’s “rhetoric for women” was a “rhetoric of femininity,” that is, a strategy which exploited certain stereotypes about women’s character and language. “Rather than writing like a woman, perhaps Teresa wrote as she believed women were perceived to speak” (Weber 11). What has been so important about Weber’s analysis for the study of early modern Hispanic women’s literature is the idea that Teresa’s rhetoric represents a highly constructed manner of speaking which “might be better understood as covert strategies of empowerment” rather than an “irrepressive feminine charm or coquetry” (Weber 15). Due to St Teresa’s new way of approaching the language in her vida we now see how countless other religious women of the period modeled their own autobiographical voices after Teresa’s “rhetoric of humility.” In the process they took advantage of stereotypical ideas about feminine modesty and humility not only in order to escape severe punishment for their potentially subversive behavior but also to gain
spiritual authority and recognition while remaining seemingly humble in the eyes of the masculine church hierarchy.

Since the publication of *Teresa de Jesus and the Rhetoric of Humility* many critics looking at early modern Spanish women’s religious writings have used Weber’s theory regarding Teresa’s “rhetoric of humility” in order to help them to better understand the ways in which early modern women used discursive strategies for purposes of self-construction. Darcy Donahue discussed the negotiations in subjectivity that both nuns and their confessors undergo in the writing of a spiritual *vida* in her article, “Writing Lives: Nuns and Confessors as Auto/biographers in Early Modern Spain,” (1989). Donahue’s discussion of the complex relationship between nuns and confessors is especially interesting in that it elucidates the very unbalanced power structure that characterized the spiritual autobiography at the same time that it interrogates the ways in which the space of obedience that was confession offered the Hispanic female religious a space of feminine discursive resistance. However, this dissertation will demonstrate that her declaration that because nuns drew from a shared hagiographic tradition, their works are difficult to distinguish from one another, is problematic.

Elizabeth Rhodes’s essay, “What’s in a Name: On Teresa of Ávila’s Book,” (2000) uses a discussion of Teresa’s construction of an autobiographic self within her *Libro de la Vida* (1588) as a platform on which to discuss the genre of the *vida*. The basic premise of her argument is that Teresa’s *vida*, and by extension the *vidas* of other Hispanic women religious, is not really an example of autobiography even though its title
suggests that it is for two principle reasons. First, Teresa’s text is characterized more by a relational identity shared between the protagonist and God then by an individual identity. According to Rhodes,

Teresa’s first long prose work is double-crossed by the name imposed upon it and the autobiographical ramifications that name has generated. It is compromised once by the autobiographical postulate of a subject whose individual identity is at odds with women’s social experience, which has long been historically conditioned by relational identity, contrary to the single-lensed “I” of autobiography. As Teresa herself points out, her text recounts not the story of her life, but rather the most extraordinary moments in her relationship with God (“Book” 82).

In Rhodes’s analysis Teresa’s close relationship with the divine causes an autobiographical reading of her vida to be problematic because “religious literature in first person [. . .] is inherently distinct from autobiography, for its subject shares the textual stage with a divinity” (“Book” 82).

The second reason why past autobiographical readings of Teresa’s vida are considered by Rhodes to be flawed is because they are based upon a self-portrait that was written before its subject’s professional life began. According to Rhodes, Teresa was only forty-seven and just beginning her reformist career when she completed the first polished draft of her Libro de la Vida. Thus, in her analysis, Teresa’s “so-called autobiography” ends precisely when her public life was beginning, and as a consequence “supplies a probationary map of her early inner geography which leaves her mature inner contours and active pursuits virtually uncharted” (Rhodes, “Book” 83). For this reason, “naming the text her Life, and subsequently reading it through the lens of autobiography, effectively canonizes Teresa’s life for posterity devoid of almost all of her public activity and without any of her other writings in it” (Rhodes, “Book” 84). Rhodes’s reiterates her
claims in regard to the problems inherent in reading Teresa’s vida autobiographically in her introduction to her recent translation of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s works, including her spiritual autobiography, *This Tight Embrace: Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza*, (2000) when she states that spiritual vidas such as that of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza are not autobiographies because they borrowed heavily from hagiographic tradition and because they were written before the women had an exemplary spiritual career (Rhodes, “Introduction” 31).

In light of the recent expansion of the notion of what constitutes autobiographical writing, the idea that spiritual autobiographies, among them vidas, are “not autobiography” is far too limiting. It privileges the notion that to be considered a “true” reflection of a person’s self; a piece of life writing must not involve any form of relational identity. Moreover, it sustains the notion that only professional projects carried out in public are worthy of autobiographical study. Finally, it fails to read for the role that an author’s individual life experience plays in both her choice of, and subsequent inscription, of hagiographic models.

The latter is a problem that Kate Greenspan’s definition of spiritual autobiographies as “autohagiographies” also faces. Greenspan employs the term “autohagiography” to describe accounts “of a holy person’s life written or told by its subject” that “share with hagiography the intention to represent the life as “more exemplary than real” (Greenspan, “Autohagiography” 219). Greenspan declares that:

> Both take their literary models from earlier lives of the saints and martyrs, from scripture based narratives, like the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, or from other non-historical sources. Thematically rather than historically cohesive, they convey what their authors perceive to be spiritual rather than a personal truth. They recount natural and supernatural events with equal conviction, often preferring the latter as explanation or justification
for their subject’s action. Finally and most significantly, traditional hagiography and autohagiography both reconstruct the lives of their subject to conform to cultural conceptions of holiness (Greenspan, “Autohagiography” 219).

Although Greenspan’s description of “autohagiographies” sheds light on how women constructed identities through the use of hagiographic tropes, it erases the very important role those individual bodily experiences played in the construction of autobiographical identity in the early modern period.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This dissertation intervenes in the discussion of the generic labeling of the life writing of early modern Hispanic women religious in an attempt to demonstrate why the *vida* should be read autobiographically. Once it establishes that the *vida* should be considered a form of autobiography, it then examines the spiritual autobiographies of Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza from an autobiographical perspective to demonstrate how these four women religious transformed the proscribed genre of the *vida espiritual* into the site of the construction of a form of agency facilitated by the discursive reconstruction of bodily experiences through a hagiographic lens. This approach entails careful consideration of the deployment of what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call “autobiography’s constitutive processes of subjectivity:” memory, agency, experience, and body (*Reading* 14).
According to Goetz in his discussion of life writing from “Spain: to 1700,” published in Margarita Jolley’s Encyclopedia of Life Writing, St. Teresa’s Libro de la Vida and the numerous vidas that followed in its wake, not only reflect the structure of what is considered to be the first spiritual autobiography, Augustine’s Confessions; they also “define the revived genre of the confessional life story” (826). Since autobiography evolved directly from the confessional life story, it follows then that vidas should not only be read as autobiography, but should also be recognized for helping to establish the foundations of the modern genre of the autobiography (Goetz, “Spain” 826). However, since they are highly concerned with an individual’s relationship with the divine, vidas should be considered a type of “religious” or “spiritual” autobiography: terms which are used interchangeably “to refer to any first-person account of one’s religious experience, or of one’s relationship to God or to any other source of mystery or ultimate meaning” (Aikman 739).

This writer has chosen to use the term vida as opposed to the term “life” of vitae when referring to the spiritual autobiographies under discussion within this dissertation as well as those written by other Hispanic women religious of the same period, such as that of St. Teresa de Jesús. This writer uses this term in order to distinguish the spiritual life stories of early modern Hispanic women from those of other vitae. This distinction is important because the vida follows a particular form that distinguishes it from other vitae. The spiritual autobiographies from other regions, such as that of St. Catherine of Siena, will be referred to as vitae. This writer periodically refers to all vitae as spiritual autobiography in order to reiterate the belief that they are at once spiritual and autobiographical rather than either one or the other.
As a form of religious autobiography, the *vida* is characterized by its employment of the standard requisite criteria of “didactic instruction, climatic conversions, biblical metaphors, moral introspection” and thus “designates perhaps not so much a definable genre as it does a body of life writing with a common theme, that of spiritual experience” (Aikman 739). It also represents “a person’s attempt to interpret his or her life in relation to the norms of a religious tradition” in combination with the “details of his or her own life” (Barbour 835). Thus, as is the case with all forms of life writing, *vidas* “reveal the interplay between communal norms for life stories and incentives for individual uniqueness” (Barbour 835). Therefore *vidas* both can and should be read autobiographically. Scholars should approach them in a way that is distinct from other forms of autobiography and should bring to their criticism the awareness that for spiritual autobiographers the autobiographical project involved the pressures of “both adherence to religious norms and individual searching” (Barbour 835).

The spiritual autobiographer believes s/he carries on a sacred tradition through an act of personal interpretation and self-evaluation. Commitment to a religious community takes the form of reinterpretation of one’s life story in relation to—although not necessarily in strict accordance with—its norms. A spiritual autobiography reconciles the writer’s loyalty to a particular religious tradition with openness to new manifestations of the Spirit, which ‘blows where it chooses’ (John 3:8) (Barbour 835).

Since the spirit can blow in many directions, spiritual autobiographical writing involves the creation of a multiplicity of textually constructed hagiographic identities. Therefore, it is imperative that studies of hagiographic identity construction in spiritual autobiography “try to understand how traditional religious images and plots shape the individual life story, and why the writer believes that the gods or spiritual powers require him or her to differentiate among individual circumstances and experiences and to
interpret their significance for readers” (Barbour 837). This dissertation asserts that one of the best ways to foster this type of understanding is to read for the way in which the material body functions simultaneously as both a sign, or marker, of identity and a site on which new types of identity can be articulated. For the authors studied in this dissertation, this new identity is constructed by first accessing memory and then fusing it with hagiographic tropes in order to reconstruct experience in such a way as to rewrite the body and through its rewriting, ultimately identity as well.

The *vidas* of these four particular women authors were chosen to argue that the body is the locus of the creation of an empowering new spiritual identity because they come from a variety of different backgrounds and have a wide range of distinct somatic experiences within their texts. Therefore, rather than constructing conventional imitations of saints lives, and thus ultimately of each other as well, for the early modern women religious each story told in her *vida*, and each identity forged by telling it, was characterized as much by *difference* as by similarity. Despite these distinctions, Isabel de Jesús, Madre María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza all shared one very important commonality. They all had “unruly bodies.” That is, their bodies either were not “intact” or “virginal” or by choice or necessity were not enclosed but “wandering.” The state of their “unruly,” “un-intact” or “wandering” bodies forced all four of them to highlight the transformations in their materiality and material experiences. It is for this reason that, in all the texts analyzed in this dissertation, the representation of the body is a constant force. Its pervasive presence can always be felt, even when some of the authors desperately tried to stamp it down and keep it from bringing its “unruliness” into their carefully constructed textual identities.
Because of the body’s pervasiveness both within their lives and in their writing the women writers studied in this dissertation had to first highlight and then re-write the terms of their cultural embodiment. For each of them, creating a subjectivity and giving it a voice required a complex textual transformation of the abject feminine body into one that their misogynist church fathers could embrace. Thus their need to create the “self” could not be isolated from the need to reconceptualize the body (Butler, El Saffar, S. Smith). Moreover, each had to redefine her bodily experiences in such a way as to make them appear to be holy rather than sinful, even though these experiences had taken place away from enclosure and involved bodies that were not physically enclosed. This dissertation will examine how all four did so through the use of hagiographic and spiritual models that would allow them to renegotiate the terms of their embodied subjectivity: that is to say, models and imagery that would help them to renegotiate the conditions of their materiality and ultimately redefine the conditions of their cultural embodiment in such a way as to justify their “unruly” bodies and their experiences of living in them. In so doing, these writers managed to subvert the ideological power structures that would have ruled them unorthodox and unruly and as such unworthy of being considered holy figures worthy of public acclaim and emulation.

As writers of spiritual autobiography, Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza re-wove the strands of traditional religious spiritual treatises with remembered experiences lived out as embodied subjects. Memory is a very important part of this project because “the writer of autobiography
depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experimental history. Memory is thus both source and authenticator of autobiographical acts” (Smith and Watson, Reading 16). In this way, instead of a simple narration of the past, for these spiritual autobiographers memory represents an effort of recovery and creation, an exploration into the possibility of recapturing and restating the past, so that recovering the past is not a hypostasizing of fixed grounds and absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structure of language and storytelling (Smith, Poetics 45).

“The politics of remembering “or rather “what is recollected and what is obscured” is central to the production of experience (Smith and Watson, Reading 24). One’s “experience” is in actually constituted through the politics of memory and thus ultimately created; as such rather that strict personal biography, it is “an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (24). In this way experience is actually constitutive of the subject; or, as Joan W. Scott defines it, “a process […] by which subjectivity is constructed” (27). It follows then that in their autobiographical acts Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza claim the “authority of experience” as a way to give authority to the stories that they tell about themselves. In effect they give “truth-value” to their own created subjectivity (Smith and Watson, Reading 26). As they do they find agency. (Smith & Watson, Reading 45).

The body regulates the construction of memory, experience and thus ultimately subjectivity, identity and agency. The key to understanding the body as a critical term for cultural and literary studies of the autobiographical, is as Caroline Walker Bynum says,
“understanding the relationship between the body understood as site and the body understood as sign” as well as “the relationship between body and the imagining ‘bodied’ subject and of course ultimately how gender figures epistemologically in these relations” (Bynum, “Faithful Imaginings” 108). The body is a “sign” because it is a cultural marker of identity. For reasons relating to its materiality such as race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental health, subjects are assigned positions within the body politic. Their positions are then modified by their class, ethnicity and religion etc. Since one is positioned in society based on a combination of all of the above, the body serves as the foundation of culturally assigned identity. Thus the body may be regarded “as the locus and site of inscription for specific modes of subjectivity” as Elizabeth Grosz points out (“Bodies-Cities” 44). Moreover, in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued that “the cultural category of the body becomes the domain upon which other symbolic constructions rest, such as aesthetic and social hierarchies [. . .]” (10).

Paul John Eakin, in How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves, states that “our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity” (xi). Because autobiographical writing involves the telling of the history of one’s life lived as body, the identity constructed within it is always filtered through the materiality of the writing subject. Within autobiographical writing, “the body, its skin, anatomy, chemistry—resonates as both a locus of identity and a register of the similarities and differences that inflect social identities” (Smith and Watson, Reading 39). Although it is easy to think that autobiographical subjectivity and autobiographical texts have more to do with the spiritual and/or psychic “self” than the material body, in reality, the body is a site of
autobiographical knowledge, as well as a textual locus upon which a person’s life is inscribed. “The body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects” (Smith and Watson, Reading 35). Since life narrative inextricably links memory, subjectivity, and the materiality of the body, when reading for the autobiographical all of these factors must be taken into consideration. Situated at a “nexus of language, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and other specificities” (Smith and Watson, Reading 35) the body influences the construction of memory, experience and thus ultimately subjectivity and identity as it is autobiographically constructed. Within autobiographical writing the body serves as a mediator through which the stories that one relates about oneself are filtered. When the female autobiographer writes, she engages the complexities of her cultural assignment to an absorbing embodiment [. . . and] carries a history of the body with her as she negotiates the autobiographical I for autobiographical practice is one of those cultural occasions when the history of the body intersects the deployment of subjectivity (S. Smith, Subjectivity 17).

Thus, for Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza any empowering experiences and empowered identities constructed through their autobiographical writing first had to be filtered through the medium of the body. By reading for the body in the text we can see how each woman’s lived bodily experiences played a primary role in filtering out which spiritual models could be either taken up or rejected in the construction of their new autobiographic self. The early modern female body as constructed in hagiographic scripts and spiritual treatises played a major role in the selection of spiritual models and the creation of a new “holy” identity given that its association with the material and the corporeal rather than the spiritual and
the cerebral limited most women of the period to identities that were characterized by
their enclosure and their “intactness.”

Each chapter of this dissertation begins with a study of how these each of these
four women used hagiographic models to create “holy” textual identities that would help
propel them to spiritual exemplarity. These preliminary discussions reveal how they used
the lives of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, both male and female, as models. The
lives of sacrifice and service of these figures had rendered them worthy of veneration
after their deaths and efficacious as intercessors between individual believers and the
divine. Thus, Jesus, Mary and the saints were considered to be holy exemplars. They
thought that by emulating these holy persons they could in a sense “become” them or in
the case of Jesus and Mary, at least become as close to them as humanely possible.

After discussion of each author’s desire to imitate holy figures, this writer
proceeds to explain how in their cases it was not enough to present oneself as a saint. In
order to convince the public that they had become the figures presented in their texts, all
four authors had to ground their identities in the minds of their readers by convincingly
acting them out within the text. Thus, once the chosen identity was selected, each
autobiographer performed it throughout the rest of her vida in the hopes of proving to her
audience that the “I” constructed in the text really stood for the “I” that was writing the
text. Such a reading would indicate to all that the one who constructed the “I” was not
only loyal to the Catholic faith and thus not subject to Inquisitorial censure, but also was
worthy of the position of spiritual authority and/or popular renown that the publication of
the newly constructed “I” could bring her.
Although critical attention has finally been placed on the way in which early modern Hispanic women religious constructed themselves within writing, and, especially on the way in which they carved their *vidas* from hagiographic models, not enough emphasis has been placed on the process by which these women went about choosing the spiritual models that would characterize their life writings. As a result insufficient attention has been given to their role as active agents choosing between some scripts and images while disregarding others; and even less has been placed on the reasons that underlie their choices. This is an important critical omission that this study proposes to fill. Autobiographers construct their textual identity by a complex negotiation of the discourses and ideologies available to them. Therefore, it is crucial that scholars study the authors of the spiritual *vidas* with this key concept in mind as it highlights the autobiographical process and the autobiographer as an active agent. This is a major objective of this dissertation.

The concept of the autobiographer as a negotiator of scripts of identity has not received the critical analysis that it requires. Thus, it is not surprising that the motivations behind choosing certain scripts over others have not been the subject of a sufficient inquiry either. This is another critical gap this study seeks to resolve. An examination of why some scripts and subject positions are taken up rather than others reveals a great deal about the author as a subject as well as about the expectations of her readers. Although much new and exciting work has been done regarding the construction of identity in the spiritual life-writings of the colonial era and the Golden Age, what is
still lacking is a study that focuses on the actual construction process of the discourses of these new life scripts in order to understand why these women chose the particular spiritual models that characterize their spiritual *vidas* as well as why they chose not to incorporate others. This is a third major goal of this thesis.

For this reason, once a discussion of the different models of writing employed within each chapter is offered, the reasons why each model was chosen, and the way in which each autobiographer incorporated it into her writing was distinct, are analyzed. Within these discussions this study will demonstrate that the way to account for these differences in both the hagiographic models chosen, and the “holy” identities that were eventually constructed through the autobiographical writing of these four women, is to “read for the body” (S. Smith *Subjectivity*; Smith and Watson, *Reading*) in their spiritual *vitae*.

To read for the body within these four texts is to focus on the body as it is made visible within language. It is to explore the autobiographical texts with an eye for how these four women religious’s narrators explore the body and embodiment as loci that simultaneously function as sites of “knowledge and knowledge production:” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 42). Thus, to read for the body within the *Vidas* of Isabel de Jesús, Madre María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza means to examine how they negotiate societal norms as a means towards approaching the proper way to place their body within their text. That is to say, how best to inscribe their body and its various parts within their writing in the interest of constructing forms of authority based upon, and grounded within, their cultural embodiment as sexed subjects.
This type of textual exploration is enabled by the following questions: At what point does the body become visible within the autobiographical text? When is it erased from view? What are the parts that are allowed, or not allowed, to be seen? What is the meaning and function of the body’s visibility? And importantly for this study, what is the relationship between the body seen in the text and the body of the writing subject and how is this subject affected by the body’s visible presence within the life narrative? (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 175).

Since the subjects under study within this dissertation used hagiographical models to find authority through the construction and subsequent revelation of their textual bodies, to answer these questions we must first address the question of what models related to the feminine body were available for these four early modern Hispanic women religious.

**Hagiographic Models in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America**

For over two thousand years, Christians have memorialized the lives of their spiritual heroes, the saints, in written form. Through the use of pious literature, or hagiography which started out as funeral eulogies, and collections of popular sayings about saints that had been passed down since the days of the early Christian martyrs. By the thirteenth century, however, the predominant form was the saint’s vita, “a self-contained narrative of ‘hagiography proper’ that recounted the saint’s life, virtues, miracles and exemplary death” (Morgan 3). The saint’s vita was not simply a religious text. It was for centuries a vehicle through which towns, religious communities, towns, religious communities, or ecclesiastical factions formulated community identities and
articulated group interests. Religious communities, towns, lay confraternities, and individual spiritual directors often appropriated the spiritual prestige of the would-be saint in order to enhance their own spiritual status. “The creation of a pious tradition, including the elaboration of the life of the saint through religious biography, was an exercise in the formulation of community identity” (Morgan 3).

The lives of saints were both the favorite and favored reading in Spain and Spanish America of the early modern period. Consequently, women religious on both sides of the Atlantic were able to choose from a wide variety of hagiographic models when they attempted to construct authority through spiritual autobiography. Stephen Haliczer, in his recently published study of women who lived Between Exaltation and Infamy: Spanish Mystics of the Golden Age (2000), states that within Golden Age Spain “there can be little doubt that the tremendous upsurge in the popularity of the cult of saints had strong support at the highest levels of Spain’s ruling elite. Perhaps this was true because the cult was fundamentally conservative and supportive of the existing distribution of power and poverty” (34). His conclusion is based on two premises. First, immersion in the legends of the saints and martyrs amounted to a form of “escapism,” that did not “encourage attack on existing authorities, no matter what their level of responsibility for the bleak situation in which Spain found itself” (Haliczer 34). In Haliczer’s analysis, the “escapism” that mysticism and the imitation of the saints offered taught their readers the “futility of active involvement in the world” because

Like Ribadeneyra’s aristocratic St. Fulgencio, who gave up his friends and the management of his estate for a life of contemplation and mortification ‘far away from the tumult and trafficking of the vulgar,’ the reader was invited to pursue spiritual perfection on an individual basis, leaving the affairs of the world to those who had been placed by God in a position to deal with them (34).
Secondly, according to Haliczer, the cult of the saints was “fundamentally conservative in nature” (38) because it was used as a mechanism for promoting Counter-Reformation doctrines. In addition, “the effort to canonize national spiritual figures was part of a wider struggle between France and Spain for influence in Rome.” This explains why in the era of the Golden Age, the “stunning canonization of saints paralleled the rise of Spain in world domination during the last half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries” (Haliczer 34).

The major hagiographic texts of the period were the anonymous Leyenda de los santos (?1497) a version of Jacobus de Voragine’s Golden Legend; Pedro de la Vega’s Flos sanctorum (published 1521-80); Alonso de Villegas’s Flos sanctorum (published 1578-1603); Pedro de Ribadeneira’s of the same title (published 1599-1643) (Rhodes, “Book” 97). Catholic missionaries and ecclesiastical authorities brought all of these hagiographic texts with them on their journey to the New World in the interest of bringing these models to converts to the Church.

Consequently, it was not long before eight out of every ten texts printed in colonial Mexico and Peru were hagiographic or spiritual texts. Literate colonial inhabitants frequently read these works. Those who could not read heard references to them cited in the Mass. It was not long before new generations of readers and listeners were imitating the holy lifestyles depicted in these texts (Myers, Saints nor Sinners 5). As they imitated them, many colonists found a place for themselves within the pantheon of exemplary hagiographic models. They then wrote their own vidas that were subsequently exported to Europe in an attempt to proclaim the vitality of Roman
Catholicism in America. One of the most important of these was the *Vida* of St. Teresa de Jesús which arrived in colonial Spanish America in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Other spiritual treatises, such as the works of St. Ignatius de Loyola and San Juan de la Cruz, traveled across the Atlantic to the newly colonized continent at around the same time (Muriel, *Cultura Femenina* 320). All these texts were transferred to the New World by Spanish settlers eager to bridge the geographical and spiritual gap between Europe and America—between the Old World that boasted hundreds of years of Catholic practice and a New World that threatened to taint European settlers’ virtue through exposure to ‘infidels’ and ‘idolatrous practices’—criollos sought to prove that the New World was a paradise for a new and pure Catholic order. Local holy people were depicted in Spanish American hagiographies for a dual purpose: they served as models to emulate and as symbols for the building of a local history and identity (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners* 5).

According to Ronald J. Morgan in *Spanish American Saints and the Rhetoric of Identity 1600-1810*, this dual purpose of the saints’ lives was essential for “criollo identity formation”(4).

One of the striking aspects of the culture of the saints in early modern Spain and Spanish America was the widespread interest in the lives of female saints. Medieval female saints were especially promoted as models of holiness for the religious women of the period to emulate. Literacy rates in Spain were high during this period; this made diffusion of the lives of the saints within the convents a relatively simple process. Haliczer states that there is evidence that reading books written by or about saints was incorporated into convent routines.

In Zaragoza’s aristocratic Convent of Santa Catalina, which had been founded by an aunt of King James the Conqueror, it was customary to choose one of the nuns to read a spiritual book of hagiography while the
others sewed or performed other labor. When Hipólita de Jesús y Rocaberti was mistress of novices in Barcelona’s Convent of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles, her own extraordinary devotion to the saints led her to call together her novices on the evening before a saint’s day to teach them about the life and particular virtues of that saint (Haliczer 39).

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, colonial women, especially “socially privileged white women” (Myers, Saints nor Sinners 4) were encouraged to draw on two major European religious narrative forms, the autobiographical confessional account and the biographical hagiography in order to write their own life stories. These stories would then be circulated throughout the empire in the hopes of creating “colonial angels” (Tuleda) who would serve as symbols of the New World’s spiritual exemplarity. Their vidas came to be “foundational narratives of the colonization process in Spanish America” because of their instrumental value in both helping to convert the indigenous peoples to Catholicism, and proving to the Mother Country that the once “barbarous” Americas had become thoroughly civilized and Christianized (Myers, Saints nor Sinners 4).

Numerous early modern Hispanic women began to “perform” the lives of the saints. They did so in order to gain some form of spiritual authority in a world in which, although albeit severely limited, the majority of the roads to power went directly though the Church. Although Gabriella Zarri deals specifically with Italian early modern religious writers in her article, “Living Saints’ A Typology of Female Sanctity in the Early Sixteenth Century” (1999), these authors shared much in common with their Spanish and Latin American counterparts. By looking at the role of what Zarri calls “living saints,” we get a good idea of why early modern Hispanic women religious felt
that this type of textual performance would have provided them with the kind of spiritual
authority that they sought:

> While images or relics could act as intercessors and purveyors of
thaumaturgic powers, the prophecies and revelations of the ‘living saints’
assured them an irreplaceable political and social role. Thus Colomba of
Rieti and many other emulators of Catherine of Siena became counselors
to princes, while astute noblewomen were able to uncover political secrets
by feigning saintliness (222).

This change in perception encouraged many early modern women religious to
seek the same type of fame as their predecessors as “there is no question that the
number of charismatic women known for their prophetic gifts swelled in the first
half of the sixteenth century” (Zarri 222).

However, because the misogynist atmosphere of Counter-Reformation Spain and
Mexican church leaders treated women that claimed to have special access to the sacred
with skepticism and suspicion, spiritual authority was often hard to obtain. Women were
treated with mistrust because it was believed that their revelations were possibly demonic
rather than divine. These suspicions were buttressed by the many women “who had little
status to lose and little stake in the status quo,” and thus were “frequent converts to new
cults and instigators of religious rebellion” (Arenal and Schlau, Untold Sisters 7). The
most famous were the *alumbradas* (“enlightened ones”) centered in Guadalajara, New
Castile (Arenal and Schlau, Untold Sisters 7). Founded by the *beata* (“holy woman”) Isabel de la Cruz, the “radically mystical” *alumbrado* doctrine of *dexamienito* appealed to
women because it provided them with the direct communication with the Divine that they
as females in a patriarchal ecclesiastical establishment could not have obtained in any
other way. However, as the many *alumbrada* trials before the Inquisition demonstrated,
the line between a heretical, unmediated relationship with God and a mystical union that was considered orthodox, even saintly was thin in the view of religious and monarchial authorities. Yet some women became spiritual examples to be emulated by the rest of the faithful. Their rise to this position was fraught with difficulties, however, as women of this era were supposed to be meek and humble and not intervene in the religious practices of the day. Those women that exceeded these expectations were rewarded with positions of spiritual exemplarity; those that did not were condemned, often in most cruel ways.

The Inquisition’s function of ensuring orthodoxy and shaping society to conform with the Counter Reformations ideals affected women not only in their lifetime but also after their death, when the possibility of living on in popular memory as exemplars of Catholic piety depended on the construction of biographies in accordance with a typology approved by the church (Giles, *Women in the Inquisition* 8).

Male, Hispanic religious and political leaders of the early modern period thought that the best way to “check” woman’s “unruly flesh” was to keep her both physically and metaphysically enclosed. Consequently, secular women were told to maintain their virginity until such time as they could be married and locked away in the home. Religious women were pushed into convents where they remained both metaphysically “intact” and physically enclosed for life. Even unchaste women were enclosed; they were ushered into brothels. “In this period of the Counter-Reformation, religious beliefs permeated gender ideology. Enclosure and purity developed as strategies for defending the faith at this time, for separating the sacred from the profane, and also for protecting the social order” (Perry 6).
The idea that women should keep themselves enclosed for the betterment of the social order was an early Christian belief that was carried over to the medieval period and beyond. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux, in his *Sermo de conversione ad clericos*, uses the character of a wandering old woman scratching her open sores to symbolize the flesh that in his mind should be “checked” in the same way that one would tame a wild beast:

*Siquidem voluptuoso sum, curiosa sum, et ab hoc triplici ulcerce non est in me sanitas a planta pedis usque ad verticem. Itaque facuces et quae obscena sunt corporis, assignata sunt voluptati, quandoquidem velut de novo necesse est singular recenseri. Nam curiositati pes vagus, et indisciplinatus oculus famulantur. At vanitati quidem auris et lingua serviant, dum per illam impinguat caput meum oleum peccatoris; per hanc ipsa suppleo quod in laydibus meis alii minus fecisse videntur* (qtd. in Lochrie 21).

Lochrie states that in this symbolic representation of female flesh:

The state of the ‘living in the flesh’ is one in which the body is abducted by the appetites and the ulcerous soul. The will, the old woman who rages and picks at her ulcers, the Eve of St. Bernard, resembles Augustine’s Eve who represents the sensual or the lower reason. In both cases woman is associated with the perversity of the flesh which began as a fissure as a result of the Fall and which has festered into ulcers ever since. Woman then occupies the border between body and soul, the fissure through which a constant assault on the body may be conducted. She is a painful reminder of the influx alienating body from soul and which continually erases the boundaries (21).

The female body, as conceived first by the early Christians and then later adopted by both medieval and early modern thinkers, was considered to be dangerous because it

---

3 “I am voluptuous, I am curious, I am ambitious, and there is not part of me which is free from this threefold ulcer, from the soles of my feet to the top of my head (Is 1:6). My gullet and the shameful parts of my body are given up to pleasure; we must name them afresh, one by one. The wandering foot and the undisciplined eye are slaves to curiosity, ambition, and pleasure which enlist the senses in their satisfaction” (trans. Lochrie 21).
was overly pervious. Hence the strong similarity between Saint Bernard’s wandering old
woman and the “grotesque” body described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* that is
depicted as “open, heterogeneous, composed of gaps, orifices, offshoots (the open
mouth, genitals, breast, belly, nose, phallus) apertures, and disproportion, as such [. . .] 
feminine. It exceeds its own limits in pregnancy, childbirth, dying, eating, drinking, in
copulation, and defecation” (Bakhtin 138-139). Thus, whereas the conception of male
bodies as already “closed, hermetic, static, homogeneous, and associated with high
culture, with Latin, with a disembodied spirituality” (Bahktin 138-139) caused men to be
looked upon as being authoritative and invested with public power. Because they were
considered to inhabit overly pervious, grotesque female bodies, women were deemed to
be unworthy of public life and henceforth subject to the most rigorous forms of
enclosure. To use Mary Douglas’ terms, women had “dangerous bodies” and the danger
that they presented was to “official culture” (4) because there was “no way of preventing
[its] mixture with other bodies” (Bakhtin 26). In this way, “because of the ‘taboo-laden’
construction of the female body as the site of fleshy disruption, it became the locus of the
medieval Church’s strategy of control” (Bynum, “Faith”).

The repercussions of this control and the negative view of women who inspired
it, have been felt by women ever since. Not even holy women, even those proclaimed to
be saints, were deemed capable of living freely in the unenclosed world as they too were
more closely connected with the flesh than male religious.

More than their counterparts, holy women were likely to be presented as
flesh-and blood creatures struggling to cope with conflicting demands of
family and society, spiritual impulses, physical and emotional needs.
Unlike male saints, women who described their own sexual problems did
not allow themselves the luxury of blaming them on the devil, perhaps
being too deeply instilled with the prevalent notion that women were the
lustful sex to think of shifting their responsibility to outside forces. For this reason the autobiographical accounts of the spiritual travails of female ascetics present the most convincing treatment of human sexuality to be found in hagiographic literature (Bell and Weinstein 87).

Theologians such as the Franciscan, Gerónimo Planes, (a reader and theologian at the convent of Jesus Nazarene in Malloca) warned that women “were the most effective instruments the devil had to deceive men” (Haliczer 126). These spiritual leaders feared that women would use the power of the false revelations given to them by the devil in order to “rule their husbands and spiritual advisors” (Haliczer 126). Such a drastic inversion of sex roles had to be avoided at all costs. Thus, those with responsibility for the spiritual lives of women were told to be keenly aware of women’s “natural” propensity toward evil and evaluate their visions and revelations with the utmost prudence and circumspection (Haliczer 126). The female mystic, no matter how orthodox her beliefs, could pose a threat to a male-dominated church unless she kept her ambitions very much within bounds and accepted the status quo⁴ because “the weak-mindedness and generalized inconstancy and fickleness ingrained in the feminine psyche, made them more vulnerable to demonic suggestion” (Haliczer 48). According to the sixteenth-century poet and theologian Luis de León, women were “weak, brittle and frail” to an extraordinary degree (qtd. in Haliczer 48). In addition, according to the late fifteenth century writer Martín de Córdoba, women were more attached to carnality than men, because emotion and not reason predominated in their psychological makeup. “As

⁴ In Haliczer’s analysis “it is perhaps an indication of the serious concern that the Roman Catholic church felt about the excessives of mysticism” that during the early modern period 41.6 % of those women accused of being “feigned mystics” were ultimately deemed “suspect” or “lightly suspect of heresy” in the final sentence (126).
a consequence, their spiritual lives were far more likely to be inspired by the devil than those of men, whose superior intellects allowed them to better resist demonic temptation” (Haliczer 48). Women had to be very careful to avoid these types of temptations. In the minds of the religious and political leaders of the early modern period, the best way for her to do this was to keep herself safely enclosed, locked away from the rest of society.

The authorities enlisted the aid of, “spiritual treatises that emphasized feminine ‘spiritual integritas’ or intactness (the repairing of the natural but dangerous accessibility of the female body,)” (Ashton 118) in order to ensure that women internalized the need for female bodily enclosure and thus willingly embraced an enclosed life. Full of descriptions of and warnings about the pervious, excessive and susceptible female body, these texts offered women a guide for maintaining their integrity by preserving their naturally intact state, i.e. their virginity, keeping their emotions in check and walling themselves off from the rest of the world. The publication of these types of treatises was considered to be necessary because “virginity, enclosure and the suppression of the feminine body and all of the feelings and emotions associated with it corrected the ‘natural grotesqueness of the woman’s body’ ” (Ashton 4). Ashton notes that the women of the period were taught to close off their emotions as well as their body because the concept of integritus extended “to the stemming or sealing of natural emotions—talk,

---

5 The maintenance of feminine virginity was thought to enclose the pervious female fles because it “corrected women’s humors, [which] because they were thought by medieval thinkers to be cold rather than hot, always wander[ed] in search of the heat of men whom they would then tempt to sin, were an equivalent to the moral breeches in boundaries associated with woman’s nature (Ashton 84).
joy, laughter, pleasure pain, sexuality, tears and their expression. Any of these things that were not controlled were considered threatening to the male world in which only divinely inspired emotion seemed acceptable” (118).^6

Within Spanish society of the early modern period, the orthodox female body was an enclosed and “intact” female body. For this reason, throughout the period, “the virgin bride of Christ model” became the “standard protocol” for a female religious who wanted to live an exemplary life (Rhodes, “Book 97). According to the dictates of this model, holy virgins were signaled as “holy” at birth but later had to go through a period of familial conflict in order to fulfill their spiritual calling. They then experienced a “brush with death” that reinforced their religious beliefs and ultimately convinced them to lock themselves away from the world in order to remain spiritually pure and physically “intact” brides of Christ (Rhodes, “Book” 98).

Two revered medieval female saints, Catherine of Siena and Gertrudis the Great, represented the personification of this model because they represented prototypical “virgin brides of Christ.” Their hagiographic works were translated, published and circulated in the hopes that Hispanic women religious would emulate their “humble” ways. Teresa used these works as models for her Vida in order to avoid Inquisitional censure. It is important to highlight the role that Teresa de Jesus’s spiritual

---

^6 The concept of *spiritual integritas* or intactness was important in monitoring the evil powers of womanly flesh. As exemplified by the words of the very important *Hali Meidenhad*, the 13th century devotional manual for women, for the medieval and late medieval feminine subject religious life was characterized by the need to adopt boundaries and maintain an unbroken body: “And then you, blessed maiden, who are assigned to him with the sign of virginity, break not thou that seal which seals you together.” Lochrie points out that the *Hali Maidenhead* female chastity preserves the “invisible frontier between body and world, a sacred space that resists the condition of abjection posed by the heaving powers of the flesh” (25). Another text, The *Ancrense Wisse* buttresses this line of thinking by stressing the need to protect the intact virginal body by encouraging women religious to flee the world and seal all the borders of their body particularly that of speech, which is why its author encouraged women to damn up their speech (Lochrie 5).
autobiography acquired as the *vida*, which was a new type of genre that women could (with the church’s approval) take up, and, thus, enter into the previously male world of authorship, became an authorized form of textual self-expression. However, one should be careful in placing too much emphasis on the influence of the form and content of Teresa’s *Vida* on the *vidas* of the Hispanic women who followed in her wake. To do so fails to give the significant attention due to the many other spiritual and hagiographic models that nurtured these later writings. Scholars should also be careful about attributing too much originality to the genre format of Teresa’s *Vida*. Much of it was fashioned in the style of other spiritual autobiographies, such as Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, and that it borrows heavily from hagiographic tradition, thus it is simply not accurate to think that Teresa originated the genre.

However, because it established the pattern of “approved” spiritual autobiographical storytelling for Hispanic women religious of the early modern period and beyond, it is impossible to discuss the *vida* without first discussing Teresa’s vida. Published posthumously in Madrid in 1588, Teresa’s *Vida* consisted of at least two fragmentary confessions, a telling of the history of her foundation of the convent of St. Joseph of Ávila, and several theological treatises on prayer and mystical union.

Although written for her confessors, the principal addressees of the published edition of Teresa’s work were her fellow nuns. The church authorities that chose to first publish and then circulate Teresa’s life did so because they hoped that generations of peninsular and colonial women in need of spiritual guidance would look to it as a guide to becoming model nuns. They were partially successful in this endeavor. The words “partially” are used here because the women targeted by the church authorities both
fulfilled and subverted their male superiors’ desires. Many Hispanic women religious did look to Teresa’s *Vida* as a hagiographic model and incorporated her use of the “rhetoric of humility” (Weber) and “her essential structure of the life story as a confessional autobiography in the spirit of Augustine’s confessions” (Goetz, “Teresa” 869) into their own *vidas*. With Teresa’s *Vida* as their guide, they stressed their guilt about their ungodliness and flawed character. They emphasized the sinful nature of both their childhood and teenage years and the fear of their possibly “demonic” visions. Perhaps, most importantly, they stressed their one-time lack of faith and inability to renounce all worldly pleasures in favor of both spiritual and physical enclosure. Such enclosure, by the grace of a divine intervention, was converted to a desire to take the veil and live the rest of their lives safely behind convent walls (Goetz, “Teresa” 869).

Kathleen Myers has astutely observed that ironically, in the case of St. Teresa, not all the women who used Teresa’s hagiographic life story as a model lived completely orthodox lives or wrote totally orthodox *vidas*. Many used it to generate new and sometimes eyebrow raising “life-paths” that were often ultimately “re-scripted” by zealous confessors eager to appropriate their life stories for the dual purpose of converting infidels to Catholicism and maintaining spiritual orthodoxy among those already members of the “one true faith” (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners* 15).

Myers also explains that Spanish and Spanish American male clergy, acting in the role of both confessors and inquisitors, were “physicians of the soul” who were charged with distinguishing between those women that were orthodox and those that were not (*Saints nor Sinners* 6). They tackled this important responsibility by obliging women who made claims to spiritual greatness to write their spiritual life histories.
Their written life stories came to be collectively known as *vidas espirituales* and were used by the ecclesiastical authorities to determine if a particular woman religious was either a “saint or a sinner” (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners* prologue). Men, on the other hand, were almost never required to write the “full-fledged confessional *vidas* that were often the essential intermediary step for women; “their ability to choose whether or not to write their life history as proof of their orthodoxy speaks to their privileged position within the religious world” (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners* 6).

The script of the “*perfecta religiosa*” (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners*) as symbolized by Teresa’s *Vida*, functioned as a script of enclosure. Such enclosure worked to keep the feminine body intact and hidden away from the rest of the world. The goal was to maintain a well-ordered Christian society free from the wages of sin by guarding against the carnal presence of women. It was a script used to encourage women to deny their potentially ‘dangerous’ appetites and continuously shape what Foucault calls a non-threatening “docile body” that would willingly enclose itself from the rest of the world in order to help re-establish, preserve, and protect a well-ordered early modern Hispanic society.

Despite the fact that male early modern religious leaders within Spain and Spanish America proscribed the “virgin bride of Christ” as the appropriate model for the women religious of the period, sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish and Spanish American female would-be saints had at their disposal a wide variety of competing hagiographic models to negotiate when they wrote their spiritual autobiographies for the purpose of constructing authority through the autobiographical “I:” among them were the holy abbess as symbolized by St. Teresa de Jesús and St. Catherine of Siena; the
“harlot” turned desert hermit as seen in the widely distributed St. Mary of Egypt; the Martyrd mother figure of the ever popular Perpetua; and the charitable notablewomen that characterized St. Elizabeth of Hungary’s popular hagiography. All of these formulaic holy models proliferated in Spain and Spanish America of the early modern age. For this reason, these hagiographic figures, together with the two most important Christian exemplars —Jesús and the Virgin Mary—constituted the basis on which Isabel de Jesús, Madre María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza constructed their subjectivities, their bodies and their embodied authority in their spiritual *vidas* (Baños Vallejo 107-120).

**Intervening in Scripts of Enclosure: A Description of the Chapters**

In chapters one and two this study engages the narratives written by Isabel de Jesús and Madre Magdalena Muñoz in order to demonstrate how early modern women were able to vindicate the “porous” female body by bringing it into their writing, and turning their abject bodies into empowered ones. Isabel de Jesús (1586-1648) was a widow and a mother of three sons who passed away shortly after their birth, who wandered the Spanish countryside for over thirty years before entering a convent; she was far indeed from the image of intact and enclosed woman. Although she was not a virgin who had lived the majority of her life behind convent walls, Isabel de Jesús managed to use her maternal and thus “open” and porous body as a means of empowerment. She incorporated maternal hagiographic imagery into her text and projected herself as the next Mother of Jesus and all humanity who was sent down to earth by God, her heavenly bridegroom, to guide all her spiritual children to
righteousness. She was successful in this endeavor because of the connection of her life experiences of sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood with those of the martyr Perpetua, the Virgin Mary, and the holy figure of Jesus as Mother which can be traced back to the Bible and was prominent in many hagiographic texts, especially those of the twelfth century abbots and the nuns of Hefta.7

Madre Magdalena Muñoz, the Mexican subject of chapter two, was a cloistered virgin; yet her body was considered dangerous because it was covered in wounds that bled profusely and thus was not intact but rather spilled out of her. Too many openings on a body allowed femininity to exude out; so her body was also an example of the unruly and the abject. Rather than try to either reject or transcend her dangerously superfluous body, however, within her Vida Madre Magdalena grounded her identity. Embracing her wounded and bleeding materiality, she insisted on its connection with the bloodied body of the suffering Christ who died for the sake of humanity. Thus, by connecting herself with images of Christ’s flesh, like Isabel de Jesús, Madre Magdalena found power and authority by writing her overly porous body. Unlike Isabel de Jesús, Madre Magdalena’s only bodily experience was that of blood, wounds and suffering; for

---

7 The idea that Jesus has maternal attributes can be traced directly to the Bible, where Jesus is often described through the use of feminine symbols and imagery. Biblical allusions to the motherhood of Jesus were expanded upon in the medieval period when Christian thinkers such as St. Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux drew upon it in order to escape from the rigors associated with their positions of high ecclesiastical authority as well as their desire to nurture other men free from censure (Bynum, Jesus as Mother 168).
this reason her text is filled with images of a crucified Christ rather than those of a maternal one. She found this power by gazing at Christ’s wounded body through the “ojos coporales” that other women religious, such as St. Teresa de Jesús, never looked through within their writing.

Although they employed different bodily images and different images of Jesus’s body and its connection with theirs, both women managed to translate the body through autobiographical writing into a practice through which the body was written corpus and each woman—identified with the flesh, and specifically fissured flesh—occupied the site of rupture where excess and unbridled affections threaten the masculine integrity of the body in order to transform it into a point of access to the sacred.

The two women writers discussed in these first two chapters re-valorized their female bodies by bringing them into their texts. The next two chapters study writing by women who constructed resistance through their textual bodies by rejecting rather than embracing the abject female body as constructed in the theological discourses of the day. It is important to stress that they did not reject their materiality. Rather, they embraced their occupation of the female body as defined by patriarchal society in favor of other forms of embodiment—forms that involve genderless and/or masculinized bodies. In this way, they too resisted their imprisoning cultural embodiment not so much by transcending it as by redefining it as one that would be more empowering.

Chapter three of this dissertation focuses on the first of these newly re-constructed bodies— that of the Mexican María de San José. Like Isabel de Jesús, María de San José spent over half of her life outside of the convent walls, and thus outside of safe enclosure, largely because she could not afford to enter a convent. Upon writing her Vida, as was
the case with Isabel, her Spanish contemporary, she also had to textually transform her “wandering” years into circumscribed ones. Nevertheless, María de San José had never been a mother; in fact hers was a virginal and intact body. In her case transforming her years away from the convent into years spent as the mother of all humanity nurturing her children and guiding them to God would not have worked as it did for Isabel de Jesús. But María de San José found other bodily strategies to implement and other images of saintly embodiment to employ. She had spent thirty years on the family hacienda in the rural Mexican desert while trying to find a way of entering the convent without a sufficient dowry. Thus, María de San José was able to use her text as a platform for transforming her experience outside of the convent into a scene taken out of a life of one of the holy Desert Fathers or that of St. Francis or St. Clare. In this way, her text exemplifies how subjects and places are mutually constituted. Like these desert dwellers she lived in a hut, eschewed all contact with others and submitted her body to continual extreme starvation and abuse. As her body is isolated, starved, beaten and silenced within her text, it ceases to be a wily and porous female one needful of enclosure. It becomes a body that ceases to menstruate, ceases to develop and thus ceases to be characterized by dangerous female qualities and is removed from the outside world. Through this presentation, María de San José followed in the tradition of a long line of medieval female mystics and saints who, according to Laura Finke,

---

8 She chose these saints as her models because they were direct descendants of the ancient Desert Fathers who had carried the strict ascetic tradition into the medieval period and beyond.
By mutilating their bodies and inflicting upon themselves countless trials and tribulations such as endless amounts of fasting, develop a means of transcending their own secondariness out of cultural representations of the body and the technologies of discipline such as the mutilation of the body and the abnegation of self that had been designed to contain and suppress it (404).

Reconstructing her female body as a genderless, starved, and suffering one was crucial to María de San José. Not only was she considered subject to sin because of her gender, she lived in the periphery of colonial New Spain, where she was subject to contact with “unruly” indigenous and mulatto bodies everyday. These were considered corrupting influences that would have easily infiltrated an overly open female body. Within her writing, this religious had to physically and metaphysically remove herself from their presence in order to obtain recognition of a pure and saintly existence during the many years before she entered the convent. However, once the subject of the Vida turned to her convent life, María de San José insisted on making her feminine body visible within her text. This is why, whereas the first art of María de San José’s Vida, Volume I, the part that narrates her life in the windswept desert, differs starkly from subsequent volumes that speak of her convent experience. The way that these differences between this subject’s special orientation affects the visibility of her body, the construction of her subjectivity, and the authorization of her identity is the subject of this chapter.

Chapter five takes up the story of one of Spain’s early modern Jesuit missionaries. Unlike María de San José and Isabel de Jesús, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza came from a background of extreme privilege. As a member of the very powerful Mendoza family, Luisa had both the social position and resources needed to live a religious life of her
choosing that was not in any way enclosed.\(^9\) The life path she chose was that of a wandering missionary who journeyed to foreign lands—in this case England—in order to save persecuted Catholics who would ultimately be martyred in the name of this faith by the heretical regime that had diverted from the Roman Catholic “one true faith.” Notwithstanding that Luisa might have had the power to choose a missionary life for herself; it was up to her religious superiors to authorize her choice by giving her the mission toward martyrdom that she greatly desired. In order to obtain this authorization she had to prove that she was worthy of taking on a very public mission; she had to demonstrate that unlike other women she was the owner of a body that did not need to be enclosed. The way she did this was to write a spiritual autobiography that constructed her as a saint who did not manifest any “overly feminine” characteristics. To insure that this presentation of herself would be credible, Luisa de Carvajal banished her body from the completed and polished edition of her life story.

Although Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza makes every attempt to keep her body from entering her text, she needed to include it in order to fully align her suffering with that of Jesus Christ and thereby demonstrate that she is holy enough to take on the missionary position that she desperately desires. She also had to offer a justification for the strange and seemingly indecent relationship that she had had with an uncle who kept

\(^9\) According to Helen Nader in the introduction to her important study of the Mendoza family, *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain: Eight Women of the Mendoza Family* (2004), the Mendozas “had risen to power in Castile during a civil war (1366-69) by mobilizing their private armies in support of the pretender to the throne, Enrique de Trastámara, the illegitimate half-brother of King Pedro (ruled 1350-69). From the victorious King Enrique II (ruled 1369-75), the Mendoza received numerous mercedes—estates and political offices—and they married into other Enriquista families to solidify their power.” By the time Luisa de Carvajal was born, “the immense wealth of the Mendoza family as a whole and of specific members gave them power in politics and finance that enabled them to lead and shape Castilian cultural and political trends during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their wealth derived from lordship over
her as his ward for most of her early teenage and adult years. In an attempt to connect the physical and perhaps even sexual abuse that she suffered under his direct supervision, and the humiliation and shame that she felt because of it, with the suffering and humiliation Christ felt during his crucifixion, Carvajal y Mendoza tried to bring her body into her text but without having its presence interrupt the process of identity formation that she was undertaking. This, however, proved to be impossible. Once it entered into her text, her body brought with it all the painful emotions and feelings of abjection that she was trying to keep at bay. However necessary reference to it may have been for proving Luisa’s spiritual worthiness for her mission, the inclusion of her body in her autobiography brought chaos and disorder in its wake. It caused her careful construction of herself as a saint to break down and her attempts at scripting a vita like those of the saints began to fall apart. Her text moved from being at the beginning a tightly controlled hagiography that is virtually indistinguishable from others within the tradition to a highly personal and emotional memoir of trauma to both the body and the soul.

In the end, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza is unable to resolve the conflict created by her attempt to connect her abused, humiliated and degraded body with the body of Jesus. She could not include it without losing the control that she had thus far held so tightly over her self-presentation within her autobiographical writing. Thus, she abandoned the writing of her autobiography and only completed the part leading up to the arrival of her uncle into her life. The rest of Carvajal’s text—the part which puts her humiliated and nude female body on display—is transformed by her pain into a trauma narrative that is left unfinished and unseen until after her death. A combination of a

numerous estates that the family had received in payment for military and political services to the crown.
hagiography and a trauma narrative, the *Vida spiritual* represents a hybrid text that is characterized by the gaps and fissures that undermine its potential to authorize Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s life.

These lordships were the family’s personal property, yet they also were political offices” (6-7).
CHAPTER 2
ISABEL DE JESÚS’S RE-VALORIZATION OF THE MATERNAL BODY

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
St Anselm (1033-1109), Oratio 10

Introduction

The early modern era was characterized by the Counter Reformation preoccupation to save souls from the evil heresies of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. During this period, Isabel de Jesús (1586-1648), an Augustinian recollect nun from Spain, used the word of God to help to reach out and bring people back to the Catholic fold. However, largely because of the mystical authority that she enjoyed, like many other early modern Hispanic women religious who helped with this endeavor, Isabel de Jesús eventually found herself under a cloud of suspicion. Largely because of the “mala reputación” as a “profeta falsa” (false prophet) that had followed Isabel de Jesús into the convent, the mistrust that her feminine figure incited from her masculine superiors was even greater than her fellow Spanish women religious. In order to clear her name she had to dictate to a fellow sister, Madre Inés del Santísimo Sacramento, a spiritual autobiographical narrative that would explain to all why she deserved to exchange her negative namesakes for the title of “holy” woman.
The text that the two women eventually produced consisted of three separate books: Book I (3-152) which tells of her life before her reentrance into the convent; Book II (153-398) which discusses her years as a nun; and Book III (399-470) which is written by her confessor Francisco Ignacio and re-tells the story of Isabel’s life and then discusses the “very holy” way in which she died as well as the testimony of eyewitnesses and others who knew Madre Isabel and had witnessed her exemplarity. In 1675, a full twenty-seven years after the nun’s death, the Vida de la Venerable Madre Isabel de Jesús, recoleta Augustina en el convento de San Juan Bautista de la villa de Arenas. Dictada por ella misma y añadido lo que faltó de su dichosa muerte (1675) [Life of the Venerable Madre Isabel de Jesús, Augustinian Recollect of the Convento de San Juan Bautista in the Village of Arenas. Dictated by her, with an Addition Telling of Her Blessed Death]. This analysis is using a photocopied version of the original 1675 manuscript obtained from the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid. Finally, when they were finally made public, Isabel’s words helped to posthumously solidify their previously poor and obscure author’s position of local fame and spiritual authority. In doing they help to “illustrate how visions could confer status and power on an illiterate peasant woman in a real life enactment of the biblical dictum that “the lowliest shall be the highest” (Arenal and Schlau, Untold Sisters 191).

In the past many scholars have looked at Isabel de Jesús’s Vida as an accurate and “truthful” portrayal of her life; that is to say they have read it as biography rather than autobiography. Given the heavy cloud of suspicion under which Isabel transcribed her life, this type of reading is not appropriate. Isabel de Jesús told Madre Inés the story of her life knowing that it would subsequently turned over to powerful Inquisitional censors
who would scrutinize it in order to accurately determine if its author’s thoughts and visions were either orthodox rather than idolatrous. Thus, as was also the case with Teresa de Jesús when she wrote her *Libro de la Vida* (1588), one cannot underestimate the amount of care and attention to detail that Isabel de Jesús put into the telling of her life story.

It is because of this great care and attention to detail that as critics we must proceed with care when we try to look to Isabel’s autobiography in order to learn more about her historical life. The only detailed information that we have about the life of Isabel de Jesús comes from this *Vida*. Given the fictional nature of autobiography, it is thus imperative that we understand that the history of her life that she offers within her text is a constructed one. The text only provides us with information that its author had previously screened through her own autobiographic lens before she wrote it down in autobiographical form. Thus, the stories told in Isabel de Jesús’s *Vida* are as much fictional as factual. This is an important consideration that the three critics who have previously written about Isabel de Jesús have not fully taken into account. Alecta Arenal and Stacey Schlau published the first excerpts of the Spanish woman’s *Vida*. They did so in both English and Spanish in their 1989 compilation of the works of Hispanic women religious, *Untold Sisters*. Although the majority of the translations of Isabel de Jesús’s *Vida* are my own, some of the longer translated passages cited in this text are Arenal and Schlau’s. These will be followed by the appropriate page number from *Untold Sisters*.

Arenal and Schlau included an analysis of Isabel de Jesús’ historical life and text along with excerpts from her text. While their words provide us with a very useful and succinct description of the biography of this Spanish woman religious, Arenal and Selau
sometimes seem to conflate the historical with the autobiographical in their analysis. Ruth El Saffar, who has written about both the *Vida of Isabel de Jesús* in the final chapter of her very important *Rapture Encaged*, also exhibits this same propensity to confuse the historical life of the author under study with that of the autobiographical persona that she is trying to textually construct.

All three of these critics especially display this tendency when describing the maternal imagery that abounds within Isabel’s text. This has resulted in a further conflation of the historical mother Isabel de Jesús with the idealized hagiographic maternal figure that she carefully constructs. This chapter will pick up where these two scholars have left off. It offers a discussion of the *Vida of Isabel de Jesús* that is grounded in the understanding that any information being given about the life, especially in regard to the claims of spiritual motherhood of the Augustinian nun is to be understood as a product of Isabel de Jesús’ own process of hagiographic self-construction. While some of it may be based on historical and biographical “facts;” these “facts” are “re-remembered” and then embellished in such a way as to provide evidence of the author’s holiness and exemplarity.

In order to protect herself from inquisitional censure Isabel de Jesús took great pains to discursively explain away the many years she had spent outside the convent walls. Above all, she strove to turn the years that she spent in the conjugal state, bearing children and then burying then, and her final “wandering” around the countryside before finally entering the convent, into proof of a saintly existence. Given what we know about the early modern view of un-intact and unenclosed women, this was no easy feat.
Isabel de Jesús did not fit the mold of the “perfecta religiosa” for she was a widow who had given birth to not one but three children. Central to the perception of sanctity, virginity was a physical reality that Isabel de Jesus, both in real life and within her text, simply could not change (Bell and Weinstein 98). Isabel as writing subject, did not attempt to change her materiality and write herself as the intact virginal saint that she very obviously was not; rather she chose to use her experiences as wife and above all as mother in order to obtain a position of spiritual authority. To do so, she called upon the same legitimating discourses of mysticism that had been used by previous generations of women religious who had demonstrated that “women’s bodies, in the acts of lactation and giving birth were analogous [. . .] to the body of Christ, as it died on the cross and gave birth to salvation” (Bynum, *Fast* 30). This concept had allowed these same aspiring women religious to both authorize and justify the thrusting of their polluted feminine bodies into the masculine spiritual realm.

Like many other women writers Isabel de Jesús legitimated her position by filling her pages with images of a feminized and “fleshy” “Jesus as Mother” (Bynum, *Mother*) who was for all intents and purposes more female than male. This self-construction as a feminized Jesus was made possible at this particular moment in history, because “both men and women described Christ’s body in its suffering and its generativity as a birthing and lactating mother and may at some almost conscious level have felt that women’s suffering was her way of fusing with Christ because Christ’s suffering flesh was woman” (Bynum, *Mother* 260). At the same time, Isabel de Jesús made comparisons between herself and the Virgin Mary. Unlike many of her contemporaries however, she emphasized Mary’s role as mother over that of a chaste virgin. Finally, she drew upon
the model of maternal martyrdom as established by Perptua in order to transform the painful deaths of her biological children into proof of her spiritual authority. As this female religious built this idealized autobiographical identity she re-valorized the archetypical maternal body and then empowered herself by connecting it with the experiences she had lived out as a mother.

Therefore, unlike the majority of the religious writers who wrote about feminine bodily processes that they themselves had never experienced, Isabel de Jesús reached back into the annals of her memory and drew from within her real life experiences the images of female embodiment that connected her with the feminized body of Jesus and that of his mother as well in order to construct herself as a kind of mother-Jesus who would save the world from itself. Her autobiographical construction of herself as a hagiographic mother figure is the subject of this chapter. The pages that follow will demonstrate how in her *Vida* Isabel de Jesús textually merged her historical life experiences as a wife and mother with the Christian ideals and discourses on holy motherhood that were prevalent in the time in which she lived in order to construct herself as a hagiographic subject who was worthy of veneration, because of, rather than in spite of, her maternal subjectivity. In doing so, brought legitimacy to the day-to-day lived experiences of other flesh and blood women religious such as herself who might have spent part of their lives cloistered in chastity, but at some point had also been wives and mothers.
The Early Modern Conception of the Wedded Feminine Body

Through imitation of revered religious figures Isabel de Jesús ultimately was able to strip herself of the label of social pariah and in its place take on the title of respected visionary. This extraordinary exchange of identities transformed her life of poverty, tragedy and misery into one of relative comfort and considerable renown. However, given the fact that she had lived the majority of her life as either a married woman or a “wandering” widow, this transformation was by no means an easy process. In order to project herself as a holy figure worthy of admiration and emulation, the Augustinian recollect had to textually reconstruct her secular life, especially those parts of it that had to do with her years as a wife and mother. In order to understand why she felt compelled to do so we must first understand the views of both marriage and motherhood that predominated during the early modern era.

Despite the fact that by this time marriage was considered a sacrament, the most influential male religious and political leaders viewed the married, and thus no doubt sexually active, female body with great suspicion. They did not consider the body of a married woman to be on the same level as the virgin body. They also considered that for the saint or a spiritual leader, virginity was supreme; for without it the highest levels of spiritual authority could not easily be obtained. This does not in any way imply that no married woman or widow had ever made it to sainthood. On the contrary, there were a number of female saints who had at one time or another been married. Yet, according to Bell and Weinstein, these women had a much more difficult time reaching sainthood than those who had eschewed marriage in favor of perpetual virginity. A woman who had married might become a saint, especially if she were either a pious widow or exemplary
queen. Her path to holiness was difficult, however, and in “her saintly title she would reveal the blemish of having known the flesh because for female saints but not for males, the official classification [of saintliness] turned on sexual condition: women saints were recorded as either virgin or widow, while men were confessors, bishops, or whatever” (Bell and Weinstein 87). Moreover, those women who managed to become saints, or at least gain some measure of spiritual authority, due to their lack of virginity, did not receive the same level of respect as their un-married, chaste counterparts.

According to Bell and Weinstein the vast majority of saints who enjoyed the greatest popular appeal, had the longest legions of followers, and who eventually received official papal canonizations were virgins (99). For proof of this declaration they offer a table titled “Multivariate Analysis: Type of Canonization, Quality of Reputation and Popularity, Extent of Cult.” According to the carefully compiled data in this index, virginal saints scored higher on all five of the components of perceived sanctity. They scored significantly higher (50.77 vs. 39.53) on supernatural activity, “one of the most important predictors of selection for sainthood” than married religious women (Bell and Weinstein 98).

The difference in scores between maiden saints and married saints is especially significant (Bell and Weinstein 98). The fact that becoming a saint was so difficult for previously married women clearly demonstrates that for women of the early modern age, there was a constant disconnect between what was expected of them spiritually and what was expected of them as members of society:
To read the lives of female saints, however, is to discover a wholly different cultural ideal, although one had to coexist with its opposite. In these cases women are in the mold of Mary, virgin in spirit if not in body, longing for freedom from the importunities of the world—a more sympathetic image to be sure, but even more devastating. The woman who internalized the ideal of Mary and sought to achieve it was virtually assured of failure, not only because the flesh was weak but because the world demanded marriage and motherhood (Bell and Weinstein 98).

Maternal Imagery in the Bible and Early Christian and Medieval Spiritual Works

How does a woman whose children are evidence of her sexual activity turn her experiences as wife and mother into ones that would be considered saintly? At first glance this question might seem to posit the impossible. Yet this is not the case. In reality in the Christian imaginary there was a long tradition of images of sacred motherhood; this tradition principally involved the Virgin Mary and the “motherhood” of God as well as Jesus and his principle male followers. It was to this tradition of Holy Motherhood that Isabel de Jesús looked when she attempted to discursively construct herself as a Holy Mother.

Despite the fact that she was poor and grew up in an isolated community, the Spanish nun still would have been exposed to maternal images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary from a very early age. We can readily assume this based upon the evidence that Haliczer offers in his study early modern female mystics. Between Exaltation and Infamy discusses several women mystics who came from very poor and/or rural backgrounds. Even those that were illiterate were generally familiar with much of the era’s most important hagiographic, spiritual and religious texts because many of them
were oral and/or visual as well as textual (Haliczer 40). In addition, Isabel de Jesús had spent years within the convent before she began to write her *Vida*. Thus, she was even more likely to have been quite familiar with the works of the early Christian and medieval thinkers and writers who had used maternal imagery to describe the Lord.

According to Jennifer Heimmel in “*God is our Mother:* Julian of Norwich and the Medieval Image of Christian Feminine Divinity (1982), “the present age and the centuries immediately preceding it have accustomed Christian western civilization to thinking of God in traditionally masculine terms and imagery” (1). Current movements, however, have begun to draw new interest to the potentially female aspects of God. 10 These movements trace the female side of God all the way back to its earliest beginnings as far back as to the writing of the Bible. Thanks to Heimmel’s very thorough analysis of the many references to maternity found in the Bible and early Christian treatises which I summarize below, we now have a more thorough understanding of the source of the maternal imagery that is so prevalent in medieval and early modern hagiography. Heimmel’s discussion is followed by a summary of Caroline Walker Bynum’s insights into the medieval mystics’ adaptations of this tradition, which she clearly defines in her very important study of the trope of Jesus as Mother.

---

10 See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (48-69) for a thorough discussion of an established tradition of a distinctly Christian and orthodox mother-God. Another important article is André Cabassut’s in which he included several brief passages from Julian, “Une Dévotion Médievale Peu Connue: La Dévotion a Jésus Notre Mere,” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique*, 25 (1949) In late 1975 Eleanor McLaughlin expanded on Cabassut’s survey with additional examples from the late Middle Ages. She also addressed the issue of the tradition’s continuation in patristic sources. “Christ My Mother” Feminine Naming and Metaphor in Medieval Spirituality,” *Nashotah Review*, (Fall, 1975), 228-48. Sr. Ritamary Bradley wrote a number of
According to Heimmel, within the Bible there are undeniable references to the creator in clearly feminine and particularly maternal terms. The Bible continually refers to wisdom, which is God’s external revelation of self, by use of the feminine pronoun as in the following passage and others: “Wisdom is further the ‘mother’ of all good things (Wisdom 7.11-12). In addition to the maternal personification of the concept of wisdom, the Bible makes many other comparisons between the Lord and the figure of the mother. In Isaiah. 42.14 the Lord is depicted as a mother about to give birth: “I cry out as a woman in labor, gasping and panting.” In other biblical passages we see descriptive terms of a more accomplished motherhood. For example, when it is said that the “Most High” who towards the good son “will be more tender to you than a mother” (Sir. 4.10) and the Lord’s beautiful response to Zion’s complaint that “the Lord has forgotten me:”

“Can a mother forget her infant?
Be without tenderness for the child of her womb?
Even should she forget,
I will never forget you” (Isaiah. 49.15).

We see yet another assurance to Zion from the Lord, “As a mother comforts her son/ so will I comfort you” (Isaiah. 66.13).

In addition to these many direct references to the motherhood of the Lord, there are also many biblical passages that depict God carrying out motherly functions. For example, when God is described as “one who carries, heals, leads, comforts, cleanses, clothes, and also disciplines the children out of love” (Heimmel 6-7). Among the numerous examples of these various functions are: “the God who for the people will feed them, and carry them forever!” (Palms. 28.9), who speaks to those of the house of Israel

---

articles that contributed to the study of the trope’s patristic devotees. One of these is “The Motherhood Theme in Julian of Norwhich,” *Fourteenth Century English Mystics Newsletter*, 2, No. 4 (1976), 25-30.
as “My burden since your birth, whom I have carried from your infancy [. . .] I will bear you” (Isaiah. 46.3-4), and who redeemed the children by “lifting and carrying them” (Isaiah. 63.9). As the “creator, who gave them life” God further says of the people: “I will heal them and lead them; I will give full comfort” (Isaiah. 57.18). The Bible also depicts God relating to humanity as children, as the one who “guarded them [. . .] kept careful watch” (John 17.12) and who “will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Revalations 7.17, 21.4). God is further depicted as taking on the perceived feminine activity of “knitting” humanity together “with bones and sinew” “with skin and flesh you clothed me” (Job 10.11) and also as the one who will “provide” much more for the children just as “God clothes in such splendor the grass of the field” (Luke 12.18), and who has indeed “clothed” us with Christ through baptism (Galatians 3.17). God is further the one who “wills to bring us to birth” (James 1.18) and who indeed “gave us new birth” (1 Peter 1.3). Finally, the many references to the Lord’s body as food and drink for humanity paint an image of the maternal body of Jesus Christ. “He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal [. . .] For my flesh is real food and my blood real drink…the man who feeds on me will have life because of me” (John 6. 48-58) and “Be as eager for milk as newborn babies—pure milk of the spirit to make you grow unto salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2.2-3).

The maternal imagery found in the Bible later inspired many early Christian thinkers and caused them to reflect upon the Lord in ways that highlighted his maternal side. Clement in his Exhortation to the Greeks first compares God to a mother bird just as in the Bible “For God of His great love still keeps hold of man; just as, when a nestling falls from the nest, the mother bird flutters above.” He later went on to explain how the
more caring and compassionate side of God was a feminine one. “God in his very self is love [. . .]. And while the unspeakable part of Him is Father, the part that has sympathy with us is Mother. By His loving the Father became of woman’s nature” (347). Finally, Clement describes God as “He who gives us this new birth” and “nurtures us with milk flowing from Himself, the Word” (*Christ the Educator*, 46).

In Homily 82 Clement makes a maternal comparison to God by incorporating the imagery of a divine body nourishment of a child: “Just as woman nurtures her offspring with her own blood and milk, so also Christ continuously nurtures with His own blood those whom He has begotten” (Baptismal Instructions 55-56). Augustine, although albeit more cautiously, also associates the wisdom of God with milk, thus linking the Him with motherhood:

> He who has promised us heavenly food has nourished us on milk, having recourse to a mother’s tenderness. For just as a mother, suckling her infant, transfers from her flesh the very same food which otherwise would be unsuited to a babe [. . .] so our Lord, in order to convert His wisdom into milk for our benefit, came to us clothed in flesh. It is the Body of Christ, then, which here says: ‘And thou shalt nourish me’ (*On the Psalms* 20-21).

According to Bynum many medieval thinkers, especially the twelfth century Cistercians, looked both to the Bible and the works of the early Christian thinkers cited above in order to create their own maternal images of the Lord (*Mother* 130). Some of the most notable of these medieval monks were The Bernard of Clairvaux (1153), Aelred of Rievaulx (1167), Guerric of Igny (ca. 1157), Isaac of Stella (ca. 1169), Adam of Perseigne (1221), and Helinand of Froidmont (ca 1235); William of St. Thiery (ca. 1148), a black Benedictine who became a Cisterian only later in life. (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 112). Bernard of Clairvaux incorporated large amounts of motherhood imagery in his
spiritual writings. He used the term “mother” not only in when he made references to Jesus, but also to Moses, Peter, Paul and even other prelates and abbots. He even frequently referred to himself as a mother abbot. The maternal image of suckling really drew the attention of Bernard of Clairvaux: “Breasts to him are a symbol of the pouring out towards others of affectivity or of instruction and almost invariably suggest to him a discussion of the duties of priests and abbots [. . .] (Bynum, *Mother* 115).

Anselm also incorporated motherhood imagery into his theological discussions and writings. He not only said that “It is you then, above all, Lord God, who are mother;” he also stated that both Paul and Jesus were mothers. He called them mothers because through their evangelical work they had helped numerous peoples to be reborn. In his mind, Paul and Jesus gave birth to people when they convinced them to convert to Christianity. Anselm also made common the use of the image of the mother hen guarding her chicks beneath her wings as a metaphor for the Lord’s care and protection of his people (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 115).

Medieval religious women also pulled from maternal imagery when they composed their spiritual works. Although, interestingly, according to Bynum they were less prone to doing so than their male counterparts (Jesus as Mother 168). However, while medieval thinkers such as Anselm and others like him used maternal images in order to express their “need and obligation to nurture other men” and a “need and obligation to achieve intimate dependence on God” (Bynum, *Mother* 168). It was not just medieval men who described Jesus through the use of maternal imagery. Many women of the period, such as the nuns of Hefta, also wrote about Jesus in this way. Gertrude the Great for example clearly had maternal visions, such as when she “cradles the baby Jesus
at her breast and has revelations in which all the sisters share in this mothering” (Bynum Mother 209). However, according to Bynum the use of maternal imagery in relation to Jesus was actually less common in medieval women than in men (168). For example, Christ’s maternity is only singularly noted in Mechtild of Hackeborn’s Maude Book when Jesus says: “I shall bear you in me, and I shall be above you as hope and joy, and I shall rear you within me and quicken you with life, and I shall gladden your soul, and make it plump and ghostly feeding as a body is made plump with fleshy fatness (qtd. in Bynum, Mother 363).

There were two exemptions to this rule however: St. Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich. St. Catherine made numerous references to the motherhood of Jesus within her various writings. Within her Dialogue she asserts that Jesus loves and cares for us not only as our wet nurse but also our true mother. She also states that the Father invites us to cling to the breast of Jesus as to our mother who feeds us with her own milk: “As an infant when quieted rests on its mother’s breast, takes her nipple, and drinks her milk through her flesh [. . .] so the soul rests on the breast of Christ crucified who is my love, and so drinks in the milk of virtue” (Dialogue 96, 179). Julian of Norwich in her Revelation, also titled Showings, sees Christ always within the Trinity, as our mother Wisdom. Furthermore, in her mind Jesus was our mother in everything:

We be bowte agen be the moderhede of mercy and grace into our kindly stede wher that we were made be the moderhede of kind love [. . .] Our kind moder, our gracious moder, for he wold al holy become our moder in althyng, he toke the ground of his werke full low and ful myldely im the maydens womb (Revelation 72-73).
All of the early Christian and medieval thinkers listed above grounded their devotional motherhood images in four basic stereotypes. The first of these three is the very inherently physical image of the mother as *natura creatix*. In this particular stereotype the mother is seen primarily as generative; she creates the fetus with her very matter. The second common view of motherhood sees the mother as sacrificial in her generative role; she feels pain and even sometimes dies giving birth. The sacrificial mother is always willing to be a martyr for the sake of her children. The third stereotypical image is that of the mother as a symbol of love and tenderness; it is within her nature to love her own children. Finally, the mother religious writers generally portray motherhood as nurturing; a mother comforts her children with her body and nourishes them with her bodily fluids. (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 131).

Isabel de Jesús employed all of the stereotypical representations of motherhood into her *Vida* in order to discursively construct herself as a “Holy Mother.” Consequently, her autobiographical self is portrayed as generative of life; she is the motherhood of creation. Just as Paul “created” Christians, Isabel’s autobiographical persona “gives birth” to all the people that she brings to the God. Isabel de Jesús also constructs herself as a nurturing mother in that she helps comfort and guide all those to whom she has birthed. A sanctifying mother, Isabel de Jesús, in a move that connected her with Perpetua, the Roman mother who abandoned her children in order to die for God, projected herself autobiographically as one who understands and accepts that, even though a mother might love her biological children, her primary duty is to help the New Adam, humankind, both aspire to, and eventually reach, a state of oneness with the Divine.
A Mother’s Influence

Isabel de Jesús’s *Vida* begins in a very traditional manner. It opens with the introduction to the readers of its author’s first constructed autobiographical self: a devout young girl who had been dedicated to God since the day she was born on a farm located near the village of Arenas in Central Spain. The youngest of Juan Sánchez Agustín and María Ximénez’s nine children, the narrator claims that she was “una hija de Padres, Católicos [. . .] naturales de el lugar de Nabalcán, tierra del Conde de Orpresa,” (“a child of Catholic parents from Nabalcán, a territory of the Count of Orpresa”) (Isabel de Jesús 11.) She describes her family as exceedingly poor; so poverty stricken in fact that she often had to forego shoes when she was out in the fields guarding the sheep that her parents had entrusted with her care, even during the dead of winter. This narrator makes reference to her shoeless state because it helped to put the finishing touches on the holy portrait of herself that she was painting for her readers. Like St. Francis and his “descalsed,” ‘shoeless’ followers, the young Isabel supposedly walked around exposing herself to the elements; doing so brought her joy because it helped her to share in the suffering of Jesus:

Acúerdame, que traía muchas veces los dedillos descabezados, y corriendo sangre, y las piernecillas azotadas de el viento venían de el mismo modo: mi madre me dezía que se lo ofreciesse a nuestro Señor, que siempre que tropecasse, dixisse: ‘sea por amor de Dios: yo lo hazia assi, y parecia que se me alivava el dolor, y sentía un gozo grandísimo’ (Isabel de Jesús 11)

---

11 “I remember that I often went around shoeless and bleeding, my toes raw and my little legs whipped by the wind in the same way. My mother used to tell me that I should offer this suffering to God. I did and it
To increase the newfound joy that she found in this type of suffering she would intensify her experience of feeling pain by purposely walking where she knew there were thorns (Isabel de Jesús 11).

The above passage offers the first hint of the essential role that maternal imagery will play in the rest of the Vida of Isabel de Jesús. In this passage Isabel’s mother tells her young daughter that she should “offer up” her suffering to God. Her mother’s spiritual advice is significant. It alerts the reader to the important role that mothers play in teaching their children to most correctly worship God. In addition, the connection between mothers and suffering is firmly established. Isabel’s mother is portrayed here as knowing intuitively that the best way to demonstrate one’s love for God is to suffer for Him just as a mother suffers for her children.

Isabel de Jesus did not portray her childhood self as being close to her father, although she does have her confide to her readers that she “remembers” hearing that he had always been good to the poor—yet not nearly as kind and caring to them as her mother, María Ximénez, had been. Isabel de Jesús portrays her mother as a compassionate woman, who, although she was far from wealthy herself, like the numerous other saintly mothers inscribed within hagiographic texts, could usually be found “recogiendo los pobres en su casa, calentándolos a la lumbre” (“caring for the poor within her house and keeping them warm”) (Isabel de Jesús 11). If she could not care for them within her own home she would do so in the barn that she had previously set up as a hospital for the poor. The narrator states that María Ximénez cared for the downtrodden in this way because she believed that “venía Dios nuestro Señor en el Pobre” (“that God seemed that it alleviated my pain and I felt a great pleasure.”
came in the Poor”) (Isabel de Jesús 11). This idealized description of her mother’s
beliefs is one of the first indications of Isabel’s concept that God called upon mothers to
care for his people. The picture of a mother helping the poor is a common hagiographic
trope. Isabel de Jesús, who grew up poor, personalizes this trope, however, by
insinuating that God can be found within the downtrodden people that the charitable
mother helps. Her insinuation vindicates the poor, and in the process posits Isabel de
Jesús’s own improbable authority, by invoking the image of the “Old” Spanish Christian
who might have been without money, but was certainly not without God.

Isabel de Jesús’s narrator states in her text that María Ximénez’s behavior rubbed
off on her from a very young age as she also enjoyed helping those less fortunate than
herself. God encouraged her in her efforts to care for the poor. In fact, it was the Lord
himself who directed Isabel to “llevar manta o mantas a casa de unas viudas pobres, para
que se abrigase los Inviernos” (“take a blanket or blankets to the poor widows so that
they can have covers during the winter”) (Isabel de Jesús 11). Isabel de Jesús constructed
herself within her text as a charitable child who tirelessly gives to others while going
without for the purpose of casting herself in the image of a martyr for the poor along the
lines of St. Katherine and St. Elizabeth of Hungary (Ghezzi14). Isabel’s autobiographical
self’s martyrdom was even stronger than theirs because they were wealthy women who
could afford to give to others. The fact that Isabel de Jesús portrays herself as poor but
still dedicated to caring for the even more impoverished, offers proof to her readers of the
extreme piety that mothers are capable of passing on to their children.

According to the narrator, Isabel’s mother’s influence was not limited to caring
for the poor but also extended to other aspects of good behavior. She encouraged her
children to share her own intense devotion to the Virgin Mary, follow the Ten
Commandments, and never take the Lord’s name in vain (Isabel de Jesús 11). Given the
way in which she emphasizes the major role that her mother played in her upbringing, it
is apparent that in Isabel de Jesús’s eyes exemplary maternal influence was the
inspiration for her “correct” spiritual upbringing. Isabel’s mother’s role is in her
daughter’s spiritual upbringing is of paramount importance in regard to the rhetorical
purpose of the Vida. It foreshadows the narrator’s later claim to her mother’s same form
of spiritual authority found through maternal guidance.

Isabel as Divine Spouse

The narrator tells us that Isabel de Jesús was both shocked and disgusted when her
mother married her off—completely against her will—to a much older man. She tells us
that the young woman’s mother’s actions were an act of betrayal not only against her
daughter but also against God because He had already chosen Isabel for his own future
bride: “quando casándome a disgusto, me sacaron de aquel paraisso de delieten que
gozava mi alma en aquel campo. [. . .] Y el mismo Señor, que me ha enseñado, me dixo:
que avía sido casamiento a mi disgusto.” (“When married against my will, I was taken
out of that paradise in that countryside that my soul enjoyed. [. . .] And my Lord, that had
taught me, said to me that I had married at his disgust (Isabel de Jesús 111).

Isabel de Jesús’s description of her marriage to her elderly groom introduces us to
the next character in the story of her life: Isabel as a divine spouse trapped in an all too
human marriage. In this part of the story Isabel de Jesús’s autobiographical self is a
young woman who had to toil everyday during her married life. Isabel de Jesús very
likely spoke through this particular representation of herself in order to rail against the fates which had created her as a woman, made her an object of exchange in the masculine world (Cixous 353), then saddled her with “years of torment” caused by the “heavy burden” of marriage to this man she did not love.

Isabel’s narrating “I” states that her marriage to this older man lasted over thirty years and that during this time she tried her best to eke out a miserable existence for herself and her family. She gave birth to three sons. Tragically, not one of these little boys lived long enough to even learn to talk. After burying the last of her children, Isabel’s narrator insists that she spent the rest of her married life trying to care for her ailing family members. She confesses that caring for not only her sickly husband but also her aged mother and ill older sister greatly tired her out, so much so that she wanted to nothing more than to be free of them (Isabel de Jesús 111). Her fatigue was exacerbated by the many jobs that she was forced to take on in order to provide for these ailing family members. Isabel cleaned houses, worked with a baker, and even briefly flirted with the idea of prostitution when it was proposed by the numerous “hombres deshonestos” (“dishonest men”) who the devil supposedly had incited to pursue her in the interest of ending her poverty in return for sexual favors (Isabel de Jesús 90). She decided, however not to take their money and thereby “offend” God’s Majesty (Isabel de Jesús 19).

Yo me hazia grandissima fuerza a dissimular mi disgusto, procurando mostrar a mi marido gusto y amor. A esto ponía muchas diligencias, procurando vencerme, poniendo mi brazo sobre el almohada, para que le sirviera de cabecera, porque sentía un vacío en el alma grandísimo: me parecía que me procedía de que no le tenía amor (Isabel de Jesús 17).12

---

12 “I worked very hard to hide my dislike, trying to show my husband willingness and love. I went to great lengths for this, trying to overcome my feelings, putting my arm across the pillow so that he could rest his head upon it, for I felt a huge emptiness in my soul: it seemed to me this came from the fact that I felt no love for him” (Arenal and Schlau 217).
Isabel de Jesús’s narrator confides that she survived these years by immersing herself in a mystical world where she, God and Jesús were united in a most divine love that she had first became aware of while she listened to the oral reading of the lives of the saints. This particular narrating “I” insists that she had found a way to model the type of divine relationships that characterized the holy stories that she heard while in attendance as these oratory events. As she acted out her own form of marriage with the Heavenly Bridegroom, she succeeded in making her actual marriage with her elderly husband more bearable. This was not without a downside however since her mystical marriage was supposedly an object of intense suspicion within her small, rural community.

Isabel’s autobiographical persona wanted so much to please her divine Husband that she would stay up all night in the barn, never once moving while praying for lost souls. She claims that she did so because she felt that, even though she was a married woman with responsibilities to her family, her primary responsibility was to carry out God’s orders. The townspeople thanked her for her efforts on their behalf by calling her a “loca” (“a crazy woman”), forbidding her from visiting their daughters, treating her like a town pariah, and even going so far as to chain her up in order to rid her of her “demonic possession.” The narrating “I” states that she in fact so harassed by the townspeople that she has to find alternative ways to go home so that she won’t pass anyone on the street. The passage in which she describes her avoidance of others in this way is quite gripping in its poignancy: “Yo tenía entonces muy en su punto la fama de loca: y porque no me viessen ir, passé por un arroyo, y por unas viñas, travesando vallados, para ir fuera de camino por no topar con nadie [. . .] (“Back then, I had the reputation of a crazy woman:
and so that people wouldn’t see me go by, I passed by a brook, and through yards, crossing over fences, so that I could go out of the way so that I would not bump into anyone [. . .]”) (Isabel de Jesús 106). But confident that God had said to her that: “hija, yo obro en ti una de las grandes obras” (“daughter, I create in you one of my greatest works”) (Isabel de Jesús 26) Isabel’s “I” continued to slave away at her endeavor to transmit her divine husband’s word to the rest of the world. In the meantime, her human husband died, leaving Isabel free to move to a convent and live in seclusion with her spiritual spouse.

Or, so she thought at the time. As the reader very soon finds out, it would be over three years before Isabel finally succeeded in entering the *Convento de Recoletas de Nuestro Padre San Augustín* that the Augustinian order had relatively recently founded in the nearby village of Serradillas. She was thirty-eight years old when she finally succeeded in becoming a member of this esteemed community, or, as she puts it, “la tierra de los vivientes,” the ‘land of the living’ (Isabel de Jesús 111). During the three intervening years between her husband’s death and her entrance into the conventt, Isabel, in true *picara* fashion, had worked her way through a series of “questionable” occupations, among them a maidservant to a wealthy woman, a “maid” within a Franciscan monastery, and finally a governess for a wealthy nobleman. This man was her last employer, principally because he used his influence to get Isabel into a convent after his relationship with his attractive young employee became an object of local gossip and suspicion. Since Isabel entered the convent under a cloud of suspicion, her early years were, unfortunately, anything but tranquil as her fellow sisters for years taunted her with references to her checkered past.
This picaresque-like ending of the description of Isabel de Jesús’s secular life disrupts the otherwise principally hagiographic atmosphere of Isabel de Jesús’s narrative. Its inclusion suggests that Isabel de Jesús was at least somewhat familiar with the picaresque tradition and knew of its keen ability to entertain the reader. Isabel’s use of this popular tradition was twofold. It energized her text while at the same time highlighted the many difficulties that she as a poor widow most likely faced in the years spanning her married life and her time in the convent. Isabel de Jesús’s incorporation of picaresque elements within her Vida reveals the intertextuality weaved into an otherwise principally hagiographic genre.

**Textual Re-Construction of the Wedded Feminine Body**

When we see Isabel’s forced marriage in light of the obstacles that the wedded state very often placed in the path of a would be saint, it is apparent that it had far reaching consequences for her. It forever prevented her from becoming one of the elite group of virginal female saints whose tales of fiercely protected chastity provoked feelings of awe and admiration in the hearts of all those who read them. Moreover, as we see in the following quote, it forever prevented Isabel from traveling away to the “spiritual desert,” i.e. solitude, in search of the same spiritual cleansing and enlightenment that many important saints had managed to find there: “Dezíame esto muchisimas vezes, llamandome con gran ternura, deseoso de gozar el alma a solas. Pero las ligaduras de el matrimonio, me detenían. Yo deseava darle gusto, y me quisiera ir a essos desiertos” (“He said this to me many times, calling me with great tenderness, desiring to enjoy my soul alone. But the bonds of marriage detained me. I wanted to
give Him this pleasure, and I wanted to go to those deserts”) (Isabel de Jesús 112).

However, despite the fact that matrimony prevented her from going to “those deserts,” she held on to the hope that the Lord would one day save her from a fate of domestic obscurity by fulfilling the promise that he had made to her before she married: because he had once told her: “yo te sacaré de entre ellos, y te llevaré lexas tierras, y te verás en la preferencia del Rey” (“I will take you away from them, and I will take you to far away lands and you will see the favor of the King”) (Isabel de Jesús 112). It would be years before the Lord “fulfilled his promise” by, as she puts it, taking her husband away from her by bringing on his death. Though it ended her married state, there were many years in which Isabel de Jesús was a wife. These years were a period that she had to fully account for when she wrote her textual vida and submitted it to the male authorities who would serve as both judge and jury in the case of her sanctity. It would take much discursive maneuvering on the part of the author to transform her years as a wife who lived the carnal life into the image of a holy figure worthy of spiritual emulation. Yet, this is exactly what she manages to do in the pages of Book I of her life writing.

One of these maneuvers involved the re-writing of her years spent as the wife of a mere mortal into years spent as a spouse of God who desperately fought to eschew carnal sexuality in favor of divine love. From the way Isabel de Jesús constructs it, it would appear that her time spent as a newly married woman were years characterized by a would-be virgin saint’s continual conflict between her “conjugal duty” and her desire to

---

13 The term “spiritual desert” refers to a metaphorical state of spiritual isolation and solitude inspired by the historical desert movement that occurred years ago when many early Christians who would later go on to become saints fled to the North African desert in search of an isolated spot for their spiritual contemplation (Lawrence 1). The theme of the desert will be taken up in much greater detail in the chapter about María de San José.
“save herself” for a more divine lover. In the end her obedience to her husband wins.

However, the onerous marital obligation is tempered by the abilities of her imagination because for years she made her “duty” more tolerable by imagining that her husband was St. Joseph.

Estuve en este tormento veinte años, o cerca de ellos, hasta que mi querido San Joseph, permitiéndolo así el Señor, me hizo merced de dar me tanto alivio, que cuando via a mi marido, se me representava el Patriarca: y con esto le cobré nuevo amor, porque era muy devota de San Joseph: y esta devoción la mamé de los pechos de mi madre, que era muy devota deste glorioso San Joseph,y me dezia muchas veces, que siendo la Madre de Dios niña, la desposaron con el, siendo de madura edad. Esto me lo dezia, para alentarme a llevar la carga; que bien conocia ser pesada, aunque yo no me daba por entendida de mi trabajo, por no la dar pena (Isabel de Jesús 16).14

Through this narrative strategy Isabel sets herself up as Mary, the mother of Jesus and wife of Joseph, with the very important qualifier that unlike Isabel de Jesus, although a wife and mother, Mary remained a virgin forever. Although she wrote that she replaced the face of her husband with that of Joseph to make physical contact with him more tolerable yet simultaneously position herself as a chaste wife, paradoxically her attempts to do only reiterate the fact that as a real life married woman, Isabel could never live up to the much venerated image of Mary, not only as virgin-bride but more importantly as virgin wife.

---

14 “I spent twenty years, or thereabouts, in that torment, until my beloved Saint Joseph, as the Lord allowed, did favor me this great grace, that when I saw my husband, he appeared to me as the Patriarch himself. And with this I felt a new love for him, because I was greatly devoted to Saint Joseph; I had suckled this devotion at my mother’s breast, for she was most devoted to this glorious saint, telling me often that when the Mother of God was a little girl they betrothed her to him, when he was of a very mature age. She told me this to encourage me to bear my burden; for she knew well it was heavy, though I would not let on I knew of my ordeal, so as not to make her sad” (Arenal and Schlau 217-218).
As an idealization of purity, the symbol of Mary as virgin wife was juxtaposed to real life married women such as Isabel de Jesus who were more representative of an earthy, carnal Eve than a married still Immaculate Mary. Thus ironically, in attempting to inculcate herself with the saintly figure of Mary through the figure of Joseph, Isabel demonstrates how “no mortal woman could truly attain such perfection as Mary. . . Mary thus came to symbolize difference from mortal women, an Other to be venerated but also to remind women of their imperfection” (Perry 41). The figure of “Mary denied the sexuality of women and promoted the belief that it was dangerous and sinful” (41) by highlighting the imperfection of women like Isabel de Jesus Not even after her husband died could Isabel arrive at a state of spiritual perfection that would reach that of the virgin. Although greatly admired in early Christianity, widows were still considered to be spiritually inferior to virgins, a fact which St. Basil went to great pains to clarify in the years 374-375 (Elm 139).

By the Middle Ages widows had diminished further in prestige in line with the increased emphasis on the role of celibacy that was to become a hallmark of the period. Even after her husband’s death, because Isabel de Jesús lacked the virginity required for the most ideal form of spiritual purity, her body would stand in her way of achieving a

15 “Widows at one point ranked in order above virgins in the Traditio Apostolica. However in the Constitutiones Apostolorum whose final redaction can be dated to around 380 it is apparent that within the arrangement of the ‘sacerdotal lists’ a marked change has taken place. Now widows were considered to form a separate order that was not only inferior to deaconess but also ranked below virgin. This virtual reversal of the widow’s role is further reflected in the functions accorded her when compared to those associated with the virgin and the deaconess in that the widow’s primary function according to the Constituciones is to ‘persevere in prayer night and day’ and to be ‘calm, meek and quiet’” (Metzger 77). Widows were also never allowed to give instruction in the faith, but rather direct all those who have questions of a doctrinal nature directly to the bishops. This reflects a further deterioration of their spiritual authority. Later widows were not permitted to teach in the church, but only to pray and listen to their teachers. It was said that “The widow must therefore know that she is the alter of God and that she has to remain at home, not introducing herself under some pretext into the houses of other faithful to become a gadabout; because God’s alter doesn’t wander about, but is fixed in place” (77).
position of power within the Catholic Church. In addition to causing difficulties in establishing religious authority for herself, her widowhood would have caused her to be viewed harshly even outside the ecclesiastical world. In a secular world even virginal women were warned against the words of “wandering old widows,” that went from house to house spreading their corrupting influence to all.

Perhaps because of the limitations of an “impure body” Isabel de Jesús continually expressed the anxiety she felt at having been torn away from her innocent pastoral existence into the “Babylonia” that was marriage in Isabel’s word (Isabel de Jesús 13). The vow of obedience she made to her husband on their wedding day was one that she could not escape. Although she tried to fight against her “flaca naturaleza” (“weak nature”) in order to retain physical and spiritual purity, the “carga pesada” (“heavy burden”) of marriage was unavoidable. However, it appears that the “marriage debt” is something that Isabel de Jesús did not seem to completely abhor; rather she seemed to get some pleasure from the carnal side of marriage. In her view something about this was sinful; thus she fought against it every day. By exposing her to the pleasures of the flesh, marriage had placed her soul in constant jeopardy. For this reason, as is quite apparent in the passages that follow, Isabel’s married life was characterized by constant battles between her spirit which longed to be pure and her “sinful” flesh which prevented her from being so:
Ay Dios, que desasosiego tenía mi alma [. . .] Ay que menos echava la paz de mi alma que interiormente gozaba en aquellos desiertos con las ovejas que guardava. Ay que lucha! Ay dios que pelea! Sino me hubiera mandado mis Confessores que me detenga, dixera aqui qual me puso la Babilonia del mundo, y quan solicitos andavan los demonios, tomándonos por instrumento a las criaturas, para que me dijesen, que era hermosa, y estaba mal empleada (Isabel de Jesús 13).16

Quería passar de buena gana, por la carga pesada del matrimonio; pero la flaca naturaleza tan inclinada al mal,.me dío grande guerra Ay qué coniratia? Ay qué Demonio tan fuerte! Ay que Ladrón casero! Ay que enemigo. Que puedo decir con verdad, que aunque me han combatido Legiones de Demonios, todos estos no me han hecho tanto mal como mi flaca naturaleza, inclinándome al mal, que como fuy concebida en pecado, quedé sujeta a que se incline la voluntad a pecar y es tan fuerte, que despúes de esta rendidos los Demonios y que ya el alma no los teme por la Bondad de Dios (Isabel de Jesús 14).17

Unable to remain a virgin bride like Mary, Isabel de Jesús resorted to punishing her flesh for causing her to sin. She relates that she tried to take revenge on her body for exposing her to the dangers to her soul found in the carnal world of marriage: “reconocía de las muchas ofensas que le avía hecho quisiera tomar venganza de el cuerpo. Hazíame famosos castigos” (“recognizing the many offenses that I had committed I wanted to take revenge on the body. I inflicted upon myself notorious punishments)” (Isabel de Jesús 115). Some of these “castigos” (“punishments”) included abstaining from bread and

16 “Oh God, how troubled was my soul [. . .]. Oh how I missed the peace of my soul, which once I inwardly enjoyed in those desert lands with the sheep that I tended. Oh what a battle! Oh God what a fight. Had my confessors not ordered me to hold back, I would relate all that the world of Babylon did to me; and how solicitous were the devils, who took human creatures as their instruments to tell me how beautiful was, and how ill-used [. . .]”

17 “I wished to willingly undergo the heavy burden of marriage; but my weak nature, so inclined to evil and to its own appetites, waged a great battle against me. Oh how obstinate! How cruel an enemy! How strong is the devil! Oh, what a household thief! Oh what enemy! What can I say with truth, that although I have fought with legions of devils, all of these have not made me as bad as my weak flesh that is conceived in sin, that inclines me toward evil, I remain subject to what which very forcefully inclines my will to sin, that after being rendered exhausted by these devils and that my soul does not fear them because of God’s goodness.”
water on the days that she could; sleeping on the floor when her husband wasn’t present as well as staying up all night crying and praying for forgiveness for having “ofendido a un Dios tan bueno” (“offended such a good God”) (Isabel de Jesús 115). Isabel had to practice these types of “disciplinas” (“disciplines”) because she had to free herself through castigation of the material body that had participated in the very sinful acts that had placed her in this fiery inferno: “Porque me hallé luego en un fuego, que me abrava toda, sin saber que me hazer: Parecíame que estava en penas de Purgatorio [. . .] Quando [God] me dixo, que avía menester el cuerpo, para que ayudasse al alma.” (“Because I found myself in a fire, that burned all of me, without knowing what to do [. . .] It seemed to me that I was in the pains of Purgatory [. . .] When God told me I would need my body to help my soul”) (Isabel de Jesús 116).

In addition to offering the castigated body as proof of a kind of spiritual purity regained, within her text Isabel de Jesús tries to mitigate the realities of her marital relationship by contrasting the absence of her husband in her bedchamber with the continual presence there of her divine lover Jesus. In this way, she could distance herself from carnal relations yet at the same time link herself with those of a more spiritual nature. Isabel relates that although she had an obligation to remain in her marriage bed for the duration of her marriage she did not always have to share it with her legal spouse because her husband was either sick or working in another town. Instead, she shared it with her divine husband who often would visit her there in the dead of night. It was during these visits that Isabel de Jesus was told that although married to a mortal spouse, it was to an immortal one that she most she owed her loyalty. “Me decía mi divino enamorado: anda acá a la soledad. Que de buena gana dejara yo cuando le veía todo
cualquier persona. Me decía esto muchísimas veces, ‘llamándome con gran ternura, deseoso de gozar del alma a solas’” (Isabel de Jesús 111) (“My divine lover would say to me: ‘Come here, where we can be alone.’ Whenever I saw Him, I would gladly leave behind everything I had. He said this many times, calling me very tenderly, for He was longing to enjoy my soul all alone”) (Arenal and Schlau 202). Although she was a married woman subject to the many distractions of domestic life, in this way Isabel de Jesus constructed herself as a spiritual bride of Christ. Like nuns, who were also brides of Christ, this subject’s first priority was her spiritual marriage. This was acceptable to the early modern reader because love for God and fealty to Him were of much greater importance than one’s loyalty to mere mortals, even one’s husband.

The fact that Isabel’s love for Jesus would have been deemed to be acceptable was a good thing because as her divine lover, the Lord was quite demanding; so much so that her “amor finito” (“finite love”) never seems to be able to satisfy him. He visits his love object both night and day during which time He orders her to love Him more; she of course would try her best to comply because she loved Him as well: “Muchisimas vezes me manda que le ame más: yo quiero dezir a su misma razón [. . .]” (“Many times He orders me to love him more: I want to follow his dictates [. . .]”) (Isabel de Jesús 89). In addition, like a jealous lover God ordered her not to see other men, but rather save herself for Him. “Dios mandóme que huyese de los hombres, porque no se enamorasesen de mí, es celoso por extremo [. . .]” (“God ordered me to flee from men, so that they wouldn’t fall in love with me, for He is extremely jealous […]”) (Isabel de Jesús 41). She later
reiterates this point by saying: “Vuelvo a decir cuán celoso es mi divino amante,” (Isabel de Jesús 187) (“I repeat that my divine lover is extremely jealous”) and “no quiere que trate con los hombres, sino con él” (“He doesn’t want me to converse with mortal men, but only with Him”) (Isabel de Jesús 96).

Yet God does not include Isabel’s husband among the men she is ordered not to see. He was also jealous of the devotion Isabel showed to the Virgin Mary—so much so that He once ordered her to “quiereme a mí más, que no a mi madre” (“love Me more, not my mother”) (Isabel de Jesús 86). He was envious of the food that she ate, the liquid that she drank, and the clothes she used to cover her body. He told her that abstaining from using these things would not harm her because He was all the warmth and sustenance that she would ever need. Significantly, although Isabel willingly gave up food and drink for her divine lover, she draws the line at giving up her devotion to the Holy Mother for Him. The fact that she refuses to give up Marian devotion for even God demonstrates that not only as a woman but also as a mother herself, Isabel is not willing to minimize the importance of the maternal power that Mary symbolized. Although she refused to cease her devotion to the maternal power of Mary, she did come to accept the Lord’s assertion that He was her “centro, y principio, y que [salió] del, y que quiere que vuelva a él, que es mi fin” (“her center and her beginning and that everything came from Him and everything returns to Him, that is my end”) (Isabel de Jesús 88). Her acceptance of God and not the Holy Mother as both the creator of life as well as the one to whom all life returns signals to her confessors that although the power of the maternal is highlighted in
her *Vida*, it is still God who is the all powerful creator and center of life. Her text simultaneously affirms the notion that the maternal role of Mary is an important one and refuses to give credence to the idea that “it is paternity which is crucial” or that “God or man is the creator and not woman” (Ashton 96).

In addition to providing nutrients and warmth for her, Jesus would replace her sinful nature with a new more saintly one. In this way her contact with Him was for Isabel de Jesús a kind of rebirth. Being reborn in this way allowed Isabel de Jesús to unite with the Lord in such a way that the end result would be that she would [cease to live as He lived in her]. Or, as the Lord himself told her, “ya no vives tú, que vivo yo en ti [. . .]” (Isabel de Jesús 106) (“you no longer live, but I live in you”) (Isabel de Jesús 119). In the passage below she connects this newfound union with the Lord with her experience of a form of bodily pain resulting from a arrow of love shot inside of her by the Lord himself. Isabel and the divine spouse were not just united in spirit but also in body. This is important because by uniting herself with God both physically and metaphysically within her text, Isabel demonstrates that she was attempting to exchange a body that had been united with a human being in a “sinful act” for one that was united with God in an act of redemption and glory:

Digo para gloria, y honra de nuestro Señor, que vi dentro de mi alma una Santísima Cruz, yo estaba muriendo de amor, sin saber de que, porque no entendía la enfermedad, solo sentía gran dolor en mi corazón, y era dolor, que procedía de amor. A este tiempo se me manifestó esta benditíssima Cruz con estos flecheros, que estavan tirando al corazón: diziendole yo a mi Confessor, me dixo, que estaba ya unido con el alma del Señor, y que amor flechava al alma, y a Dios (Isabel de Jesús 92).18

---

18 "I say for the glory and honor of our Lord, that I saw within my soul a Holy Cross, I was dying of love, without knowing from what, because I did not understand the sickness, I only felt a great pain in my heart, and it was pain that came from love. At this time the Holy Cross with these arrows that were being thrown at my heart was revealed to me: I was saying to my Confessor, he
Later Isabel further emphasizes the material bond that exists between her and Jesus by describing the way in which Jesus invited her to come into His body by way of the wound located within His side. “Estando mirando un Santísimo Cristo de bulto, me llamó con la cabeza Santísima, y mirándome con los ojos, me enseñó la llaga de su Santísima Costado: mandóme que me entrase por ella, usó esta fineza de amor conmigo, valiéndose de su mismo retrato [. . .] ” (“While I was looking at a carved figure [statue] of the Most Holy Christ, He beckoned me with His most holy head, and looking at me with His eyes, He pointed to the wound in his Most Sacred Rib: He ordered me to enter Him through it, He performed this favor of love with me, by means of His own portrait [. . .]”) (Isabel de Jesús 201). Isabel de Jesús’s use of visual imagery here illustrates that many hagiographic models were visual as well as textual. Thus, in the early modern period, even poor and uneducated women such as this Augustinian had before them a variety of saintly models that they could emulate for the purpose of self-authorization.

By describing her relationship with the Lord as that of a series of intimate encounters between a wife and her dedicated divine husband which ultimately led to a form of spiritual union, it is my contention that Isabel de Jesús attempted to compare herself with many other saintly feminine figures such as St. Teresa de Jesus, St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Gertrude the Great (1256-1302) and Mechtild of Magdeburg (1207/10-c1282 or 1297), who had also described their relationship with the Lord as said to me, that I was now united with the soul of the Lord, and that love had pierced my soul as well as that of God.”
being one of a spiritual marriage. The difference was that these women were not, and had never been, married, while Isabel had been. The narrating subject highlights the husband’s continual absence at the same time that she insists on the Lord’s persistent presence in her life, thus seemingly conveying to the reader that like these other saintly women she too was chosen by God to be His favored intimate partner, and through their partnership she would spread His Word throughout the world. Despite the fact that she was a poor married woman living in rural Spain, God had invested her with the awesome responsibility of being his mouthpiece. He wanted her to be seen so that she could spread his Word. Thus Isabel claims that although she was “afrentada en los pulpitos” (“affronted in the pulpits”) for her reputation as a loca, because “su Santísima palabra no puede faltar” (94) (as his Saintly word could not falter), she diligently tried to spread his word. By constructing herself as bravely persevering in the face of her accusers, in this case her spiritual leaders, Isabel portrays herself as a martyr in the tradition of Jesus’s disciples and the early Christian martyrs who continued to spread his word even though they were constantly held up to public censure for doing so. In doing so she demonstrates that

According to Bynum bridal imagery was even more common in the writings of medieval spiritual women than were images of motherhood. “For women do not use the image of Mother Jesus as one of their primary ways of speaking of union [. . .] To them, Christ is the bridegroom, and all kinds of passionate sexual language serves as metaphor for union with a male God” (Mother 162). Mechtild of Magdeburg for example produced lyrical love poems to God, filled with erotic and nuptial imagery. In these poems, “the soul is God’s bride [. . .] bashful, submissive, weak, hesitant, a maiden who finds courting [. . .] difficult, this soul is nonetheless passionately joined with God in a union that transcends awareness of self or sin and is frequently described in images of heat and light” (229).
ultimately memories are created as the subject reconstructs a sense of identity and while engaging with the world in symbolic exchange and since the ability to recover memories depends upon the material body---there must be a body that perceives and exteriorize the images, sensations and experiences of the external world---embodied subjects are located in their bodies and through their bodies in culturally specific ways (Smith and Watson, Reading 35).

Isabel de Jesús was intent on proving to the reader that it was really her divine spouse who she loved more fully and who returned her amorous feelings tenfold. In similar fashion to many of the women religious whose texts informed her own writing, Isabel de Jesus’s Vida often reads like a romantic novel with Isabel and God playing the principle roles. Adopting and incorporating the images of divine love that she had been infused with when she listened to the public readings of the lives of the saints, Isabel permeates her text with pictures of intimacy and mutual devotion and shared necessity of touch and togetherness. The two talked to each other “como entre amantes se habla con llaneza” (“as lovers speak to each other, with familiarity”) (Isabel de Jesús 84). In addition, like the masculine lover who appears in the pages of one of the many novels of chivalry that were so prevalent in the era in which she lived, the Lord is portrayed as a man completely enthralled with His feminine love object. Christ also appears in the favored guise of a knight errant from the novels of chivalry, so popular at the time that characters, situations, and dialogue become a part of everyone’s imagination: “([. . .] mi valeroso capitán…de armas blancas, caballo blanco, y todo de punta en blanco [. . .]” [. . .] my courageous captain [. . .] in white armor, on a white horse, and dressed in all elegance . . .”) (Isabel de Jesús 80).
Isabel was an imperfect being who had to work hard to fulfill his desires, yet she continually tried to do so. As she strived to love the Lord more fully she often forgot about her marital obligations. For this reason, she does not always follow her mortal husband in the way that the other wives do. She follows God. In the passage that follows she is able to free herself from the “carga pesada” (“heavy responsibility”) of her marital state.

[. . .] que desveladas andaban mis vecinas tras sus maridos: procurava yo hacer lo mismo: pero no me satisfecha nada. Después me hizo el Señor merced de darme luz, descubriendose el alma y manifestandola, que no llena el vacio, sino solo el que la crió capaz para el, y solo el la satisface: las palabras de Dios son obras, y passo el amor de la criatura al Criador: Ibame ya enamorando de su Magestad, y olvidandome de mis trabajos ya passados y lo que antes tenía por carga pesada [. . .] (Isabel de Jesús 17).

In this passage the narrator proclaims that as Isabel formed an intensely intimate relationship with the Lord, she escaped “lo que antes me atormentava, el pensar que avía de vivir siempre y comer y dormir con quién yo había tenido siempre tan poco amor,” (“what before used to torment me, the thought of always having lived and eaten and slept with one that I always had so little love for”) and what “le doblava la pena” (caused her anguish) and made her “tan incapáz de las mercedes que el Señor [le] hazía” (“totally incapable of all that mercies that God had done for her”) (Isabel de Jesús 17).

This is a very important claim for the Augustinian nun to make because it allows her readers—the church authorities as well as the rest of the public—to see her as being intimately connected to a divine spouse rather than to the thoroughly human one that she

---

20 “The neighborhood wives sleepily walked round following their husbands: I tried to do the same but it did not give me any satisfaction. Afterward God made me see the light, discovering my soul and showing it, that it was not full of emptiness, but was made only for Him and only to satisfy Him: I went around enamored of his Majesty, forgetting about my old jobs that used to be such heavy responsibilities [. . .]”
had married. However this self-portrayal is filled with internal tension in that she cannot show herself to have been disobedient to her earthly husband because that would have been a sin. Thus, although this subject tries to present herself as being completely immersed in her spiritual marriage, the fact that she also has to present herself as being a dutiful wife and mother to her family on earth continually undermines her attempts to be seen as a bride of Christ in the tradition of such holy women of the convent as Gertrude the Great, Catherine of Siena and Teresa de Jesús. As she attempts to represent herself like these other women, Isabel de Jesús simultaneously calls attention to the fact that “the allegorized eroticism of bridal mysticism devised by the predominantly male authors of 12th century monastic literature of formation provided a spiritual paradigm that assigned positive value to the female body only in its most physically static state: virginity” (Potkay and Evitt 30). Women such as Isabel whose marital obligations prevented them from remaining virginal were unable to keep their “biological essence from interfering with their devotional practice by preserving the body in its purest form” excluding them from participating fully in mystical marriage (Potkay and Evitt 166). This double bind is a reality that Isabel de Jesus could not ever completely escape either during her life or within her text.

The narrator of the *Vida* stressed the fact that she punished herself for engaging in intercourse with her husband because she wanted to clearly demonstrate to her readers that she had managed to reclaim her spiritual if not her bodily purity which had been stripped from her the day she got married. She could have tried to insist that she had remained pure despite her marital state. There was precedent for this. Several saintly married women and men had been hailed for their ability to remain chaste throughout the
years of their married life. According to Bell and Weinstein, “medieval people believed that a chaste marriage was possible and that it was not a sign of sickness but of sanctity, a self-administered spiritual test of the most severe and relentless sort” (76). Male saints were especially celebrated for their ability to resist the marriage bed, “thereby turning marriage into a private theatre for spiritual heroism” (76). Female saints who had given birth could also be admired. Yet, they were celebrated only when they managed to convince the world that they had lived in the strictest of chastity after the birth of their last child. This was a difficult feat however, which is why not many women were able to successfully pull it off. One women who did was Francesca de’ Ponziani, the patroness of Rome, who took a husband and bore several children. She was greatly admired because after sixteen years of marriage she was able to persuade her husband to live in chastity (Bell and Weinstein 40). However, the existence of Isabel’s long deceased children would have invalidated that claim. Therefore, she faced the same dilemma that other married woman with children who strived for spiritual authority, such as Marjorie Kempe (1373-1450), Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1303-1373) and Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) had faced many years before her.21

21 All three of these medieval women had not only been married for a large portion of their lives but had also borne children. Kempe was born into an upper-class family in the town of Lynn. She was married at age twenty and bore fourteen children. Throughout the years of her marriage she worked to become a spiritual leader. She was not very successful in her lifetime, largely because she was not left a widow at a young age and thus continually had to balance the demands of her religious life with that of her secular one. Birgitta of Sweden was born into a noble family and throughout her marriage successfully balanced personal piety with marriage and motherhood. After being widowed in her forties she became a nun, moved to Rome and worked for papal stability and unity. A member of a wealthy family, the Umbrian Angela of Foligno married while in her early twenties and had several children. She had a spiritual conversion in her thirties. She was able to act on this conversion because all the members of her immediate family died shortly after it occurred. Her marriage and motherhood did not inhibit her rise to spiritual prominence because eventually she became well known for her visions and experiences of union with God (Benedict 4).
Isabel’s sexual relations with her husband are an example of the unspeakable as an element within her *Vida*. Her children are proof that intercourse occurred. However it is not something that Isabel will go into detail about in her writing because pregnancy and childbirth were viewed by medieval and early modern thinkers as evidence of women’s sexual nature. Thus, although she mentions her marriage, she is very evasive in regard to her sexuality. “Estuvimos casados veinte y cuatro años o veinte y cinco, y en este tiempo tuve estos trabajos que dexo aquí declarados, y los que Nuestro Señor sabe que no digo” (“We were married twenty-four or twenty-five years, and in this time I endured those travails that are declared here, and those that Our Lord knows about but that I don’t tell”) (Isabel de Jesús 18). The negative view of maternity was not however limited to seeing it as the stain of a woman’s sin. In pregnancy a woman’s body extended beyond the limits of the classical body. In giving birth it contracted and then emitted both blood and another being. Thus, in the eyes of medieval and early modern society the woman’s body was an example of a grotesque rather than a classical body. Always transgressing its limits, it threatened a spiritual world free from materiality—and the death and decay that it represented—that masculine Christian thinkers of the period had been desperately trying to create.

For evidence of the fact that the pregnant and birthing body was viewed in this manner, and thus as an object of disgust rather than admiration, we only have to read the words of two very important early Christian thinkers: Osbert of Clare who concentrates in his portrait of earthly pregnancy on what he describes as “the sallow, hollow face of the expectant mother; [and what he] foregrounds [as] “the woman’s swollen, distended belly with a description of its ‘vitals torn apart within by the burden of pregnancy” and
Peter of Blois, who “emphasizes his disgust with what he imagines as the emotional disarray and moral turpitude of the pregnant body by admonishing that ‘daughters of this world [. . .] conceive in sin, bear in sorrow, suckle in fear; they are constantly anxious about the living and inconsolably grieved for the dying [. . .]. If you wish to bear, you wish to perish’ (qtd. in Newman 32). Mary’s visibly pregnant body in the nativity plays similarly acknowledges a breaching of boundaries. Yet it also insists on the self-containing unity of that breach. Mary is, after all, absolutely inviolable according to doctrine: immaculately conceived as well as perpetually virgin before, during, and after her conception and birth of Christ. “But in carrying a child she clearly demonstrates the elastic, movable boundaries of her female body” (Potkay and Evitt 119).

A Martyred Mother

As a mother Isabel knew what it was to sacrifice for the sake of others. She knew what it was like to experience pain on behalf of others. Most of all she knew how to guide wayward children back to the Lord. Because of this knowledge gained through actual experience Isabel was chosen by God to spread the message of his love to the world; which is a theme that she comes back to again and again throughout her text. Isabel de Jesús sets it up early by insinuating that her real children were purposely taken from her by God because they distracted her from fulfilling her higher calling as a spiritual mother to all of God’s children.

Tuve también por trabajo a los principios, el quitarle Dios los hijos, que los quería mucho: y lo más que llegué a sentir, fue el perder el último, que ya comenzava a hablar. Hizieronle una cura tan cruel, que basta dezir, que le costó la vida. Solo me quedó de alivio, acordarme, que avía sido por no aver yo querido ofender a mi Dios con él, que se la hizo: que quiso mi desgracia se aficionasse de mi. Sea el Señor alabado que me tuvo de su 101
Ironically, it is because Isabel bore children in her real life that she is chosen by
God to guide all of his children to him. The children that she bore had to die so that she
could take on the very awesome responsibility that God himself had entrusted her with.
Several years after the death of her children God brings about the death of her husband,
because married life was what was preventing her from giving herself completely to God.
She was told as much by a local priest just after she informed him of a vision in which
she saw three nuns: “mostrome tres Monjas; tenían el hábito de mi P.S. Augustin, y sin
aver visto ninguna Monja en mi vida, me aficioné tanto que no podía atender a otra cosa,
porque me dió el Señor noticia que me avía de ver en aquel hábito” (“He showed me
three Nuns; they wore the habit of my Father, Saint Augustine, and without having ever
seen a Nun in my life, I became so inspired that I could not attend to anything else,

22 “I also endured the trial, early on, of having God take away my children whom I loved dearly. And most
painful to me was the loss of the youngest, who was just beginning to talk. They inflicted such a cruel cure
upon the child that suffice it to say, it cost him his life. I was left with only this consolation, that it all came
to pass because I had not wanted to offend my God with the man who carried out the cure upon my child,
for as my misfortune would have it, he took a liking to me. Praise the Lord, who held me in His hand, for
in this way he gave the blessed innocent His eternal glory, and left me free of all cares, as both the one and
the other are no small blessing indeed. I often beg the Lord to forgive me for all the love I bore my
children; I loved them so, that they cast a spell upon me. My having had children has served me full well
in the contemplation of my divine Lover. He has told me that taken together, all the parents there are, or
ever were, or ever will be, still do not equal the love He has for us. May He be exalted forever, as such a
fine Father, and such a good Lover. Would that we could fulfill His love, and turn all the parts of our
bodies to tongues, and clear lenses, to give Him full thanks for everything, for His infinite love; because
every day, I find myself more deeply beholden to Him” (Arenal and Schlau 221).
because my Lord gave me notice that I would be seen in that habit”) (Isabel de Jesús 61).

Upon hearing about her vision the priest responded sharply that she should make her confession and stop thinking about such things. Isabel understood his reaction because she was married at the time and God had not revealed the nuns to the priest: “me repondió con apereza, que me confesasse y me dexasse de aquello: disculpado esta mi Confessor, por quanto era casada, y las obras de Dios no se avian manifestado a él” (“He responded to me harshly, telling me that I should stop this and confess: my Confessor was forgiven for this, because I was married, and the works of God had not shown themselves to him”) (Isabel de Jesús 61)

In the following passage, God does not stop with Isabel’s husband and children but also takes away her mother to whom he caused a “grande enfermedad” (“grave sickness”) as well as her sister, both of which she had to help to care for, leaving her in a “grande soledad” (“great solitude”) (Isabel de Jesús 19). By removing through death all of the people that were in her care, the Lord was fulfilling his promise to her that she would some day be at the front of the pulpit. Her children however were the only ones that in Isabel’s eyes were replaced with someone else. We know that Isabel saw them as being replaced in her comparison between herself and the biblical figure of the widow of Nain.

[. . .] me digo una manifestación que el Señor me ha hecho merced, que yo entendía acerca del amor que los me enseña el Señor a mi modo, diziendo me: que quando a un padre se le muere un hijo, y después de muerto, buelve a resucitar, es tanto el gozo, que el padre recibe, que le parece, que aquel día nació su hijo, y que assi se puede llamar dos vezes hijo. Ayer quatro de Mayo, día de nuestra Santa Madre Mónica, entendi
bien y distintamente esto que voy declarando [. . .] que movido el Señor, de las lágrimas de la viuda de Nain, viando de su acostumbrada misericordia, le restituyó a su hijo la vida, y se le entregó, el qual recibió por nuevo hijo, por quanto ya se le tenía perdido (Isabel de Jesús 227).23

Isabel was also like the mother of St. Augustine who also almost lost her son to death: “[. . .] passó por ella a lo divino lo mismo que avía passado con la viudad de Nain; porque se le restituyó, dándole vida” (“[. . .] the same divine thing happened to her as had happened with the Widow of Nain: because her son was resuscitated, giving him life”) (Isabel de Jesús 227). In biblical times as well as during the early Christian era, losing one’s son, especially one’s only son, would have been considered to be a tremendous loss because widows were most often taken care of by their sons in their old age. Without a husband or a son widows were often destitute. We know that this was also the case of Isabel de Jesús. She lamented the loss of her children not only because she had loved them but also because they were “todos tres varones” (“all three males”) (Isabel de Jesús 19). Even though she later came to realize that their deaths were examples of “misericordia suya” (“God’s mercy”), she knew that without her sons she would probably have a very difficult time in her old age (Isabel de Jesús 19). Just as the Lord resurrected the Widow of Nain’s son so that he could care for her, and just as He promised Monica, St. Augustine’s mother, that He would return her son to her, the Lord

23 [. . .] I am speaking of a vision that the Lord mercifully made to me [. . .] that I understood to be about the love that the Lord teaches me, saying to me: that when a father loses a child to death, and after dying, brings him or her back to life, the pleasure that the father feels is so great, that it seems to him, that his child was born on that day, and that thus he can be called a child two times. Yesterday, the 4th of May, the day of our Saint Mother Monica, I came to understand very well and distinctly what I am declaring, [. . .]. that, the Lord, moved by the tears of the widow of Nain, seeing with his customary mercy, returned her son to her alive, and gave him back to her, and she received him as a new son, as she had already lost hers.”
promised and then gave many spiritual children to Isabel de Jesús. Just as she would have done with her own children had they lived, Isabel became a spiritual mother to all her children and led them to God. She cared for them as much as she would have cared for her own children and it is for this reason that God entrusted her with their care.

In return for her motherly guidance and care, all of Isabel’s children looked out for her and insured that she did not live out the rest of her life in abject poverty and extreme isolation. Therefore, within her text, Isabel de Jesús’ spiritual children created by the union between herself and her divine lover replace the very real human children that Isabel had with her husband, and who God in his infinite wisdom took from her so that she could fulfill her role as his mouthpiece to the world without distractions. Their replacement is the final step in Isabel’s transformation of her real world experiences of intensely domestic life into textually constructed saintly experiences created to replace her limiting identity as real-life wife and mother with the more empowering one of wife

---

24 Perhaps the Lord told me, and promised me many children, I was very happy, because I wanted them very much, because all of mine had died, and I was so happy that they were in heaven praising the Lord that had given them to me, that I wanted to have many to offer to him [. . .] that I was ordered to remain without them, and I gave them up with much pleasure: I went around with these desires, and then what He said happened to me, that the Lord gave me many children [. . .] my husband was already very old and ill: but the Lord that promises keeps his word [. . .]” (74).
of God and mother to all his children on earth. As such, it is an indication of the way in which “medieval culture delimits the value of the female body in ways that make it virtually impossible for flesh-and-blood women to combine motherhood and sainthood” (Potkay and Evitt 60). Isabel’s text thus stands as another example of how in the spiritual narratives of female religious we find with alarming frequency portraits of maternal martyrdom that emphasize a “tragically alienated experience of motherhood” (Newman 247) which are “characterized by pressure for women to abandon, even sacrifice their children in order to participate fully in the religious paths they choose” (Potkay and Evitt 60). St. Augustine suggests that Felicity and Perpetua, two of early Christianity’s most famous female martyrs, at their deaths endured not so much the fear of dying but the sorrow of leaving behind their infant children. Their martyrdom he continues, is all the more glorious, their souls ‘assuredly more virile,’ because they chose martyrdom in spite of their motherhood (Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny* 67). Therefore, by claiming that she both understood and accepted the death of her biological children as proof of God’s favor, and of his desire to free her path of worldly distractions such as a mother’s love for children, Isabel de Jesús authorizes herself through the discourse of maternal martyrdom.

In the eyes of both medieval and early modern society, women that chose to dedicate themselves to their more earthly children were too distracted by worldly responsibilities to be able to be a mother to Christ or to his children on earth and as such were not generally encouraged to try and do so. However those women who left their children “in order to serve God more single-mindedly, found themselves encouraged to think of their new religious life as an opportunity to escape the distractions and demands of their earthly family in order to display a ‘truer’ maternal compassion for the infant
Christ”(Newman 93). Isabel de Jesús could not have portrayed herself as abandoning her children in an act of martyrdom because they had died from natural causes. However, as the narrating subject within her text she was able to attribute their deaths to the will of God. Thus, she was able to use her writing as a way in which to rationalize their young deaths to herself and in the process help herself to better accept their painful untimely demise. Furthermore she presented their passing as evidence of her importance to God and of the plans that he had for her. Because they interfered with this job, God relieved her of her domestic responsibilities, ironically because it is due to them that she was in fact chosen for the job of intermediary between the human and divine worlds in the first place. By sacrificing her own children in order to do God’s will on earth, Isabel follows in the footsteps of God himself who sacrificed his own son through death on the cross so that all His children on earth could be saved from sin and death.

According to Isabel, the children that God gave her were created inside her in the same way that Jesus was created inside the Virgin Mary. Therefore, just as the Virgin Mary had life created within her body at the behest of God, so too did Isabel de Jesús. Thus for this subject the will of God and the grace that it bestows upon the world is one that is both connected to and enabled by, the female body. By using it as a site for the creation of both Jesus and humanity, God infuses it with a special kind of power. It is this power that Isabel highlights over and over again when she reflects upon the miracle of the Incarnation, as for example, in the following passage: “El me ha manifestado, y se encarnó en las entrañas de Santa María Virgen, y que fue concebido por obra de el Espíritu Santo y que esto lo hizo su Magestad una vez para que por este medio podamos nosotros concebirle en nuestras entrañas por gracia” (“He has shown to me, and he was
made incarnate inside the entrails of the Holy Virgin Mary, and that he was conceived by
the power of the Holy Spirit and that this was done by his Majesty one time so that in this
way we could conceive him within our entrails by grace”) (Isabel de Jesús 76).

According to Isabel de Jesús, the children of humanity were entrusted to her care
because having once been a mother herself, God knew that she would be fully capable of
guiding them to God in the same way that their biological mother would:

porque como fui madre de hijos, qual quiera persona que me los mostrava
antes que dava yo tan pagada, y mucho más, que si me los mostrava a mi,
porque los amava tiernamente, tanto, que me olvidada de mi con el mucho
amor con que los amava. Y assí, quanta diferencia avrá de amor a amor, y
de madre a madre y de hijo a hijo

Mothers were the ones most suited to spread the word of God to all. They were the most
able to serve as an example of piety to all their children. Isabel reiterates this point by
once again stressing the fact that it was her mother and not her father who took charge of
her morality, her spirituality and her piety when she was still a child. As she tells it, her
piety did not come from herself but rather from God by way of her mother: “Acerca de la
caridad, quiero dezir, no de parte mia, sino de parte del Señor que me la dio. Como me
dío tan buena madre, inclinóme a tener caridad con los pobres, y esto se me imprimió
desde niña, como lo mamé de mi madre” (“About charity, I want to say, it did not come
from me, but rather from the Lord who gave it to me. As the Lord gave me such a good
Mother, he caused me to be inclined to be charitable to the poor, and this was imprinted
in me when I was a young girl, I learned it from my mother”) (Isabel de Jesús 98). In

25 “because as I was a mother of children, I returned love to whatever person had shown it to me because I
loved them so dearly, that I forgot about myself with all of the love that I had for them. And thus, what a
great bit of difference there will be from love to love, from mother to mother, from child to child” (Isabel
de Jesús 212).
addition, it was her mother who forced her to pray everyday and constantly show her devotion to God: “Digo esto así, porque mi madre me mandó, que tuvieses mucha devoción con su Magestad, y la rezasse el rassario: yo lo hazia, y me ha ido muy bien; porque ella fue mi norte, y mi guia para ir a su Santisimo Hijo, bendita ella sea para siempre [. . .]” (I say this thus, because my mother ordered me, that I was to have much devotion to his Majesty, and to pray the Rosary: I always did, it has gone very well for me, because she was my North Star and my guide for reaching the Holy Son, blessed may she be forever [. . .]) (Isabel de Jesús 85). Just as Isabel’s mother led her to God, so too would Isabel lead God’s children to Him. God knows this because as he tells her, the love that parents have for their children is the strongest kind of love. Thus only parents, especially mothers are the most suited for the job of caring for all mankind and guiding them to their salvation through his son Jesus: “[. . .] él me ha dicho, que todos quantos padres ay, y ha avido, y avrá no llegan al amor que nos tiene” (“[. . .] He has told me, that parents such as I have been have a love for their children that no one else has” (Isabel de Jesús 113).

Sanctifying Mother

So just who are all these children for whom Isabel de Jesús has taken responsibility? They include everyone on earth, but especially sinners because they are the ones who have been the most led astray by the devil and are thus in the greatest need of Isabel’s guidance. She sees these wayward children in many of her visions. One of the most powerful is the one where Isabel sees a field full of prisoners joined together in chains on the way to purgatory (Isabel de Jesús 44). “Veía un campo muy ancho,
llevaban por el muchos presos cautivos, y con unas argollas echadas a los cuellos, iban ensartados unos con otros, a modo cuando llevan galeotes a los lados del camino por la una parte, y por la otra mucha mala gente, que los davan muchos empellones haziendolos ir mas [. . .]” (“I saw a very wide field, many captured prisoners with shackles around their necks, they were chained together like galley slaves and on the other side, many bad people that were pushing them to force them to go farther [. . .]”) (Isabel de Jesús 44). In this same vision God tells her that He has come to Earth in the form of Jesus to save souls from their sins and that it is up to Isabel to transmit this message to those whom He is trying to save, because thus far they have not heard it.

Manifestome mi divino Maestro que le tenía tiranizando el principe de las tinieblas del mundo y que estaba hecho Señor, y dueño del, no siendo suyo, y que por eso salió su Magestad a batalla con el, deziamen quan fuerte enemigo estaba, y que fueran menestar fuerzas de Dios, y hombre, para quitarle lo que no era suyo, y que todos aquellos presos que avia visto, eran almas, que llevaba al infierno, que como Señor absoluto, le quería entregar de todas (Isabel de Jesús 44).26

Isabel does not stop with bringing the word to all the souls who are threatened by sin of God’s salvation through Jesus. In the style of the active Virgin Mary of medieval texts, such as the thirteenth century Milagros de Nuestra Señora, by Gonzalo de Berceo,27 Mother Isabel intercedes on behalf of all her wayward children. She takes their cases directly to God and tries to obtain forgiveness from them on their behalf. Within

26 “My divine Master revealed to me that the prince of darkness was tyrannizing the world and that he had made himself lord and master of it, and because this was not his, his Majesty went to battle with him, he told me what a strong enemy he was, and that forces of God and man were needed in order to take from him all that was not his, and that all of those captives that I had seen, they were souls, that he carried to Hell, that as he was the absolute Lord, He wanted to take all of them from him [the devil . . .] ”

27 In Berceo’s text a very active Virgin Mary that continually intercedes on behalf of humankind is on display. This representation of the Holy Mother is in direct contrast to the early modern Virgin Mary who was generally depicted as passive.
her text there are many examples of these types of interventions. While she was still married she spent all night in a corral praying for “un alma que estava en pecado mortal” (“a soul that was in mortal sin”) because just before she was about to enter the corral she saw a vision of a crucified Christ who was ordering her to intercede on this poor soul’s behalf (Isabel de Jesús 46). While she was up all night praying she saw another vision in which faith, hope and charity of God were all symbolized by women walking among the lost souls—which she described as figures without heads sitting in the dark, thus without God, and shining light on them. In the vision the women then handed a child to Isabel and informed her that it was through this child that all humans would be saved. That these qualities are all symbolized by women further reiterates the fact that for Isabel, although Christ in human form was the one who would save the world, this could not be done without the intervention of women, especially mothers such as herself who felt a special kind of love for their children.

[. . .] me manifesto el Señor muchas almas, espesas como las estrellas, las vi en la región del aire levantandas de la tierra, todas tenían luzes en las manos, vi como les acabavan, que quedavan casi muertas, quedando aquellas almas obscurecidas, aunque no del todo, vi una hermosísima doncella, con un niño en los brazos, llevava consigo una grandísima luz, iba passando por medio de aquellas almas, encendido con la luz que llevaba en las manos a todas las otras luzes, y aunque estavan ya tan apagadas, que no luzian, quedaron con grandíssima luz todas y luzían tanto y echavan de si tal resplandor y hermosura, que era gloria verlas, era aquella doncella la Fe, y aquel niño que llevaba en los brazos, me pareció la esperanza, y en aquella tan hermosa luz, me pareció ser la caridad de Dios, que acude a alumbrarnos, para que no acabemos de desfallecer. Después desto, se me acercó una hermosísima doncella, con un niño en los brazos, era hermosísimo por estremo: representandome a lo que vino al
mundo este divino niño, mandó que aunque era niño tenía potestad para
mandar fue obedecido al punto soltandose de los brazos de su bendita
Madre, se postró en la tierra: luego fueron pasando por encima del,
muchisimos pecados: entendi en aquello, que como el Señor tomó a
quenta suya los pecados del mundo (Isabel de Jesús 46-47). 28

After Isabel sees this vision she sees another one involving the soul that she was
directed by God to save. This soul is in hell and she is supposed to save it just as the
women in her vision were trying to save all of the souls sitting in the dark. She stays up
all night praying for this soul. This caused her great problems with the rest of her
community, including her confessor. When they found her lying prostrate and
completely unresponsive in the corral they think she is insane and/or possessed by the
devil. Ironically, it was the confessor for whom Isabel was praying. After being told that
he is the one in her vision whose soul is in trouble her confessor says he must be the one
to confess even though he has been sent to confess Isabel. Thus in the confessor and
Isabel we see an example of a significant role reversal. Sent to save Isabel, it is Isabel
who saves her confessor. Empowered by God, Isabel takes on the confessor’s role of
intermediary between the human and the divine. In her text she becomes the new Adam
(Jesus). “Me trocó del vestido del Adan viejo, vistiéndome con la vestidura de nuevo

28 The Lord showed me many souls, as thick as the stars; I saw them high in the sky, raised above the
earth, all holding lights in their hands; I saw them high in the sky, raised above the earth, all holding lights
in their hands; I saw how those lights were snuffed out, so that they were left almost dead, leaving these
souls in the darkness, though not entirely. I saw a most beautiful damsel, with a child in her arms; she
carried with her a vast light. She went about amongst these souls, and with the light she carried in her
hands, she was kindling all the other lights. And though they were so nearly snuffed out that they no longer
shone, they all were left with the most brilliant light; and they shone so, and cast much splendor and
beauty, that it was glorious and a great consolation to see them; they shone so that it looked like heaven. It
occurred to me that this maiden was Faith, and the child she carried in her arms seemed to me Hope, and in
that lovely light I seemed to see the Charity of God, which comes to illuminate us so that we may not
perish. After this, a beautiful young woman with a child in her arms came up to me, she was beautiful in
the extreme: she represented to me that this divine child came to the world. She ordered that although but a
child, He was to be obeyed from the point that He leapt out of His blessed Mother’s arms and landed on
Earth. Later after committing many sins, I came to understand that the Lord took on all the sins of the
Adan) (“He took the old Adam’s clothes off of me, dressing me with the clothing of the new Adam”) (Isabel de Jesús 31). Just as it was Jesus’s job to lead all the wayward children back to God, so too is it Isabel’s. Isabel’s role is of great importance because although Jesus is the Son of God in human form sent down to save the human race for the people have sinned against God. As Jesus tells her, they have not followed Him with their whole hearts. Rather they have largely forgotten about Him and the promise of the incarnation (Isabel de Jesús 35). It is up to Isabel de Jesús to remind them. Isabel does exactly this with the soul of her very own confessor whom she has been ordered to pray for, and in praying for him, she begins to fully understand that he is as much her son as if he had been created in her own womb. She loves him as a Mother and it is for this reason that Jesus took her as his instrument and asked her to pray for him as well as many others like him. Isabel alludes to these things in the following passage:

Digo yo; miserable pecadora indigna de que el Señor me tomasse por instrumento; para dar luz a esta alma, que puso tanto afecto su Divina Magestad, y fuerza en mí, que me desazia en lágrimas, pidiendo a Dios, que pussiesse los ojos de su misericordia en mi hijo, que no permitiesse que me faltasse en su rebano y que faltarme a mí, era perdida también para él; por quanto le avía él criado, y redimido. Digo, que se movió su Divina Magestad por si mismo, y le hizo a él, y a mi la señalada merced, que dexo dicha, la qual no mereci yo alcanzar, y assí confieso otra vez, que fue su Divina Magestad movido por si mismo, que nos le puede negar: esto conozco ser assí, y también conozco dentro de mi alma, que es hijo de mi dolor, y fruto de mis lagrimas, porque hasta que bolvió esta alma a Dios, no se enjugavan mis ojos, ni sossegava mi corazón, y assí le llamo por esta ocasión hijo mio; porque fue engendrado, con afecto de amor en mi alma, imprimido de la mano de Dios, y me tiene manifestado, que es tanto el gozo que tiene, quando una alma ha llegada a estar muerta en la culpa del pecado, y restituyendola su Divina Magestad a su gracia, la buelve a dar vida nueva, me tiene dada luz, que es doz vezes hija de su Divinida Magestad, y que es tan poderoso, que todas las vezes; que le falto su divina gracia, bolvendose a él, recibe el alma vida nueva, y es nuebamente hijo, siempre que recibe la divina gracia de Dios: el qual
como Padre amorosisimo se goza tanto, que quiere que le den la norabuena de la obeja perdida, por quanto se precia de buen Pastor, como de verdad lo es (Isabel de Jesús 225). 29

As a spiritual mother in charge of securing the eternal salvation of her charges, Madre Isabel above all concerned herself with the correction of sinful behavior. She did not always take a stance from on high. Rather she used herself as an example and affirmed her authority by saying, “I have sinned, thus I know what it is like to be in your position and because of this knowledge I represent your best hope for salvation. She would have been believed because in Catholic Europe of her time there was ample room for a sudden shift from sinner to saint. Biblical prototypes existed: Mary Magdalene was honored throughout Christendom as the fallen woman who became one of the inner circle of Jesus. Through reformed sinners-saints “Christ guaranteed that repentance was never too late, that no sinner was beyond the pale of God’s compassion” (Bell and Weinstein 105). Yet, Isabel de Jesús had to be careful with this analogy, because although the faithful were in awe of all wonder-workers, “the main hagiographers reserved veneration for those who had been uncommonly virtuous and ascetic from an early age, and they practically ruled out any one who turned to a holy life after many years of blatant sinning”(108).

29 “I say, miserable sinner that I am, the Lord took me for an instrument in order to give birth to this miserable sinner, that his Divine Majesty put so much affection and strength in me, that I dissolved in tears, asking God, to put his eyes of mercy on my son, that he not permit that I lose him in his flock. This I know thus, and I know it within my heart, that he is the son of my pain, and the fruit of my tears, because ever since this soul has been returned to God, my eyes have not dried out, nor has my heart calmed down, and thus on this occasion I called him my son, because he was engendered, from the love within my soul, put
Isabel does not limit herself to just saving powerful people whose souls are in jeopardy. Throughout her text she intercedes on behalf of a variety of different people, including girls who are “in trouble,” the men who got them in trouble, priests who have sinned against God and nuns who have somehow lost their way. Isabel does not exclude anyone, not even women such as the following who had committed the sin of masturbation: “[. . .] yéndola yo a visitar [. . .] se me ofreció, que la había tentado el espíritu de la fornicación, que por verguenza usó mal de sí misma, y como no hubo varón de por medio, entendió que no había entrado en pecado, y no la tenía confesado” (Isabel de Jesús 72-73) (“[. . .] I went to visit her [. . .] it occurred to me that she had been tempted by the desire to fornicate, and that she had used herself shamefully, and because there was no man involved, she believed that there was no sin, and had never confessed it [. . .]”) (Arenal and Schlau 207). They were all her children and through her they would all be saved.

The harassment of the townspeople makes a martyr out of Isabel de Jesús, in the sense that it makes her like Jesus Christ himself who was also shunned by the many people who failed to understand his divinity. Isabel highlights this comparison between her suffering and as an imitation of the crucifixion in a compelling description of his death on the cross. As she tells it, on one occasion she sees “Cristo bien nuestro” (“our good Christ”) down within her soul (Isabel de Jesús 63.) He is wearing his cross of thorns and as he reaches the very point of death he asks her for a sheet to put over Him. His body is wracked with the pain of the sins of humanity. In the vision, Isabel rests his head over the pillow of her heart. In doing so she is able to feel his tremendous pain, so

there by the hand of God, and the pleasure that he has when a soul that has become dead because of sin has
much so in fact that it feels to her as if the thorns of his crown have penetrated her own heart (“como se me entran unas aquellas benditas espinas en el corazón” (“how those blessed thorns are entering my heart”) (Isabel de Jesús 64). Their shared pain has caused God to be in her body; it has caused both their bodies and souls to unite. This unification, brought about by their shared suffering on behalf of humanity, is symbolized by the presence of a brilliant light, which had the appearance of a great sun that she sees deep within her soul. This son is the justice of the Lord, and it is not just for her, but as she is God’s intermediary and messenger, it is to be passed on to all (Isabel de Jesús 64). Once people began to see her as his intermediary she will see herself as empowered because she will finally begin to understand what God meant when he told her that “sin mi no eres nada, pero conmigo ¿quieres que te diga lo que eres? [. . .] conmigo eres más que esos Cielos, con esos adornos que tienen de estrellas, sol y luna, eres conmigo una Madre de Dios” (“[. . .] without me you are nothing, but do you want me to tell what you are with me? [. . .] with me you are more than those heavens adorned with stars, the sun and the moon, with me you are a Mother of God”) (Isabel de Jesús 57).

**Bodily Connections With “Jesus as Mother”**

By portraying herself as the town “loca,” avoided by all and harassed by many, within her text Isabel de Jesús forges connections not only between herself and Mary but also between herself and Jesus Christ. It is important to point out that the suffering Christ that she compares herself to is not a masculine one but rather a feminized, maternal one who like Isabel de Jesus suffers the pains of childbirth in order to save souls as well as become reinstated to his Divine Majesty by grace has been shown to me” (Isabel de Jesús 225).
the pains of breasts engorged with milk but with no children to nurse. For this reason, while Jesus is most vividly characterized in the autobiography as a lover and Isabel de Jesus identifies most strongly with him when he appears “como una madre con sus hijos” (“as a mother with her children”) (Isabel de Jesús 81). The link to Jesus through maternal imagery is so fluid that she almost appears to become one with him. On one or two occasions, she represents the Lord in relation to her children as the Pope in relation to the faithful: “Me dijo el Señor [. . .] que era Redentora de mis hijos” “The Lord told me [. . .] that I was the Redeemer of my children”) (Isabel de Jesús 305). Madre Isabel’s use of maternal imagery is perhaps her most inventive and effective equalizing device. Like she herself had done years before, the Lord suffers the pains of childbirth in order for His children on earth to be reborn through Him. He continues to feel pain throughout his life, and he demonstrates to Isabel de Jesús that these pains are like the pains that come from the act of childbearing. Isabel knows what these pains feel like, because as she points out to her readers, she has felt these pains herself:

Manifestavame los dolores acerbísimos de su santa pasión: pareciame que estava su Magestad como una muger que está con dolores de parto, que no cabe en parte ninguna: quisiera que le acompañaran sus hermanos en aquella tribulación: esto ha passado por mi, como fuy casada, y assi hablo de experiencia [. . .] (Isabel de Jesús 40-41).30

30 “The lord showed me the severe pains of His Holy Passion: it seemed to me that his Majesty was like a woman in unrelenting labor pain from childbirth: he wanted all of his brothers to accompany Him in that tribulation: this has happened to me, as I was married, and thus I speak from experience, that only I had suffered that task, and that my brothers could not help me in it [. . .].”
Once when Isabel sees that Christ’s back is full of wounds he tells her that because she loves him, his back no longer bothers him. This remark reminds Isabel of how women giving birth feel; they suffer great pain in labor, but afterwards forgive the child who caused it, because of love. Isabel understands this sentiment because it reflects how she felt after giving birth to her own three children. Her labor was difficult and painful but it was above all an act of love that according to Isabel is comparable to Jesus’s suffering on the cross. In making this comparison Isabel vindicates the labor of childbirth in that rather than just a grotesque event in which the expanded body contracts, feels great pain, bleeds profusely and sometimes dies, it becomes an act of love and sacrifice in which a mother becomes Christ-like in her willingness to endure great pain and face possible death for the sake of others producing new life. She expresses it the following way:

Otra vez me hizo el Señor merced, que le vi con los ojos del alma por las espaldas, tenía las de las llagas como una criva, que quebrava el corazón el verle, tanto, que quisiera desviarme por aver yo sido la causa de gran tormento por mis grandes pecados, el me llamó con su acostumbrada caridad, diziedome, no te vayas, mira que atrueque de que me quieres, no me duele ya nada, benditas sean sus entrañas de caridad, a mi me representó lo que diré aquí, como fui madre de hijos, quando me vía en el parto, y en el trabajo sentía mucho; pero era un sentimiento con amor, después que me via con aquel hijo salido de mis entrañas, me olividava de todo el trabajo, porque canpeava en el corazón el amor, ofreciaseme que lo mismo que avía passado por mi, passó primero por Cristo bien nuestro, pareciame, que dolores fueron de parto los que su Divina Magestad padeció en el árbol santisimo de la Cruz para darnos nueva vida, sacándonos de no ser al ser de su divina gracia, y después de aver passado los dolores de su acerbisima passion como se vío Rendentor de las almas, que es ser padre (78-79).31

31 "Another time, the Lord granted me his favor, and I saw Him with the eyes of my soul, from behind. His back, with the wounds that were in it, looked like a sieve, and it broke my heart to see him, so badly that I longed to turn away, for I myself was the cause of such awful torment, on account of my great sins. He called me with His charity, saying: ‘Don’t go, for you see, in exchange for your love, it no longer hurts me.’ Blessed be his heart for the charity it holds. Then I understood His meaning just as I shall here relate: as I myself was the mother of children, when I came to childbed, and to my labor, I suffered greatly; but it
In the passage above we see that Isabel de Jesús equates Christ’s crucifixion with childbirth, because he suffered and died in order to bring forth new life. Isabel de Jesús’ feminization and materialization of Christ does not stop with the portrayal of him suffering the pains of childbirth however. Later, she goes on to make comparisons between Jesús and all the mothers like her who willingly took on the grave responsibility of caring for the children that they had just brought into the world. As mother Jesus comforts his small children and takes great pains to protect them from harm. In an image taken straight out of the Bible, Jesus appears to Isabel as a mother hen that keeps her children under her protective wing: “Mira que soy yo; y que soy comparado a la gallina, que amparo a mis hijos debaxo de mis alas” (95) (“Look it is I; I am compared to the hen for I protect my children under my wings”). St. John Chrysostom (347-407 AD), orator and patriarch of Constantinople, gives evidence of this tradition in not one, but several of his writings. In his Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Mathew he quotes Matthew and employs that same biblical image of God as Mother Hen. All of these stereotypes are on display in the following prayer of Anselm, found in his The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm:

“And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? are you not the mother who, like a hen, Gathers her chickens under her wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother;

was suffering with love. And later, when I held the child born of my womb, I entirely forgot the labor that child had put to me. Because in exchange for the pleasure of the babe, I considered all labor and suffering as well spent indeed, because love had triumphed in my heart. It occurred to me that the same thing that had happened to me, happened first to Christ our blessed Lord. Then it seemed to me that it was the pain of childbirth that His Divine Majesty suffered there on the most Blessed Cross, so as to give us new life, freeing us from no life, to the life of His divine grace. And after He had suffered the pain of His most bitter Passion, he now became a Redeemer of souls, which is to say, a Father” (Arenal and Schlau 219).
for both they who are in labor
and they who are brought forth
are accepted by you.
You have died more than they, that they may
Labor to bear.
It is by your death that they have been born,
for if you had not been in labor,
you could not have borne death;
and if you could not have died, you would not have
brought forth.
For, longing to bear sons into life,
You tasted of death,
And by dying you begot them.
You did this in your own self,
Your servants by your commands and help.
You as the author, they as the ministers.
So you, Lord God, are the great mother” (153-54).

In Isabel’s text in addition to the comfort and protection of his body Jesus offers
nourishment for his children, and the food that he gives them comes from his own
breasts, just as a mother’s milk comes from her own breasts whom she understands are
the gentiles. At one point Madre Isabel writes that she sees Jesus nursing dogs from his
engorged breasts and that He tells her that He has to do so because His own children have
taken ill as a result of their refusal to suckle from his breasts causing engorgement (Isabel
de Jesús 81-82). By refusing to drink from the breasts of Jesus offered to them, God’s
children have refused to avail themselves of His mercy. Their refusal has caused Jesus to
acutely feel the pain of engorgement. Isabel is quick to point out that she knows how
Jesus feels because she herself has felt the pain of breasts left engorged with milk
because there was no child to nurse from them.

Manifestome el Señor un día su corazón con santissimo, diziendome, que
estaba cargado y que no hallava quien le descargasse los pechos: yo
entendi que los pechos de su misericordia, por lo que me manifesto que
me dixo, que por aver enfermado sus hijos, avía dado los pechos a los
perros, entendi, que como el pueblo de Dios vivo, enfermo, no queriendo
recibir su divina palabra le desobligaron los hijos, que el tanto amava, y que no queriendo sus divinos pechos, los dio a los gentiles, que eran los perros: yo lo entendi muy bien, porque avia passado por mi quando enfermavan mis niños, y quando se moría dava mis pechos a los hijos agenos, y a los mismos perros, porque no cabe la leche en los pechos, y esta hirviendo por salir, y como la leche de la misericordia de Dios estava en el encendido amor, cociendo por comunicarle; para hazernos bien no se puede detener el corriente del apoyo de su infinta misericordia; sean dadas las gracias a su divina Magestad; deseles su divina Magestad por todo el genero humano, pues a todos alcanza el apoyo de su misericordia, sin exceptuar (Isabel de Jesús 82).32

In the passage above Isabel directly relates her own lived maternal and embodied experiences with those of Christ. As she does so she makes intimate female body parts such as the breasts visible within her text. By doing so she re-valororizes the feminine body as well as the very physical female experience of breast feeding which before had been viewed askance given that it involved the emission of womanly fluids—symbols of feminine disorder—into the world. The narrating subject transforms the feminine body from something to be transcended into the vehicle for transcendence. In the process she demonstrates quite clearly that “female mystics are similarly interested in the experiential quality of vision but reveal through their writings a demonstrably more somatic kind of mysticism: one that understands the body ‘not so much as hindrance to the soul’s ascent’ as the opportunity for it” (Potkay and Evitt 61).

32 “My Lord showed me His holy heart, telling me, that He was full and that He could not find anyone to ease His breasts: I understood that His merciful breasts, by what He had shown and told me, that because His children were sick, He had given His breasts to dogs, I understood that the people of God, sick, were not wanting to receive His divine word, they were disobeying Him, that He loved them greatly, and that they did not want His divine breasts, He gave them to the gentiles, who were dogs: and I understood very well, because this had happened to me when my children got sick, and when they died I gave my breasts to other children, and even to dogs as well, because there was no room for the milk in my breasts, and they were surging to leave, and as the milk of mercy was burning with love, suffering to communicate; so that we know well that the current of His support of His infinite mercy cannot be detained; thanks to the grace of the divine Majesty; His divine Majesty desires to give it to all people, so that all will know of the protection of His mercy, without exception” (Arenal and Schlau 199).
Other visions of a maternal God involve bodily fluids like as milk and blood, (which in medieval and early modern terms were considered to be interchangeable). These establish a direct link between Jesus and Madre Isabel. As Arenal and Schlau point out in *Untold Sisters*, “when her mouth bleeds when she takes communion, Madre Isabel replaces Christ’s blood with her own” (199-200). In their analysis “her bleeding mouth symbolizes her ability to spill blood in sacrifice for others in the same way that Christ’s bleeding wounds are symbolic of His offering of himself to all humanity” (199-200). In creating inextricable connections between herself and Jesus through the imagery of His milk of mercy and His blood Madre Isabel played with the fundamental symbolism of Christianity and “reversed the traditional male and female roles [. . . but] also inverted the hierarchy of the Church” (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 203). She shares this in common with Catherine of Siena, who looked upon herself as “a mother who yearns over the sons and daughters of her womb,” who “loved and labored for her people and who “with tears and groans” said that she would give birth… until death as God will give me the grace” to the word of God (letter T 126 to Monna Alessa and Cecca).

Isabel de Jesús had experienced maternity. She knew what it is like to suffer and fear death in childbirth. She knew what it is like to feel the pain of engorgement when one’s children are not there to suckle. She knew what it is like to try one’s best to protect their children from harm only to lose them to death anyway. As we see from the following declaration of motherly love and protectiveness, through her own experiences she knew what it is like to be a protector of children and it is a responsibility that she holds dear to her heart. Like God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary, in her text Isabel stops at
nothing to save the children that were created within her and that she gave birth to amid great suffering. She even becomes a martyr for them. At the same time, in a move that links her with one particularly important medieval and early Christian saint, Perpetua, who abandoned her infant son to her family in order to die for God at the hands of the Romans (Salisbury 4). Like Perpetua, allows her own children to be abandoned so that she could become a new mother to all of the new “hijos de su alma.” As we see in the next few passages her sacrifice of her biological children is not in vain as with them safely in heaven, she is left free to lead many more to God’s loving arms:

Ea, hijos de mi alma, redimidos con sudores, y sangre de Cristo nuestro bien, […] No os olvidéis de esta miserable madre […] Yo os doy mi palabra de Madre, y Madre pecadora, de no olvidarme jamás de vosotros [. . .] es mi gusto llorar por mis hijos, sin consuelo, para imitar en mi llanto a la Hermosa Rachel. Yo enderezaré a mi Dios mis suspiros, y lágrimas, pidiéndole, que por su amor, me favorezca a mis queridos hijos, y a mí con ellos [. . .]. El mismo recuerdo que hace nuestra Santa Madre la Iglesia al hombre, ése mismo hace a la mujer; y así se tengan por avisadas, porque también necesitamos las mujeres, de procurar el remedio para nuestras almas, como los hombres, y si no más, no menos. Que aunque soy mujer, no quiero volver por las mujeres, que antes, por serlo yo, y por parte que me ha alcanzado de ser tan riuen como soy, pudiera decir mucho mal, pero al fin, todo el mundo es uno, y lo mismo digo por la naturaleza humana, que por ser toda una, estamos todos, hombres, y mujeres, sujetos a unas mismas caídas (Isabel de Jesús 320-22).33

[…] Va para treinta años, que la Real Majestad de Dios nuestro Señor, me hizo merced de darme cargo, de que o same, haciéndome madre vuestra, […] que estando yo con ansias de hijos, me los prometió, y me

33 “Come then, my beloved children, redeemed by the sweat and blood of Christ our God [. . .]. Do not forget your wretched Mother [. . .] I give you my word as Mother, this sinning Mother, never to forget any of you [. . .] it is my delight to weep for my children, inconsolably, so as to imitate the beautiful Rachel with my weeping. I shall address my sighs and tears to God, asking Him for the sake of His love to favor my children for me, and me with them [. . .]. The same reminder which our Holy Church makes to man, she makes to women; and thus women should be advised, for they too are needed to procure salvation for our souls, as are men, and if indeed no more so, neither any less. For though I be a woman, I have no wish to take women’s part; rather indeed because I am one, and because of the lot that has fallen to me, being as vile as I am, I could speak much ill; but after all, the world is one, and so are all—men, and women—subject to the same lapses” (Arenal and Schlau 226).
Isabel de Jesús knows that there is no other path for these children accept the one that leads
directly to God: “Yo tengo entendido, que no hay otro camino, sino el de la humildad, para
obtener nuestra salvation; porque Christo bien nuestro fue por este camino, y quiere
que a imitación suya, vamos nosotros por él” (“I understand that there is no other way,
except the way of Humility and that by imitating Him, we come nearer to Him).

Knowing that God is the only path to their salvation, like Jesus she guides the “lambs” to
God. If one gets lost along the way she is quick to redirect the path of the “oveja
perdida” (“lost lamb”) (Isabel de Jesús 238).

Within her text Isabel de Jesús transforms domestic space into empowered space.
This transformation is a much needed part of her autobiographic self-construction
because although many saints were married and had children, “marriage and motherhood,
[however,] constituted the prehistory of their mystical experiences, a past they thoroughly

---

34”[. . .] It is nearly thirty years ago that God our Lord, his Royal Majesty, granted me the favor of giving
me this charge, that I should love you, and He made me your Mother [. . .] for when I so longed to have
children, He promised them to me, and they were given me by His most generous hand. After I had taken
communion, in the days when I was married, you would so take possession and cause uneasiness in my
soul that I began to feel grave concern for your help and your salvation. I would seek ways to be alone
with God, so as to discuss with Him, as with my Father and yours, what road to take so as to render to Him
a good account of you. His divine Majesty took charge of the matter, removing those worldly obstacles
that hindered me, that I might take pleasure in you. And when I was left a widow, within three short
months, I went myself into exile for your sake, leaving my land, desiring to do you good in some way,
without ever returning there again, desiring to undergo trials and injuries for you, in reverence to Christ”
renounced” (Frugoni 135). As such, it was something rarely mentioned in the accounts of these married saint’s lives. Emphasis is placed on what came after marriage and children, usually widowhood or a renouncing of marital relations in favor of celibacy and a much more important spiritual relationship and physical union with God. As Lapo Mazzei noted of Birgitta of Sweden, ‘Widowhood was the time of her greatest perfection [. . .] when human affections and ties with husbands were suppressed” (135).

Isabel de Jesús however refused to erase her past. In her text it is her motherhood rather than her widowhood that is highlighted and that is espoused as her suitability for spiritual authority. Thus, physical experience is upheld as that which leads to more true spiritual experience, in the end making it appear as if what was most empowering for the married, unsealed saintly figure was emphasis on and not erasure of the “concreteness of perception and sensation to be expected from women whose bodies had known. . . . impulses and acts” closely related to both marriage and motherhood (135). For this reason, rather than being omitted or hidden between the lines, images of pregnancy, nursing and childcare, all of which are associated with the corporeal as well as the maternal, are such strong and compelling tropes that are pervasive throughout Isabel’s entire text.

Conclusions: The Reception of Isabel de Jesus’s Vida

Isabel’s strategy of highlighting rather than diminishing her lived bodily experiences in the end proved to be successful. We know this from the glowing words of approval from her confessor as well as the Inquisitional authorities that greeted the

(Arenal and Schlau 226).
publication of her spiritual *vida*. For example, the official title of her text is immediately followed by glowing approvals that today stand as testimony to Madre Isabel’s success at convincing her devoted followers, her spiritual superiors and ultimately the Inquisitional examiners that she was a saintly figure rather than a demonic or demented one. Even the very highest authorities could not have helped but be moved by her discursive spiritual authorization. The Examinador Synod del Arzobispado de Toledo says that not only had he not found anything unorthodox in her writing but that after thoroughly examining her story he found Madre Isabel to be a “maravillosa mujer a tan familiar trato con su Divinidad Magestad” (“a marvelous woman very familiar with His Divine Majesty” (Isabel de Jesús 142) especially selected by God to gather up the lost “lambs” of Spanish society and bring them back to the orthodox Christian flock and as such, this text of her life needed to be set free for all to see. In addition, in his written expression of approval the very same confessor who once thought that she was possessed by the Devil tells the readers that they will be so moved by Isabel’s story that they will finish the text with a strong desire to try and model themselves after her. Because she had at one time been seen as a social outcast, if Isabel had been alive to read the following laudatory words of the confessor who had once condemned and castigated her, it would have seemed to have been a very sweet form of spiritual vindication.

While some of the church elders were certainly not pleased with the decision to present Isabel de Jesús as a model for emulation, others understood that, in those turbulent times, when so many Christians were being tempted to join heretical cults or simply falling away from the church, it might be auspicious to publicize such naively charismatic eloquence. “Isabel de Jesús was valuable to these church leaders because she
could speak to peasants and laborers in their own language as many ecclesiastics could not; hopefully by doing so she could prevent them from being tempted by unorthodox religious views” (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 193). More than anything however it was the very re-presentation of herself as a spiritual mother that in the end guaranteed a position of authority for Isabel de Jesús.

Given the early modern Spanish masculine subject’s intense desire to prevent the eruption of the feminine in just about every facet of social life, it may seem strange indeed that a text that celebrated both motherhood and the maternal body could in fact be held in such high esteem by the male clergy that reviewed it (Isabel de Jesús 72). In a world in which separation from the mother was deemed necessary in order for the “modern” masculine subjects to doff their agrarian communal identities and take on separate subjectivities that are centered on the view of the self as an autonomous and independent entity fully in charge of its own consciousness and destiny, it would certainly seem that overly feminized subjects such as the one Isabel de Jesús constructs in her text would have been treated with utter scorn rather than utmost respect. This would especially seem to be the case when we consider the way that Saint Anne, (believed by Catholics to have been the mother of the Virgin Mary and the Grandmother of Jesus,) who at one time enjoyed remarkable devotion in the medieval period in Spain, saw her status plummet in the early modern era largely because of the focus that her cult placed on her maternity (Black 5).

The suppression of St. Anne’s cult in early modern Spain as well as others dedicated to female saints, especially those who were associated with motherhood and domesticity, coincided with the promotion of a number of important male saints, as well
as frequent attempts to contain and control women (Black 13). Despite the fact that Isabel de Jesús’ text was published during an era characterized by its repression of the feminine, and especially the maternal, Isabel’s Vida which placed great emphasis on the role of the maternal body in the construction of spiritual authority and imitable saintly behavior was held in high of esteem by those who reviewed it after her death. The question is why?

The answer to this question could lie in the contradictory nature of the fear of the mother that was prevalent in early modern Hispanic society. Given that institutionalized male hysteria originates from “unresolved desire for and against the mother,” (McBride 179) it is apparent that although (as Ruth El Saffar has so convincingly argued,) Spain’s rise to modernity was accompanied by a suppression of the Mother, this suppression had a darker side. This shadow side was characterized by a great longing for the sense of protection and a sense of all-encompassing love that unification with the mother brought with it. Male subjects wanted to reject the mother and the disorderly feminine that she symbolized in order to enter the more ordered world of modernity; however they could not totally resist her pull, just like they still cannot resist it in today in the new millennium. This was especially true in the case of the many early modern subjects who, having lost a mother to death very early on, spent the rest of their lives secretly longing for the special kind of love and security found only in her presence. Isabel de Jesus’s presentation of herself as the personification of the long lost mother would have appealed to the shadow side of the masculine authorities that read her vida. Reading her text, surely they could not help getting caught up in the feeling of connection to the space of the maternal that her images of protective motherhood as well as of fluid maternity
offered. These were symbolized by the fluids (which are so symbolic of femininity in general) in the form of blood, tears and water which flow profusely. It is fluids that according to many feminine mystics, including Isabel de Jesús, that unite Jesus to all of humanity. This idea of fluids uniting all human beings comes straight out of the writings of John: “Because he has entered in his flesh into the depths of our human suffering, the breast of Jesus surges with living water as a fountain at which all can drink” (John 7:27).

By highlighting Jesus as mother and then connecting this image with her own lived bodily experiences Isabel de Jesús is able to turn her grotesque, transgressive and “boundary-less” female and maternal body into a body that is empowered rather than abjected. Her body becomes like the “Mother Jesus” in its symbolic openness. Emitting fluids in the same way that a female’s body does, Christ’s body, is like the woman’s body. Unfinished and open (dying, bringing forth and being born), Christ’s body is “not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects [. . .] it is a body of flesh that desires our flesh, that indeed is shattered by desire for us, a body moist and labile, generative and nutritive” (Ashton 5).

Thus, like the breasts of Jesus, Isabel’s open and welcoming body becomes a safe harbor, a place where men discomfited by the fast paced changes of the seventeenth century could find security. In the recounting of her visions,

Isabel lets these superiors who long for the last mother, as well as anyone else who reads her text and has unconsciously longed to find that reconnection with the lost mother, inside the luminal world of her own making and in which she seemed to have spent the majority of her time, in order to find their way back to the lost feminine (El Saffar 106).
It is because they were secretly drawn to the space of the lost Mother within Isabel’s text that her superiors were willing to look past her sometimes shocking behavior and evaluate her with praise and adulation.

Although the masculine hierarchy was drawn to the lost mother in Isabel de Jesus’s spiritual writing, since the mother signifies the unification and oneness from which life sprang, she is also feared for that oneness. She is the object of aggression for having destroyed the oneness the male child at one time experienced; her confessors as well the inquisitors were fearful of as well as in awe of what they had found within her text. In order to allay their masculine anxiety they had to insure that once found the lost mother was once again placed safely under their control. “The phallic mother must be controlled, dominated and marked with the signifiers of patriarchy” (Lukinbeal and Aitken 383) because “without the masculine phallus as the primary signifier, the male becomes hysterical, disassociated from body, language and the scales of patriarchy” (Lukinbeal and Aitken 383).

In order to control the Mother that is Isabel de Jesús, yet at the same time bask in the comfort of her presence, Isabel de Jesús’s confessor wrote Book III (399-470) and appended it to her autobiographic text on the event of her death. It contains the requisite description of Madre Isabel’s death, information about her secretary and collaborator Inés del Santisimo Sacramento, as well as the testimony of eyewitnesses and others familiar with Madre Isabel’s religious virtues. This is also the format for beatification of a tentative saint. It represented the testimony of a saint’s virtues. Book III works to contain Isabel de Jesús’s unruly body while at the same time open it for public consumption. It accomplishes this seemingly paradoxical goal by re-writing the events of
her life in such a way as to make them less subversive yet still evocative of the power of
the longed for figure of the Mother. Isabel is neutralized and then held up to public
display. As such she serves as an example of how “for institutionalized male hysteria,
the desire and anxiety for the mother works to construct a gendered hierarchy which
reaffirms the masculine phallus and suppresses the effeminate other” (Lukinbeal and
Aitken 140). When this hierarchy is threatened, even in a way deemed somewhat
pleasurable by the masculine authority, “woman is castrated in the place of man so that
his anxiety may be allayed” (Aitken and Herman 165).

The modern theorists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva all tell us
that the repression of the mother is never complete. The fact that Isabel de Jesús’ \textit{Vida}
and the maternal imagery found within it, were published at all is proof of this fact. The
power of the Mother is unleashed by the approved publication of her text. This is even
more amazing given that by the time Isabel’s \textit{Vida} was published in 1675, “the age of
popular belief in the powers of women to access the unconscious was nearly over”(El
Saffar 105). However, despite the shift in paradigm that was occurring when Isabel’s text
was finally published, by the time Isabel de Jesús closed her eyes for the final time and
said goodbye to the material world, she was already well on the way to becoming
venerated as a holy woman with a very special relationship with God. She was
considered to have been possessed of visionary powers and the ability and the power to
use them on behalf of all those that she considered to be her spiritual children.

The fact that she had reached this point by her death at the age of sixty three
demonstrates just how successful she was at convincing the world around her that in fact
she had been selected by God to serve as his mouthpiece and his intermediary between
the spiritual and material worlds. Like those holy women that came before her, Isabel de Jesús showed herself to be another example of an early modern religious woman who was surrounded by patriarchy and misogyny but still managed to be more than just one of the passive ‘Brides of Christ’ languishing in love, but rather a woman endowed with an enormous drive and fortitude (Schlau 304).
CHAPTER 3

MARÍA MAGDALENA MUÑOZ’S BODILY AGENCY:
SEEING WITH “LOS OJOS CORPORALES”

The one who sees me sees the father
John 14:9-10

Introduction

Madre María Magdalena Muñoz (1576-1636) was born in Mexico City in 1576 and entered the convent at the age of fourteen. She lived there the rest of her life and remained both chaste and enclosed throughout her adulthood. She enjoyed a position of local fame and spiritual renown in Mexico in her lifetime, so much so that she was asked to write her memoirs. That text was published fourteen years after her death, when her nephew brought it to public attention in 1650.

When Madre Magdalena sat down to write about her life, she did not face the challenge of transforming sexual and maternal experience into evidence of a saintly existence. She had neither lain in a marriage bed, borne children; nor had she ever wandered outside convent walls. Magdalena had become virtually bedridden because of “therapeutic” bloodlettings at an early age, which forced her to live out her adult life bedridden and behind convent walls. Her poor health was such a defining aspect of her identity that her nephew Francisco de Lorravaquio35 chose to mention it in a note that he

35 Her nephew was a priest and Comisionado (commissioner) of the Inquisition. He had chosen to copy the
added to the title page of his copy of Madre María Magdalena’s posthumously published *Vida, Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena, monja profesa del Convento de Sr. S. Jerónimo de la Ciudad de Mexico hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio, y de Isabel Muñoz su legítima mujer* (1650) (*A Book Containing the Life of Madre María Magdalena, Professed Nun in the Convento del Señor San Jerónimo of Mexico City, Daughter of Domingo de Lorravaquio and of Isabel Muñoz His legitimate wife*). Within this note, Lorravaquio states that Madre María Magdalena “estuvo en una cama cuarenta y cuatro años y tres meses ejercitada con trabajos, enfermedades, temblores, y regalos de su divina Magestad. Le mandaron sus confesores fuese escribiendo su vida, y los particulares regales que de continuo recibía de Nuestro Señor”) (“She was bedridden for forty-four years and three months, tested by trials illnesses, tremors, and favors from his divine Majesty. Her confessors ordered her to keep a written record of her life and the special mercies she continuously received from our Lord Jesus Christ.”)

By attaching these words to Madre Magdalena’s life story, her nephew distinguished his aunt as a nun faced with the special challenges of being sickly and bedridden. Thanks to his announcement, the readers of Madre Magdalena’s spiritual autobiography were, from the beginning, able to realize that Isabel’s disabled body was perhaps her most distinctive characteristic.

At first glance, it would seem that the Mexican Hieronymite would not have very much in common with Madre Isabel de Jesús except for the fact that they were both nuns and that they both lived within the Spanish imperial realm during the seventeenth century. But even though Isabel de Jesús’s life was characterized as being that of a

manuscript from the original version after it had passed into the hands of his aunt’s cousin who was a nun
“wandering woman,” she and Madre Magdalena shared one very important characteristic: neither possessed a body that conformed to the idealized, male-created hagiographic standards. Thus, like the Augustinian from Spain, when Madre Magdalena wrote her *Vida*, she made a point to discursively transform her body and her experiences lived out as an embodied subject into a form of textually empowered embodiment. Even so, the experiences and the memories that Magdalena’s body carried with it were distinct from those of Isabel de Jesús. That is why the hagiographic models she used to buttress her claims to spiritual authority differed from those used by the Spanish nun.

Rather than write her body as a maternal one, Madre Magdalena wrote hers as a wounded one. In order to do so, she drew upon one particular part of the long-established tradition: *imitatio Christi*, or the bodily re-enactment of Christ’s suffering during the Crucifixion. In a clever textual performance, she transformed her wounded, bleeding and suffering body into the divine body featured in the scenes of The Passion. Doing so placed her squarely within the orthodox tradition of *imitatio Christi* and authorized her body by fusing it with the hagiographic tradition of the holy infirm, feminine body. This echoed the model used by many medieval and early modern women—among them Catherine of Siena and Teresa de Jesús—to find a form of embodied agency. Those saints had been able to cast aside the holy, infirm body when they intervened in public life: Catherine when she advised political leaders, Teresa as she founded new convents across the countryside. Magdalena, however, could not reconcile the fear associated with
a bedridden, wounded body and the reverence given the holy, infirm body. Put simply, it was impossible for her to set aside her wounded, useless body. Even in her writing, Madre Magdalena’s mysticism had continually featured a failed body.

Thus, in order to authorize her body within her *Vida*, Madre Magdalena insists upon incorporating a thoroughly embodied mystic imagery. Her mystic experiences are usually seen through *los ojos coporales* and tend to feature visual, corporeal images of a crucified Christ. This was daring on her part, because in her era, visual images—or images seen with the “eyes of the body”—were deemed inferior and even dangerous to intellectual visions seen with the “eyes of the soul.” This boldness allowed Madre Magdalena to turn the tables on her contemporaries and create a double-focused form of bodily agency seen with both physical eyes and spiritual “eyes.” Therefore, she was able to “act out” the suffering of Christ within her body and ingeniously fuse her “failed” body with that of the proximally failed—yet empowered—body of Christ.

As already noted, Magdalena’s type of agency is quite distinct from that promoted by mystics such as St. Teresa. These mystics believed that union with Christ’s human form was secondary by far to the union that emphasized His divinity. They also assumed the inevitable flight from the physical body needed to join with the supernatural Christ.

In contrast, Madre María, never moves beyond the body to the supposedly more important spiritual realm. Through the constant and repetitive use of corporal symbolism to express divine, ultimate union, she insists upon the presence of the body within mystical encounters. Thus, it seems that though she did her best to describe this union and aspired to the same form of inner “Nothingness that is All” as did her spiritual models St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross, she never reached their degree of
incorporeal union with the divine that it implied (Rivero 22).\textsuperscript{36} That is why Eliana Rivero in her article, \textit{Mystic Symbolic Language East and West: The Case of the Venerable Madre María Magdalena} (2001), states that although “Madre María Magdalena did manage to go beyond stammering” she was not able to reach the same level of “self-illumination of other mystics East or West.” Rather she seemed to “have remained in that ‘most profound solitude’ within her soul, where she abandons herself to the yearning of Love [. . .]” (Rivero 19). I would argue that Madre Magdalena did not reach this same point because she was incapable of doing so. Rather, like other mystical writers who occupied “unhealthy” bodies that continually quivered and bled, she needed to insist on the body’s participation in divine union.

\textbf{Description of the \textit{Vida} and its Criticism}

Madre María Magdalena’s \textit{Vida} consists of three parts: a twenty-two page account of her life, a four-page summary of her spiritual daily schedule and a one hundred-thirty-two page discussion of her mystical life. In her discussion of mystical women of colonial Latin America, \textit{Cultura Femenina Novohispana} (1994), Josefina Muriel labels Madre Magdalena’s \textit{Vida} Mexico’s first mystical text, largely because of the length of the last section of the text (319). Despite its primacy, the Mexican nun’s

\textsuperscript{36} The fact that many medieval and early modern mystics consistently wanted to “transcend” their materiality through contemplation speaks to their discomfort with the mortality of the human body. Peter Lombard, Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure (building on Augustine’s \textit{Literal Commentary on Genesis}) spoke of the “separated soul as ‘retarded’ by longing for its body after death” (Bynum, Fuss 260). Their concerns were reflected in the religious environment in which they lived in that “whether or not the concern for identity and the concern for material continuity were fully compatible, both were deeply related to the fear of biological change” (Bynum, Fuss 260). This fear of change explains why the resurrected and reassembled body, which exactly conformed to its earthly structure, became so important. It was a “guarantee that change has limits; process is under control; development stops at death. Butterflies may from come from cocoons and worms from corpses but we will not be, in the afterlife, something we cannot
Vida has not received much critical attention, even by scholars of Hispanic mysticism. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau both discuss it and offer selected translations of it in their compilation of the works of Hispanic women religious of the early modern period, Untold Sisters. However, they do not offer an extensive critical analysis of it.

In her 2001 article Eliana Rivero describes Madre Magdalena’s attempt to grasp the “unknowable” (i.e. God), or infinite truth, through the use of mystical symbols. Although her analysis is exemplary, she unfortunately does not refer to the original text, but rather to the shorter, translated sections of it found in Untold Sisters.

Marta Bermúdez-Gallegos, who discusses the text in an article, “Eroticism and Sexual Agency in the Writings of Three Colonial Nuns” (1993), explores the erotic elements in the vidas of colonial women religious and cites only translated excerpts rather than the full text. This is regrettable, given that the text (folio # MS 1244) is readily accessible in the Nettie Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas’s Perry Castañeda Library.

This chapter is the first essay to use Madre Magdalena’s original Vida as its primary source. Therefore all the translations within it are my own. It is also the first study that interprets the text autobiographically, meaning that it analyzes Madre Magdalena’s construction of herself as a hagiographic figure enabled by the positioning and courageousness of her infirm, feminine body. We start this discussion with an analysis of Madre Magdalena’s construction of herself as a “holy” child.

recognize” (Bynum, Fuss 259).
“Holy” Childhood

As is customary with the spiritual autobiographies of early modern women religious, Madre Magdalena, whose full name was María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muñoz, begins her text with a declaration of obedience to two Jesuit fathers: Gerónimo Ramírez and Juan Sánchez, who had requested that she write, manifestando el discurso y distribución de mi vida (“revealing the passing and apportionment of the hours of my days”) (2). Without literary pretensions or expressing concern about her ability to fulfill the assignment—in fact without any trace of the “rhetoric of humility” (Weber) whatsoever—Madre María fills the pages of her spiritual text with anecdotes about her youth. Details include things such as her daily routine and numerous examples of the mystical visions that she saw virtually every day of her life. That she chooses to tell her story without self-deprecation is interesting in light of the fact that the majority of women’s spiritual biographies from this period are filled with self-deprecating language. Even more interesting is that her omission of the appropriate clichés related to her humility did not appear to bother her superiors. Perhaps the best explanation for her ability to tell her life story without the rhetoric of humility is that she was so successful at presenting her wounded and bleeding body as evidence of her close connection with a suffering and broken Jesus Christ “tan fatigado y maltratado” (20) (“so fatigued and maltreated”) that she did not need to insist upon her humility. By bleeding for others, she had already adequately humbled herself before God and the world.
From the twenty-two pages of Madre Magdalena’s *Vida* that discuss the life that she lived before she entered the convent, we know that Madre Magdalena did not begin her life with a wounded body. The child of an upper class Mexican-Creole family from Mexico City, Madre Magdalena was born into a life of some privilege. We know that the family must have been at least moderately affluent, because she mentions her hatred at seeing the family servants mistreated and reports taking all she could from her mother and father to give to the poor. Moreover, as Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau have observed, within Magdalena’s writing “no question arises about the availability of funds for the convent dowry, for the support of the extra servants that were needed to care for her when she became ill, or for doctors’ fees” (*Untold Sisters*, 347). In addition to a certain degree of affluence, Madre Magdalena had “pure blood.” This was something still necessary at that time for one to be eligible for membership in the upper echelons of colonial Mexican society.37 For María Magdalena, joining the convent was not so much about upward mobility as it was for many women in colonial Mexico. More than likely, in her case the decision to join the convent reflected a choice rather than a necessity (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 356).

Beyond her Spanish descent and high social status, we do not really learn much information about Madre Magdalena’s early life from her autobiographical writings. Unlike many women religious writing during the colonial period, Madre Magdalena did not place much emphasis on her youth. Although shorter than sketches of other

---

37 Having “pure blood” or “pureza de sangre” meant having a lineage that was free from the “taint” of the blood of one of a different race, ethnic or even religious group. In Spain this usually meant having no trace of Moorish or Jewish ancestry. In Latin America it meant having no trace of these two types of blood as well as no trace of indigenous blood within one’s family. On both sides of the Atlantic having pure blood could mean the difference between being accepted within society and or elevated to positions of power and influence or not. Thus the importance of one’s pure blood during the early modern era cannot be
women’s childhoods, Madre María Magdalena’s representation of her childhood and adolescence reads very similarly to theirs. This is because she chose to include very closely inscribed hagiographic conventions within it. Because her description of her early days is virtually indistinguishable from others, it is hard to glean many objective facts about her actual childhood from it. What we can ascertain from the construction of her child-self is that Madre Magdalena was interested in presenting herself in formulaic, saintly ways.

For example, she presented herself as a devout child, serious, withdrawn, and more inclined to praying than to playing with other children. Within the *Vida*, the narrator asserts that she would always “[. . .] procuraba huir de los juegos y travesuras, que la edad pedía ([. . .] (“try to escape from the games and pranks that the age demanded”) (3). If anyone tried to get her to become involved in these pastimes, she would feel tanta pena y sentimiento, como si hubiera cometido mil pecados en ofensa de Dios (“so much pain and emotion, as if I had committed a thousand sins against God”) (3). Because she avoided such youthful pastimes she appeared melancholia al parecer de ellos [. . .] su madre y hermanos (“melancholy to her mother and siblings”) (9). Perhaps this is why the narrating “I” claims that as a young girl she felt out of sync with the rest of her family and thus “íbame a las partes muy solas” (“used to go to isolated locations”) rather than remain in their company (11). Madre Magdalena’s depiction of herself as a child made lonely by her intense devotion to the Lord was very much in keeping with the underestimated (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 356).
hagiographic tradition. Many hagiographies construct similar childhoods to assert that their protagonist had been perfect from birth. This “perfection” was a sign that he or she had been chosen by God to be an exemplar of His holiness.

In keeping with this formulaic, “holy” presentation of its narrator/protagonist, the *Vida* creates the impression that the young María Magdalena preferred spiritual companionship to that of her family. In fact, it puts forth the idea that she felt closer to the Virgin Mary than to her own mother, with whom she could not have the same intimate conversations. It was the Virgin Mary who supposedly oversaw her spiritual conversion “la edad de diez años poco más o menos” (“at age ten more or less”) (3). It was the Holy Virgin—and not her flesh and blood mother—to whom she would look when she needed guidance: “[. . .] y le manifestaba mis deseos y le pedía me ayudase y socorriese en todas mis necesidades [. . .]” ([. . .] “and I would show her all of my desires and I would ask her to help me and aid me in all of my needs [...]”). This is why the narrator states that it was the Holy Mother who was really *era mi madre* (“my mother”) (3). Thus Madre Magdalena listened to her spiritual mother when she told her to enter into a convent (3). Years later, when she was unable to leave her bed, this subject intensified the identification of herself with Mary through the use of a series of visions involving the Holy Mother.

As is the case with countless other saintly children and/or adolescents, the narrating “I” says that she learned to read by spontaneous inspiration and from that point on placed herself on a convent schedule of prayer, embroidery and reading. She stresses that the books she read were spiritual ones, for example, the lives of the saints, various spiritual devotions and books of prayer. Like the saints that she encountered in her
reading, Madre Magdalena is portrayed as having been blessed with a most charitable heart. She always gave to the poor and treated those less fortunate than herself with the utmost compassion: “siempre tenia muy grande compassion de los enfermos y necesitados, tomaba todo cuanto podia a mis padres para dar a los pobres no podia dar ni ver tratar mal a las mosas ni gente de casa por que era muy compassiva” (“I always had great compassion for those who were ill or in need, I took whatever I could from my parents in order to give to the poor. I couldn’t give or watch the maids or other people within the house be treated badly because I was so very compassionate”) (5).

Madre Magdalena’s description of herself as a “charitable child” is very similar to that of Isabel de Jesús. There are two very important differences between the two nuns, however. Isabel de Jesús really was poor. Thus, her “charity” represented a greater sacrifice than that of the relatively affluent María Magdalena. Moreover, Isabel de Jesús did not have maids to fret over. She was too busy working to spend time worrying about the treatment of the help.

**Descent into Disability**

Because of her inclination to be holy, it is not at all surprising that the narrator declares that at the age of fourteen Madre Magdalena eschewed secular life in favor of becoming a bride of Christ. She describes herself as having been overjoyed to join the five-year old Hieronymite convent (the same one which Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz would join eighty years later) on July 22, 1590.³⁸ Unfortunately, this state of joy was short-

³⁸ According to Stacey Schlau and Electa Arenal, the illness that Madre Magdalena developed was rheumatic fever and as a consequence St. Vitus’ dance, a nervous ailment causing involuntary contractions. In order to try and cure her condition, doctors cut her muscles and bled her from “las Fuentes” (the
lived, because her health deteriorated a mere two years after she became a nun. She
developed a throat infection [. . .] “en creciendo en mí la devoción y fervor crecía el
temblor” [. . .] “As my devotion and fervor increased, so did my tremor” [. . .] (8).
Various doctors tried to nurse her back to health. Madre Magdalena asserts that their
medical intervention of dislocating her legs and thighs caused her inability to walk. She
then spent the rest of her life in a completely bedridden state: “[. . .] hicieron gran junta
de médicos y después de muchas curas y que no acertaban a conocer que mál era [. . .]
empezaron ellos en mí a hacer pruebas de remedios y determinaron de que me zafasen los
muslos y piernas [. . .]” (“They called a large conference of physicians, and after having
tried many cures, when they had not determined what my illness was [. . .] they started to
try various remedies on me and they decided that they should dislocate my thighs and
legs [. . .]” (8).

In a move to align her suffering with that of Jesus Christ, Madre Magdalena
compared the mortification that she felt when the doctors saw her naked flesh during this
operation with the shame that Jesus felt when he was stripped of his clothes, flagellated
and then left naked by the soldiers who had already drawn lots for his clothes: “[. . .] yo
sintiendo esta mortificación y verguenza mucho por haber de estar a la vista de los
hombres se los ofrecía a Dios muy de versa y considerando lo que Nuestro Señor por mí
había sentido en la columna [. . .] y la verguenza que su Magestad había pasado cuando la
desataron de la columna, y no hallaba sus vestiduras [. . .].” (“[. . .] I felt much

fountains) (a literal translation of the contemporary medical term, or “issues” in English) that they had
opened in her limbs. This medical attention destroyed her remaining health and left her permanently
disabled, disfigured and in considerable chronic pain. Madre Magdalena’s unfortunate experiences with
bloodletting are evidence of the fact that in the early modern period, “medical cures—to which only the
privileged had access—were often much worse than the disease they sought to relieve” (Arenal and Schlau,
Untold Sisters 348).
mortification and shame because I had to be seen by these men; I offered these feelings up to God, recalling what Our Lord had suffered for me when they tied Him to the column [in order to flagellate him] and the shame that His Majesty felt when they untied Him, and he was not able to locate his clothing [. . .]” (8). Madre Magdalena’s comparison of her shame at having her body exposed to the male gaze with Jesus’s forced exposure of his naked flesh to others is only one in a series of comparisons with Jesus’s corporeal trials and those of her own.

As a result of the dislocation of her legs and thighs, Madre Magdalena developed a painful abscess that eventually led to her bedridden state. As we see in the following passage, the location of the abscess was in an intimate part of her body; thus it added to the mortification described above: [. . .] “después de algún tiempo me dio una apostema en parte que fue de muy gran mortificación para mí el curarme los médicos y de ésta y los demás males ha sido el estar ya ordinariamente en la cama hartos años ha que son treinta y tres años desde el principio de estos males” (“[. . .] after some time I got an abscess in a place that caused me great mortification when the doctors came to cure me, and as a result of this and my other illnesses I have usually had to stay in bed for a great many years, for it has been thirty-three years since the onset of these ills”) (14).

The dislocation of Madre Magdalena’s legs and thighs and the resultant abscess in a private area allows the most intimate parts of the nun’s body to become visible within her text. They are seen because they are the proof of her holy infirmity and saintly
disability. Thus, within her Vida, body parts that are “unmentionable” and unseen in most spiritual vidas of Hispanic women religious are placed front and center in Madre Magdalena’s reconstruction of her life.

Since autobiography involves the construction of a life, it is not imperative that we “know” all the facts about the life of a particular text’s author. However, in order to better understand why Madre Magdalena constructed a subjectivity that was based upon “holy” infirmity, it is important to address the veracity of her claim of physical disability. María Magdalena’s nephew testified to his aunt’s bedridden state when he appended his description of her forty-four years and three months spent in bed. However, it is difficult to take his words completely at face value. It is possible that he is making this observation solely on what he has read in her text. Although we do not have any other direct confirmation of Madre Magdalena’s bedridden status, we can ascertain from her vida that it is highly likely that she was both disfigured and disabled and spent a large amount of time alone in bed. The detail and extent with which she describes the symptoms of her illness would have been difficult to fabricate. The descriptions of her daily travails related to her disability are highly personalized rather than formulaic. Their personal nature makes it seem highly unlikely that they are figments of her imagination.

In addition, Madre Magdalena’s Vida is characterized by the absence of most information about convent life. Her interactions with the other nuns are discussed very little. The only exceptions are when the narrator explains that because of her bedridden state, she was unable to go with the other nuns and view the comet that had descended upon Mexico City, attend choir with them, or even visit with them unless she was carried to their rooms by a higher power. The last of these examples is the subject of the
following passage: “[... ] de repente me llevaron a un aposento y en él vi a una religiosa muy cerca de mí que yo conocía muy bien quien era y [...] después vi a la otra y también la conocía y me alegraba yo mucho de verlas allí y luego me llevaron a otro aposento más adentro y en vía a otras dos religiosas de que me alegraba mucho más y les hablaba porque les conocía en este gozo y habla que les tenía se me desaparecieron y quedé sola” (375).39

It is telling that Madre María Magdalena has to be carried to the other nuns in order to make contact with them. Moreover, when she is left alone at the end of this passage, we get a sense of the loneliness she felt due to her bedridden state. This atmosphere of isolation is repeatedly invoked throughout the text. This has led Arenal and Schlau to observe that, “a strange absence haunts the text” (Untold Sisters, 349). The “haunting absence” is the lack of discussion or contact with Madre Magdalena’s fellow women religious who never appear as living, breathing beings but rather, “shadowy figures in her visions” (Arenal and Schlau, Untold Sisters 349).

The Vida’s lack of references to the inner workings of the convent community of which its author was a part sets it apart from the spiritual writings of other nuns. Most of them almost always make frequent references to the day-to-day activities of convent life: the inner conflicts, the duties of the sisters, and the schedule of daily activities. The Magdalena Vida’s omission of this type of information is best explained by its author’s inability to fully participate in convent life. This argument is buttressed by the fact that

39 [... ] all of the sudden I was carried to a chamber and in it I saw a nun very near me and I knew very well who she was [... ] and later I saw another and I knew her well, and it made me very happy to see them there; and then I was carried to another chamber, further within, and there I saw two other nuns whom I was even happier to see, and I spoke to them because I recognized them; in this joy and conversation I had with them, they disappeared from my sight and I was left there all alone” [... ]
Madre Magdalena had no work-related responsibilities within the convent. This is odd given that the proper functioning of a convent community depended upon the active participation of every recollect. Not being of an able body, Madre Magdalena was exempted from physical work. Her only task was to follow a strict schedule of contemplation and prayer: both of which could be done in her bed. Upon her superiors’ request, she included within her *Vida* a detailed account of what she did all day.

This account describes a day spent cleaning wounds, reading spiritual texts, praying and entering into states of quiet contemplation. The times of contemplation would last for several hours and sometimes even entire days. The contemplations were always followed by a set sequence: prayer on a particular topic (usually the Passion), usually started upon the completion of communion; followed by petitions on her behalf and then later on that of others. Following that, she discussed her suffering with—and dedicated her suffering to—the Lord. Then, there would be suspensions filled with visions that subsequently faded away, leaving Madre Magdalena resigned to longing both for God’s love and thankfulness and His presence in her life.

The repetitiveness of Madre Magdalena’s daily routines suggests that they were ritualistic in nature. Prevented from attending community rituals, she came up with her own ritualistic spiritual practices. Forced to structure her own prayer routines in isolation, Madre Magdalena had little interaction with others. This explains why her discussion of daily activities is confined to her bedroom. Her discussion also fails to describe having little time to write because of work-related responsibilities; something that is found in many other *vidas* of Hispanic women religious. These omissions speak directly to the likelihood that Madre Magdalena was indeed physically disabled.
The narrator asserts that Madre Magdalena’s bedridden years were exceedingly difficult for the young nun. Not only did she contend with constant pain and disability, but also a society and church hierarchy that initially viewed her violent tremors and spasms as physical evidence of devil possession. In fact, at one point, she was even denied confession because she was thought to be a loca (an insane person) and thus not capable of confessing her sins (10). She was even beaten by the convent prioress, who thought the devil had taken possession of her body: “[. . .] los temblors no se quitaban sino que antes iban a mas volvieron a tratar que con engano del demonio lo fingia para que se me quitase; determino mi perlada que me habia de azotar y poniendo por obra con mucho rigor yo lo senti con mucho extremo y ofreciendoselo a Dios muy de versa por las afrentas e injuries que por mi había pasado en la cruz me hizo su Magestad muchas merecedes [. . .]” (9-10).40

The narrator states that she accepted this cruel treatment because it was similar to what Jesus felt when he was suffering on the cross. However, it must have been quite a relief when, after being subjected to numerous spiritual examinations in order to determine if the tremors that continually plagued her were the work of Satan or the Lord, “una persona muy docta y muy santa” (“a very learned and saintly person”) (9) examined her “en público como en secreto” (“in public as well as in secret” and determined once and for all that no era demonio el que causaba aquellos efectos (“that it was not the devil that had caused these effects”) (9). Subsequently, her illness was deemed to be un regalo de Dios (“a gift from God”) (8). It was also said that her “temblar también procedia del

---

40 “[. . .] the tremors did not cease but rather increased, and again they said that because of deception by the devil I was feigning them; and to cure me of them my Prioress decided I should beaten, and as she did so with great rigor. I felt great pain, which I offered to God most earnestly in exchange for the affronts, and
espiritu” (“her tremor also came from the spirit”) (8), a declaration that “causaba espanto
y admiración a los médicos, y a todos los que me vian” (“that caused admiration on the
part of the doctors and everyone who came to see me”) (8).

Madre María Magdalena wrote that each day she would take a “libro espiritual y
leyendo en él un gran tiempo [quedó] después de haber leido pensando en lo que había
leído y pidiendole a su magestad me [se] enseñare el camino de perfección” (“a spiritual
book and reading in it at length she remained after having read thinking about what she
had read and asking his majesty to teach her the path to perfection”) (4).

She hoped that by embarking on the path of perfection she would realize her
dream of transcendence of material limitations through mystical devotion. Madre María
Magdalena read “vidas de santos [. . .] que [me] alientan y aminan mucho a padecer más
y más por Dios and otras veces otros libros de escencias espirituales” (“the lives of saints
that enlightened and animated me and made me want to suffer more and more for God
(and) other times other books of spiritual scenes”) (18). She did this in hopes that they
would help her to somehow escape her miserable existence, or as she puts it, “llevase a
un desierto y me sacaré del mundo” (“transport her to a desert and take myself out of the
world) (4). Physically unable to go there herself, or even to set up her own desert
existence out in the dry, windswept Mexican wilderness, Madre María hoped to replace
her bedroom with the spiritual desert that figured so prominently in early Christian

insults He had suffered for my sake on the cross. His majesty offered me many mercies [. . .]”
legends. She wanted to be taken out of her real-world existence of being bedridden and placed in a world where she would be free to move about and save souls for God. Her books helped her imagine this world and arrive there in her mind by instructing her in the camino de perfección.

As this subject wrote about her reading experiences, she placed great emphasis on the fact that it was through her devotional texts that she reaches this mystical inner world. That was because in the post-Trent era in New Spain, one “had to be careful to adhere to more external forms of piety, prayer of words, devotional acts and rituals etc. Mystical contemplation alone could raise the specter of Illuminism [which had been] proclaimed heretical by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) due to its insistence that only a personal mystical union sufficed, without any need for devotional works” (Lavrín, “Vida conventual” 61). As we see in the following passage, she always felt the same sense of interior peace and connection with the Lord after reading that the early Christians felt living in desert isolation. Because of this sense of peace, she knew that the mystical path was the one on which God had placed her. She writes that she knew that this place of peace, where one could learn about the path to perfection, could only be found within oneself:

Me quedé como dormida aunque no lo estaba y en este mi alma en un silencio y paz y quietud, que me parecía a mi habían llevado el alma a un desierto, y allí aunque no oy ni vi nada me enseñaron que el camino por donde quería Dios llevar mi alma era por soledad interiormente hablando y tratando con Dios en ella (4).

---

41 “I remained as though asleep although I was not and in this my soul was in such silence, peace and quiet, that it seemed that I had been taken to a desert, and there, although I did not hear or see anything, I was taught that the path along which God wanted to take my soul was one of solitude, interior speaking and working with God in it.”
Madre María usually found herself transported to this place of inner peace and interior reflection after she received communion or in other states of *recogimiento* (inner recollection). While in this place, she seemed to understand everything that God was telling her. Yet, once she came out of it, she found herself in a state of utter confusion and almost completely unable to adequately describe what had happened to her. In this way, Madre María Magdalena was similar to the majority of mystics, who were initially conscious of ultimate reality with such vividness and vitality that there is no room for doubt, but afterward, when “ordinary” non-mystical consciousness returned, often felt confused or doubtful about what happened.\(^{42}\) The happening, that “oneness of being” with God that mystic experience, is far richer and more real than mere words can express.

The books that Madre Magdalena absorbed functioned as a portal into an interior mystical world that did not require a healthy and mobile body for entrance. Madre María Magdalena, in effect, changed her existence from one of abjection to agency when she left her body behind and entered into this interior world and then proclaimed its existence to the world upon her return. Her visions empowered her because they enabled her to encounter God and spread His message to the world without leaving her bed. Ironically, the very tremors that had earlier caused her to be suspect ended up helping her to reach her empowered state by offering verifiable physical evidence of her encounters with God. After each trance or “suspension” as she calls them, her body would shake violently. For those observing her, the uncontrollable quaking of her body was irrefutable proof that God had touched her. When word of this happening spread, people came from all over to

---

\(^{42}\) Consider Thomas Aquinas, who once said that when he met God all of the volumes on his shelf turned to straw (22).
ask her to intervene on their behalf during her visits with God. As her fame spread, so did her spiritual authority. Thus, she claimed that her body was empowered by its own illness and abjection.

The Holy, Infirm Hagiographic Female Body

Madre Magdalena was by no means unique in her use of illness as a discursive strategy within her life narrative. On the contrary, holy infirmity was a widely used trope during the early modern era. Women were especially drawn to it because it was a sanctioned path to spiritual exemplarity.

Elizabeth Rhodes studies early modern women religious’ use of this trope in their spiritual autobiographical writing in her insightful article, “What’s in a Name: On Teresa of Ávila’s Book” (2000). According to Rhodes, the inscription of the holy, infirm body within the *vitae* of late medieval and early modern spiritual women represented a “prototypical visionary experience” (“Book” 100). For this reason, both male biographers and female autobiographers frequently described their subjects as being plagued by a cycle of illnesses that almost always ended in a near-death experience that forever changed their lives by bringing them closer to God. The authors of spiritual *vidas* placed great emphasis on this cycle of illness, because in their view, there was a direct relationship between female physical disability and feminine spiritual power. Raymond of Capua, for example, gave much attention to St. Catherine of Siena’s illness and death in his biography of her. Thanks to Raymond of Capua’s depiction, or rather construction, St. Catherine came to be viewed as having taken on a lifetime of pain in order to help free
people from purgatorial suffering.\footnote{Medieval and early modern theologians agreed that suffering taken on during one’s life on earth carried with it a “higher redemptive value” than any penalties paid after one’s life had ended (Haliczer 221).} She helped to proclaim the veracity of St. Jerome’s claim to an inverse relationship between true spirituality and physical health: “El cuerpo de fuera muy reluciente testigo es el alma muy sucia” (“The resplendent outer body is evidence of a very dirty soul) (Jerome, “Eusebius Hieronymous” 178v).

St. Teresa de Jesús was familiar with Raymond of Capua’s biography of Catherine of Siena and was an avid reader of St. Jerome. Thus it is not surprising that, in order to convince her superiors that she too was capable of suffering for others, the saint from Ávila also presented herself as perpetually ill. References to her illnesses and suffering are found throughout St. Teresa’s \textit{Vida}. In fact, chapter five is dedicated to \textit{las grandes enfermedades que tuvo} (“the great illnesses that she had”). At one point St. Teresa describes how she became envious of a nun who was very ill:

\begin{quote}
Estava una monja entonces enferma de grandísima enfermedad y muy peñosa, porque eran unas bocas en el vientre que se le havían hecho de opilaciones, por donde echava lo que comía. Murió presto de ello. Yo via a todas temer aquel mal; a mí hacíame gran envidia su paciencia; pedía a Dios que, dándomela ansí a mí, me diese las enfermedades que fuese servido; ninguna me parece temía, porque estava tan puesta en ganar bienes eternos, que por cualquier medio me determinava a ganarlos (37).\footnote{“There was then a nun in the house who was afflicted with a most serious and painful disease. She suffered from open sores on her stomach, that were caused by obstructions, and through which she discharged all that she ate. She very soon died of this. Now I saw that all the sisters were frightened by her disease, but for my part I only envied her patience, and prayed God to send me any sickness He pleased provided He sent me as much patience with it. I do not think that I was afraid of any affliction, for so set was I on gaining my eternal good that I was resolved to gain it in any way whatever” (39).}
\end{quote}

St. Teresa was so envious of her fellow sister’s pain and suffering that she asked God to make her suffer as well. He fulfilled her wishes by sending her illnesses so strong as to make her nerves painfully contract. “Casi un mes me havía dado una purga cada
día, estaba tan abrasada que se se me comenzaron a encoger los nervios con Dolores tan incomportables, que día ni noche ningún sosiesgo podia tener; una tristeza muy profunda” (39). (“I was reduced by the daily purges that I had been given for almost a month, and so shriveled that my nerves began to contract, giving me such unbearable pain that I could get no rest by night or day, and fell into a state of great misery” (42-43)).

St. Teresa’s pains of the nerves, ‘de nervios’ as she puts it, led to a paralysis that she asserts lasted for three years, during which time she claims that she was forced to crawl around on her hands and knees (St. Teresa de Jesús Vida 39). From that point on, she claims that she never lamented over any of her illnesses or physical travails because they were gifts from God and proof of his love for her. Illness sent from God buttressed her claims to spiritual perfection in the same way that it did for Raymond of Capua’s idealized representation of Catherine of Siena.

It is notable that Madre Magdalena, who in all probability had read St. Teresa’s Vida, also drew upon her nerve pains and paralysis in the constructing her spiritual authority. Both women’s use of these body parts as vehicles to power speaks to the agency that early modern women found not only in holy infirmity, but also in their individual body parts and bodily systems. For them, sickly and disabled bodies were empowered bodies.

The culmination of the spiritual women’s cycle of illness and disability almost always resulted in what Elizabeth Rhodes calls a “brush with death” (“Book” 99). The
“brush-with-death episode,” was a critical part of their textual hagiographic self-construction because “like the archetypal hero’s descent to the underworld, [it] takes the woman to the portals of life, from which she returns to human existence enriched beyond mortal limitations” (Rhodes, “Book” 99).

The 1511 Spanish _vita_ of Catherine of Siena describes Catherine’s own brush with death, which forced her mother to release control over her. Rhodes points out that Teresa’s four-day coma, which official historians record as three, even includes her recollection of almost being buried alive (Rhodes, “Book” 99).

According to Rhodes, the “brush-with-death” episode was standard protocol for medieval and early modern European holy women who wrote their lives in accordance with the bride-of-Christ life pattern, principally because it was extreme enough to certify their extraordinary spiritual credentials (“Book” 101). However, the brush with death had ceased to be common with men during the fourteenth century. This is not a coincidence.

The holy woman’s cycle of sickness ending in a symbolic death was a reflection of the early modern period’s increased demand for the enclosure of women. As a trope, it was popular because the “less physically active women were expected to be, the more illness became them” (Rhodes, “Book” 101). Men, on the other hand, did not have to be enclosed to stem the progression of societal chaos. Thus, the portrayal of “holy infirmity” within spiritual life writing increased among women, while those featuring men decreased. In order to be sure that holy women remained enclosed, they had to be rendered perpetually ill.
The endurance of prolonged infirmity also provided a means to prove heroic stature in a way that did not threaten societal norms, since unlike the active woman, the sick woman did not contradict the mandate that women be enclosed, passive, and submissive. Hence illness became a showcase for female heroics in a religious context, and the female body was employed as a metaphorical space in which physiological reality was contradicted so that sickness could signify God’s positive attention (Rhodes, “Book” 102).

Paradoxically, nuns had to be consumptive skeletons that were nonetheless fit enough to travel around the countryside to intervene in political matters (like St. Catherine) or found an abby (like St. Teresa). Political intervention or founding new convent communities was the highest level of spiritual authority allowed women in that era. “A representational screen of physical debility, whether accomplished in self-representation or in a biography, greatly reduced the woman’s threat to the dominant society upon whose approval her continued activity depended” (Rhodes, “Book” 101).

Counter-Reformation Spain’s need for heroines who were simultaneously healthy and sickly offers the best explanation for St. Teresa’s contradictory representation of herself as having a life characterized by both seemingly endless physical travails and continuous bouts of abundant physical energy. It also explains the conflict between her enduring stomach pains that led to endless vomiting and her observed portly stature (Rhodes, “Book” 103).

Teresa described herself as perpetually sick and disabled to mitigate the “threat” of bountiful feminine activity in which she reformed two branches of an important religious order and founded seventeen convents. “The saintly paradigm for women required that she be ill; national Catholic reform required that she be well, and both find representation in her Book (Rhodes, “Book” 104). This contradictory dual
representation within her *vida* allowed Teresa to be “womanish” enough to be non-threatening to the male establishment, while at the same time powerful enough to “astonish” men (Medwick 115).

**The “Double Bind” of María Magdalena’s Holy, Infirm Body**

Madre María Magdalena successfully convinced those who examined her that her illness and the constant tremors were God’s work rather than that of the devil. She was able to do that because she had previously convinced others that she was a visionary in the mold of Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa of Ávila. Since both those women had enjoyed God’s favor and had direct access to Him, others accorded this same status to Magdalena.

Once other saw Magdalena in this light, it would have been easy for her to convince even the strongest of skeptics that her bodily infirmities were divine gifts rather than evidence of demonic possession. After all, her bedridden state and the many spiritual works and mystical treatises she read provided excellent ground for her to prove she was on the path of perfection. Unfortunately for Magdalena, even this was not enough.

This was so because her medical “treatment” had left her permanently disabled. That fact kept her from drawing on the hagiographic models of powerful abbess, founder of convents and holy infirmity as St. Teresa had done. Magdalena’s bedridden state made those physical activities impossible; she was unable even to direct her convent community. And so, Madre María Magdalena’s only road to sainthood rested solely on her broken physicality. This was an exceedingly difficult path. It was, after all, easy to
claim yourself as sick or disabled; true infirmity was quite another. Strange as it may seem, in an era that associated integrity with wholesomeness and perfection with the divine, constructed and/or self-induced illness might be glorious, even a gift from God. True infirmity was, however, disgusting and threatening. Therefore, Madre Magdalena found herself in a double bind. Exploiting her illness and physical disabilities made her look “holy”, but it forced her exclusion from the active community participation the religious authority demanded. Madre Magdalena’s textual reconstruction of her failed body and “holy” presentation especially threatened the norms of that era.

During her lifetime, Church authorities and the public at large viewed Madre Magdalena’s materiality with suspicion. That is because they defined her body principally as wounded rather than virginal. It didn’t matter that she was actually virginal and non-threatening (unlike Isabel Jesús’). What did matter was that Magdalena lacked the idyllic, “closed completed unit” of classical thinking. Instead, her body was “unfinished and “transgress[ed]” its own limits” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 26). Covered with unhealed sores and wounds, leaking bloody fluids and being continually overtaken by violent tremors, others considered Magdalena’s body as grotesque.

An example of unfinished materiality others found suspicious is that Madre María Magdalena’s body never properly controlled its own boundaries, but continually quivered and seeped out into the world. It seemed that Madre María allowed the fluids of her body—such as her blood and pus—to eject into the world, which in turn brought danger and disorder. According the views of that era, these things are intermediate objects existing somewhere between the space of the body and the outside world. Lacan refers to them as objet a and Kristeva calls them “abject” — to be ejected into the world bringing
danger and disorder in their wake. Madre Magdalena’s fluids were considered abject because they, “[did] not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3) and they represented the “in-between” or “the ambiguous” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). As such, they placed the integrity of both body and soul continually at risk.

In that era, people believed that—much like corpses and the smell of decay—Madre Magdalena’s bloody, festering wounds had invasive power over subjects/objects and inside/outside borders. This, in turn, made those borders permeable and her identity problematic. After all, once her body released these fluids, they created as much fear, loathing and disgust as her body. They were held in the same esteem as urine, feces, saliva, sperm, blood, vomit, hair, finger/toenails, and skin. As peripheral, removable parts of the body image magically linked to the body, “these body products can only be negatively coded (with disgust or horror)” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 81) because they symbolized the final fate of all bodies: disintegration. Early modern society demanded both bodily integrity and virginity in its female spiritual models (i.e., inviolate boundaries). They equated physical susceptibility to illness and external influences as moral weakness, even evidence of demonic intrusion. Thus, the virginal Madre Magdalena’s crippled and sickly body made her an unsuitable as a great spiritual model (Potkay and Evitt 103). Her body’s permeable borders cancelled out its central integrity, despite her virginity.

As the owner of a “dangerous” body, the colonial Mexican nun faced a difficult road to ecclesiastical approval. So, Madre Magdalena worked through her body to carve out a place for herself within a long line of important early modern and medieval women religious mystics. These women possessed gifts of prophesy and divine intervention and
were a source of community pride and ecclesiastical admiration. Such mystics included Isabel de Jesus, and others who were doubly embodied, such as Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich. The latter two had experienced bodily injury and/or disfigurement early in their lives.

Magdalena created a niche by finding a technology, the use of “holy infirmity.” In doing so, she constructed a form of *imitatio Christi* that emphasized the physical things—suffering and bleeding for others—and were designed specifically to exploit the permeability of bodily boundaries.

Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1379-1471) first used the *imitatio Christi* tradition in the popular *Devotio moderna Imitation of Christ*. This book has survived more than 800 manuscripts and 120 printed editions in seven languages between 1470 and 1520. He asserted that martyrdom found through suffering was a paradigm established by none other than Christ himself. The martyrs had followed the Lord in bearing the cross, and all Christians were obliged to do likewise:

> How shouldest thou sinful creature think thou shouldest go to heaven by any other way than by the plain, right and high king’s way, that is to say the way of the cross [. . .]. Now since the leader of life with all his martyrs have passed by the way of the tribulation and the cross, who so ever intend to come to heaven without the way of tribulation and the cross they err from the right way, for all the way of this mortal life is full of miseries and crosses of tribulation (*Imytacyon* 2.12 [f4v-f5]).

---

45 At about the age of seventeen the fourteenth century the Italian saint was stricken with smallpox. Ironically it was her disfigurement that opened the door to her fame as a great spiritual leader. The Dominican Sisters of the Third Order, called the Mantellate, usually would not admit anyone but mature widows (they were not cloistered and thus virgins could not be protected). However Catherine was so
Ludolphus of Saxony, a Carthusian monk of the fourteenth century whose religious teachings were very influential within the early modern Spanish ecclesiastical community, also used the holiness through suffering model in his *Vita Christi*. In his *Vita*, Ludolphus encouraged the reader to “feel himself present, to help Christ with his cross” in order to enter into contemplation” (qtd in Davis, Religious 88). In his view, meditation upon Christ’s suffering on the cross was a crucial first step for those embarking on a spiritual life (Bodenstedt, 120).

Early modern Spanish religious authorities drew upon Ludolfus’ and à Kempis’s instructions and insisted that recent initiates to the spiritual path should look upon Christ—and especially his suffering on the cross—as the object of meditation. Jesus’s suffering during the crucifixion is at the base of Saint Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. In this very important work, the Jesuit tells the reader to “imagina[sic] a Christo nuestro Señor delante y puesto” (Ignatius de Loyola, *Obras completas* 211). Francisco de Osuna’s *Abecedarios espirituales* also stresses that Jesus’s humanity should be the main source of contemplation for beginners. Saint John of the Cross—in his *Subida del Monte Carmelo*, even insists that new contemplatives look directly at Christ “humanado” because the Son’s corporeality contained the divinity of God (Davis Religious 91).

Within her *Vida*, St. Teresa declares that “While we live as human beings, it is very important for us to keep Christ’s humanity before us [. . .] (157). Clearly, she

---

*disfigured by the smallpox and so sober in her speech that she became the first virgin tertiary in the*
recognized that those who have been practicing oración for a long time would benefit the most from initial contemplation on Christ’s humanity rather than beginning with concentration on His divinity (Davis, Religious 91). Magdalena insisted that the body of Christ be held in higher esteem than other bodily objects, especially by spiritual novices:

Withdrawal from bodily objects must no doubt be good, since it is recommended by such spiritual persons. But, in my opinion, it is right only when the soul is very far advanced. Until then it must, of course, seeks the Creator through his creatures [. . .]. But what I should like to make clear is that Christ’s Humanity must not be reckoned among those bodily objects. This must be clearly understood [. . .] (Vida 156).

Indeed, a key part of the spirituality and the move toward their union with the Divine was through the imitation of God’s human form: Christ Jesus. Yet, for all of these mystics, gazing upon Christ’s human form—and especially upon his suffering on the cross—amounted to no more than a first step on the road to divine union. Once the apostolate progressed along their spiritual journey, he or she was supposed to abandon corporeal images in favor of “intellectual visions,” images sensed or felt rather than seen. St. Teresa states in her Vida: “[. . .] que con los ojos del cuerpo ni de el alma no vi nada, más, parecía estaba junto cabe mi Cristo y vía ser El el que me hablava” [. . .] (Vida 118) (“[. . .] I saw Christ at my side—or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul [. . .] but as this was not an imaginary vision I could not see in what form”) (Life 188). If they ever did see an image of Christ in human form, it was to be seen with the “eyes of the soul” rather than the “eyes of the body.” Viewing Christ with the ethereal soul rather than the physical body greatly diminished the role that the mystic’s corporeality played in both mystical

Dominican order (Potkay and Evitt 18).
contemplation and union with God. This is why early modern Spanish mystics often described themselves as gazing upon images of Christ’s body with spiritual eyes rather than physical ones.

Within her *Vida*, St. Teresa of Ávila states that she often looked upon the body of Christ. Yet, she is continually careful to stress that she always sees Him with the “eyes of the soul.” She asserts that: “Representóseme Cristo delante con mucho rigor, dándome a entender lo que de aquello le pasaba. Vile con los ojos del alma más claramente que le pudiera ver con los ojos del cuerpo” (*Vida* 45). (“Christ appeared before me looking most severe, and giving me to understand that there was something about this that displeased Him. I saw Him with the eyes of the soul more clearly than I could have seen Him with the eyes of the body [. . .] (*Life* 53).

Teresa was aware of the preference given to visions that were felt rather than seen. In fact, in the commentary that followed the vision described above, we see that Teresa was not only cognizant of the greater importance given to images seen with the “eyes of the soul” but was well aware that visions viewed with corporeal eyes were considered to be dangerous as they were possibly the work of the devil and thus, “[. . .] la más baja y adonde más ilusiones puede hacer el demonio [. . .] (*Vida* 123) “the lowest kind, and the one most open to the delusions of the devil” [. . .] (*Life* 197). Later, St. Teresa states that not understanding the harm involved with seeing visions with the eyes of the body could cause: “Hízome mucho daño no saber yo que era posible ver nada, si no era con los ojos de el cuerpo, y el demonio que me ayudó a que lo creyese ansí, y hacerme entender era imposible, y que se me havía antojado, y que podia ser el demonio, y otras cosas de esta suerte” [. . .] (*Vida* 45). (“I was much harmed at that time by not
knowing that one can see things with other eyes than those of the body. It was the devil who encouraged me in my ignorance, and made me think any other form of sight impossible. He made me believe that I had imagined it, that it might be his own work, and other things of the sort [. . .]” (Life 53).

Apparently, Teresa de Jesús was quite aware of the dangers inherent in acknowledging visions seen with the physical body. She therefore took great pains to distance herself from them. Her Vida also declares that the soul never likes to waste time with things related to the body: “Oh, qué es un alma que se ve aquí haver de tornar a tartar con todos, a mirar y ver estar farsa de esta vida tan mal concertada, a gastar el tiempo en cumplir con el cuerpo, durmiendo y comiendo!” (Vida 97) “Oh, how it pains a soul which has been in this [contemplative] state to return to the business of the world, to look at the disorderly farce of this life, to waste time attending to such bodily needs as those of eating and sleeping!” (Life 149). In St. Teresa’s view, mysticism and the body were for the most part separate entities.

Teresa de Jesús’s distance from the corporeal aspects of spirituality went beyond an assertion that only spiritual eyes, or ‘ojos del alma’ were capable of seeing mystical visions of Christ’s humanity. She taught her novices that they should only briefly contemplate Christ’s suffering humanity, then quickly move on to other spiritual matters. To clarify her position, she described her reaction to a vision of Christ’s wounded body she once saw while in the oratory: “[. . .] Cristo muy llagado, y tan devota, que en
mirándola, toda me turbo deverle tal, porque representava bien lo que pasó por nosotros. Fue tanto lo que sentí de lo mal que havía agradecido aquellas llagas, que el corazón me parece se me partía, y arrojéme cabe El con grandísimo derramiento de lágrimas, suplicándole me fortaleciese ya de una vez para no ofenderle” (*Vida* 53).46

In the above passage, St. Teresa places emphasis on the emotional reaction that she felt upon seeing Christ’s broken body. However, in a later passage she declares that one should not spend too much time reflecting on Christ’s suffering body, lest they should loose sight of the primary importance of his love:

> Pues tornando a lo que decía de pensar a Cristo a la coluna, es bueno descurrir un rato y pensar las penas que allí tuvo, y por qué las tuvo, y quién es el que las tuvo, el amor con que las paso; mas que no se canse siempre en andar a buscar esto, sino que se esté allí con Él, acallado el entendimiento. Si pudiere ocuparle en que mire que la mira, y le acompane, y hable, y pida, y se humille y regale con Él, y acuerde que no erencia estar allí; cuando pudiere hacer esto—aunque sea el principio de comenzar oracion—hallara grande provecho [. . .] (*Vida* 69).47

According to the teachings expressed in this passage, one’s attention should be placed on Jesus’s spiritual presence rather than his suffering and death: “porque si es imagen, es imagen viva; no hombre muerto, sino Cristo vivo; y da entender que es hombre y Dios, no como estaba en el sepulcro, sino como salió de él después de

---

46 “Christ terribly wounded and it was so moving that when I looked at it the very sight of Him shook me, for it clearly showed what He suffered for us. So strongly did I feel what a poor return I had made for those wounds, that my heart seemed to break, and I threw myself on the ground before Him in a great flood of tears, imploring Him to give me strength once and for all not to offend Him again” (*Life* 67).

47 “To return, however, to what I said about mediating on Christ at the pillar—it is good to reflect for a while and think of the pains He suffered, and of why He suffered them, and of who it was that suffered them, and of the love with which He suffered them. Yet we should not always weary ourselves by pursuing such thoughts, but rather stay there beside Him, with all our thoughts stilled. We should occupy ourselves, if we can, by gazing at Him who is gazing at us, and should keep Him company, and talk with Him, and pray to Him, and humble ourselves and delight in Him, and remind ourselves that we do not deserve to be there. Anyone who can do this, though he may be at the very beginning of prayer, will make great progress [. . .]” (*Life* 96-97).
resucitado” (*Vida* 125). “If what I see is an image, it is a living image, no dead man but the living Christ, and He reveals Himself as God and man, not as He was in the tomb, but as He was when He left it, after rising from the dead” (*Life* 199). This passage illustrates that when Teresa sees a vision of Christ, it is a vision of an empowered divinity seen through the “los ojos del alma” rather than a broken and bloody human body gazed upon by “los ojos corporals.”

**Seeing With Los “Ojos Corporales:” The Embodied Mysticism of Madre María Magdalena Muñoz**

In contrast to St. Teresa, Madre Magdalena’s *Vida* demonstrates its autobiographer’s belief that one could not reach divine union without doing so through the body. She was a mystic who thought, felt and knew through her body. She used images that mediated between the body and the spirit. In her particular form of mystical experience, the heart and spirit share importance, even if she tried to say that mystical union was in fact a bodiless endeavor. Thus, within Madre Magdalena’s writing, we see that the body is often “deeply implicated” (Petroff 61) in the mystical theology of early modern feminine religious leaders. For many of them, “knowing is performed not by the soul alone, but by the whole person—body soul and heart” (Petroff 61).

For this reason, although the writing subject may speak of the suspensions and the visions she saw as occurring when her soul is outside of her body; she never completely omits her body and its various parts and fluids from her mystical writing. On the contrary, we will see in the following discussion of the written transmission of her visionary experiences that Madre María Magdalena transmitted a message of unification
with the divine that simultaneously announced it as disembodied while at the same time it undermined its own announcement by firmly situating itself within corporality. She did so by combining the ultimate state of union with God, and the supposed disembodied state that it involved with an insistence on contemplation of Christ’s crucified body as the way to arrive at this union. When she combined the body and mysticism in this way, she displayed what Wendy Wright defines as “embodied mysticism,” (i.e., the manifestation of the suffering divine body of Christ within the mystic’s own body) in her article “Inside My Body Is the Body of God: Margaret Mary Alacogue and the Tradition of Embodied Mysticism” (2000).

According to Wright, medieval mystics like her subject, the Frenchwoman religious Margaret Margaret Alacogue actually “became” Christ’s wounded body within their mystical writing by enfolding their bodies within His (Wright 186-187). Their modes of prayer that “encouraged a radical participation with the suffering of Jesus” enabled them to envelope their own corporality within that of Jesus’s divine body (Wright 186-187).

Suffering, particularly as a sacrificial victim, became a primary category through which knowledge and intimacy with God was cultivated. Moreover, the suffering participant became part of the redemptive movement unleashed in the Christ event. The sufferer became an alter-Christus whose own pain was efficacious (Wright 188).

In a sense, these mystics “acted out” the event of Christ’s crucifixion and his later suffering for humanity within their own bodies. Thus, their actions represented a “theatrical embodiment, an enfleshing of God revealed as the poor, crucified Christ” (Wright 187). “striking female figures who embodied, “acted out,” or were joined in union to the person of the crucified Lord” (Wright 187).
Women who had suffered from bodily illnesses and physical disabilities were especially drawn to the textual dramatizations of shared bodily suffering with Christ’s body. This was so because such dramatizations transformed the vivid experiences of bodily and mental anguish that they regularly felt into discursive re-enactions of Christ’s death on the Cross. The sickly and disabled Madre Magdalena was one of these women. This is why Madre Magdalena Muñoz’s refused to look away from the grotesque spectacle of the wounded body when she wrote her *Vida*. On the contrary, the Mexican nun consistently highlighted the body’s position within her text to re-value its status within society. Madre Magdalena first placed the bloodied, wounded and imperfect body of Christ front and center within her *Vida*. Once she placed Christ’s body in a prominent position within her text, she then, in an act of what the thirteenth century English anchoress of Norwich (1343-1413) once called “bodily seeing,” she refused to look away from it but rather continued to gaze upon it in order act out its pain and suffering within her own body.48

According to Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt in *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* Julian’s “bodily seeing” was representative of her desire to have a recollection of the passion in the form of “a bodily sight.” She desires this so as to “hauv more knowledge of the bodily paynes of our saviour” (“have more knowledge of

48 In 1373 Julian of Norwich first saw at the age of 30, a series of visions or “showings” of the Passion of the Christ. Although she wrote them down in 1393 she never gave a title to her book—perhaps a testimony to its perpetually unfinished state. Modern editions are published under various titles, the most common of which is some form of *Revelations of Divine Love*, though the work is frequently referred to as *Showings*, on the basis of Edmund Colledge and James Walsh’s critical edition, entitled *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, and their popular modernization, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, in the Classics of Western Spirituality series. In this chapter I refer to the text by the title *A Revelation of Love* given to it by Bauerschmidt because I agree with his assertion that it more closely reflects the spirit of the text (213). After all, Julian describes the work in the opening of the first chapter of the long text as a revelation of love: “This is a reuelation of loue” (1.2). Moreover, this is also the title chosen by Marion
the bodily pains of our savior”) by suffering with Christ just as did Mary Magdalene and others who were at the crucifixion. The result was to obtain a kind of solidarity in suffering: “I wolde have beene one of thame and suffrede with thame” (I would have been one with them and suffered with them”) (23). The Virgin Mary was the paradigm for this type of vicarious sharing in Jesus’s suffering in that “gazing with her bodily eye upon her crucified son she feels his passion in her own body” (Bauerschmidt 91).

The Mexican nun herself calls in seeing con “los ojos corporales” (“with corporal eyes”), “los ojos del cuerpo” (“the eyes of the body”) or even seeing and experiencing “corporalmente” (“bodily”) that she refused to turn her gaze away from its wounded materiality. Later, in the last stage of her process of bodily re-conceptualization, Madre María discursively connected her bleeding and broken body to that of Jesús Christ. In doing so, she transformed a feminine materiality that was once an object of disgust and revulsion into an object of veneration and adulation.

In similar fashion, Madre María’s mystical theology constitutes a form of “bodily seeing” that uses the body as mediator of mystical knowledge. It also focuses on the concrete humanity of Jesus as the locus of the revelation of divine power. She sees and feels things through her body “vi y senti corporalmente” (Magdalena 23). Thus like Julian’s “showings,” Madre Magdalena’s visions reveal the unusually visceral quality of her imagination. The Christ that appears to her is one who is always dripping blood from under his crown of thorns. For example, in one vision, she explains that half of Christ’s head had been made so bloody from his “corona de espinas en la cabeza” (“the crown of thorns on his head”) as to be completely engulfed in red: “era medio lado de la cabeza y

Glasscoe for her edition of the British Museum Sloane Manuscript No. 2499.
rostro el cabello rojo y muy ensangrentado” (“half of his head, face and hair were very red and bloody”) (Muñoz 40). Seeing all of this blood did not disturb her or make her turn away; rather it made her want to love Him all the more: “y buelta de esta suspension quede con muy grande de amor a este Señor” (“and I returned from this suspension with a great love for the Lord”) (Muñoz 40). Christ’s blood fills her with such feelings of love and devotion that she is always asking him to bathe her in this blood: “suplicando a su Magestad la limpiase con su santísima sangre” (“I was begging his Majesty to clean me with his holy blood”) (Muñoz 49); and to purificase mi alma y la labase con su sangre (“purify my soul and cleanse it with his blood”) (Muñoz 49).

Madre Magdalena’s construction of herself as being bathed and cleansed in Jesus’s holy blood subtly connects both her body and Jesus’s body with the same symbolic image of Jesus as Mother that Isabel de Jesús used so prominently in her Vida. She made this connection because in her era, religious thinkers considered the bodily fluids of blood and milk to be interchangeable. We see this same type of connection in another mystical Mexican text written by a religious woman: Sor María Ann Agueda de San Ignacio. The author of this text makes a direct reference to the interchangeability of blood and milk when she explains how milk rather than blood streamed out of Catherine the Martyr when she was decapitated for refusing to recant her Christian beliefs (Eich 115). This same author also states that the Virgin Mary’s blood was later converted into milk to feed her son. Furthermore, it is this author’s contention that Christians receive
Mary’s spirit through her blood converted into milk: “Sabido es tambien, que en la Leche se simboliza la doctrina, porque recibe en ella el espíritu de quien la ministra” [. . .] (It is also known that [Mary’s] milk symbolizes doctrine, because from it one receives the spirit of she who dispenses it). (Eich 33).

Madre Magdalena’s desire to share in Christ’s blood springs directly from her desire for a ‘bodily sight’ in which she can literally suffer with Christ. She wanted this type of corporeal seeing because having bodily sight means suffering with Christ. In her mind suffering as a human pattern was not a first step that must be transcended in contemplation; in itself it was the moment of union with the divine. Ultimately, when she focused on Jesus’s crucified material body to reach a state of union, (Madre María’s Vida rejects the nominal God of formal omnipotence in favor of the crucified God of Jesus Christ. In the process, she shows (as is the case with Julian of Norwich’s Revelations,) that “salvation depends on incorporation into and union within the suffering, generative body of Christ, and this incorporation and union is as much ‘political’ as is it is ‘spiritual’” (Bauerschmidt 58).

Because mystical vision was to Madre María Magdalena both a visceral and a spiritual experience, she often describes herself as witnessing God with the eyes of her soul and the eyes of her body (“los ojos del alma y cuerpo”) (19). Whenever she leaves her body and goes into a trance or levitation and experiences a vision involving union with the divine, she feels it as well as sees it “corporalmente” (bodily). Just as it was with both Teresa of Ávila and Catherine of Siena, Magdalena feels within her body a
state of “grave enfermedad” (grave illness) (Muñoz 23). For this reason, the form of affective piety expressed by Madre María is one in which the “body is not so much a hindrance to the soul’s ascent as the opportunity for it. Body is the instrument upon which the mystic brings changes of pain and delight” (Bynum, Fragmentation 58).

Madre Magdalena’s visions do not just involve her seeing through her body. They also involve her gazing upon a God who is both bodied and bodiless at the same time, or as she continually puts it “con objeto y sin objeto” (“with and without object”) (Muñoz 62). That is to say she feels and sees a formless God but at the same time she always finds herself in the presence of an embodied God (i.e., Jesus) during her ecstasies. She described one such experience where she was lifted up and away from her body and floated within her solitary spiritual desert:

me llevaron el alma en un gran desierto o soledad y de repente vide una cruz con JesuChristo crucificado tan doloroso y llagado y estando yo con mis gran afectos mirándole y pidiéndo misericordia de mis pecados se desenclababa por un braxo y se iba doblando su santísimo cuerpo en la cruz hasta que llegaba avía mi alma y vi y senti hechaba un brazo sobre mi y me allegaba a su santísimo cuerpo con muy grande beniguidad yo entonces quede tan absorta que me parecia avia desfallecido mi alma. . . (Muñoz 22) 

49 “I was carried to a great desert or quiet place and all of the sudden I saw a cross with a very painful, wounded, crucified Jesus Christ and I felt great emotion looking at Him and asking His forgiveness for my sins when his Holy Body turned on the cross until it arrived at my soul and I saw and felt him put an arm around me and I was very happy because of His holy body and then I was so absorbed that it seemed to me that my soul had fainted away [. . .]”
In this vision, Madre Magdalena comes to know God by having Jesus enfold her body in his. It is the enfolding of this materiality within hers that leads to the unification of their bodies, which is later followed by that of their souls as well. This type of somatic unification between the human and the divine is reiterated in another vision in which she and Jesus are together in the desert:

Otra vez estando en oración de coloquio ofreciéndome a Dios, y resignándome en sus divinas manos y voluntad suplicándole fuese yo agradable a sus divinos ojos. [. . .] Y estando mi alma en éste con unos ardientes deseos de amar a Dios se me apareció una figura de JesuChristo en pie, su santísimo cuerpo desnudo y muy llagado (Muñoz 18)50

Gazing at her body, Jesus says “[. . .] y estándole mirando con los ojos del alma oí una voz que decía: ‘ésta es mi recámara.’ Y luego se me desapareció [. . .]” (“[. . .] looking at Him with the eyes of my soul, I heard a voice that said: ‘This is my bedchamber.’ Y luego se me desapareció) (Muñoz 18). By this he means, “within your body is where my body lies” (Muñoz 17). The eroticism that the phrase “this is my bedroom” implies adds a sense of intimacy to María Magdalena’s union with Christ as it is depicted in the text.

Significantly, the body that Madre María Magdalena both sees and ultimately unites with in the two above visions is that of a crucified Christ whom she sees while mediating on Him. Thus, rather than one that is completely healthy and “put together,” what she sees and unites with above is a material holy body that is wounded and bleeding and that can be best accessed through contemplation of the steps of the Passion of the

50“Another time I was in conversational prayer, offering myself to God, and placing myself in His divine hands and holy will, making supplication that I might be pleasing in His eyes. [. . .] And as my soul rested there with fervent desires to love God, there appeared to me a figure of Jesus, standing upright, His most blessed body naked and full of wounds [. . .] (18).
Christ. This is also the case in all of her other visions in which the body of Jesus Christ is present. In fact, the majority of her visions that involve the body of Jesus Christ, she describes herself as being witness to “lo que pasaba a de mi nuestro Señor con la cruz” (“what happened to my Savior on the cross”) (Muñoz 16). In these visions, she re-enacts Mary’s vicarious sharing in Christ’s suffering as she gazes with bodily eyes upon her crucified Lord (Bauerschmidt 58). She sees the blows as they hit his body; she sees the blood that flows from the wounds created by cruel torture. As she witnesses these events, she feels the pain that they provoked coursing through her own flesh. This makes her feel as if she was actually present at the historical event, along with Mary. She rejoices in this feeling, and through her rejoicing shows that in fact she, “wanted to see with her body and not just her eyes” (Bauerschmidt 59). She wanted to see Him thus because to gaze with the same intensity of love as Mary upon Christ crucified was to be with him on the cross, to the point where perception lapses over into imitation. She felt Christ’s pain. Ultimately, her body becomes His body and she reaches the point where St. Bonaventure in Meditaciones de Passione could be talking to her and the Holy Mother when he asks the gut-wrenching question: “Father! Do you not see my mother’s pains? She is with me on the cross; I should be crucified, and not she” (qtd in Bauerschmidt 39)

Madre María Magdalena’s experiencing of God through los ojos corporales is a reflection of her strongly held belief that God’s power is the power of the cross. Thus, what she sees in her visions is none other than the divine nature revealed as in Jesus’s bodily sacrifice that redeems humanity. In this way, the Mexican nun’s mystical theology reflects Saint Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo? This foundational Christian text argues that the human nature of Christ was crucial to our salvation, for it was by virtue of
his humanity that he was able to act as our representative before God. Aquinas believed that it was the flesh \(\text{caro}\) of Christ and the mysteries therein \(\text{et mysteria in ea perpetrata}\) that is both the instrumental and exemplary cause of grace (Cousins 376). In a similar mode, Madre María’s mystical theology produced a response of what was called “compunction:” (“a divinely inspired piercing of the heart by sorrow for sin and longing for God”) which allowed for the one desiring to suffer with Christ to subjectively appropriate his work. In Madre Magdalena’s compunctions, visions that involved the crucifixion of Jesus did not merely allow her to witness what happened with Christ on the cross, she actually experienced it along with him. Their shared experience of suffering is what ultimately unites her with God.

In Madre María’s visions, her soul becomes affixed to the cross and symbolizes her newfound unification with Him through their shared suffering. She later reiterates this point when she describes how during one of her suspensions, she felt as if the cross had in fact implanted itself right in the middle of her heart and remained there as if she had actually been born there: “me suspendí y sentí que una cruz muy grande la alzaban en alto y la dejaban caer y se afixaba en medio de mi corazón y quedaba en el como si en el ubiera nacido” (“I was suspended and I felt that an enormous cross was raised and then fell, penetrating the center of my heart and remained in it almost as if it had been born there”) (Muñoz 19).

The union that she has found with Jesus—and through him to God—in their mutual suffering is one that is especially suited to Madre Magdalena. In her historical life, she suffered daily. Like Him, she was a wounded body, a failed body that bled profusely and sloughed off its parts unto the rest of the world. Thus her connection with
her material body and her historical life bodily suffering serves as a clear example of just how much “illness could also teach and remind both the patient and those around her about the nature and profundity of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity” (Ross 38-9).

Madre María continually highlights the presence of her wounded, bleeding and broken body throughout the text to reinforce the idea of her unity with Christ’s suffering. She inscribes almost every page of her Vida with the signs of the physical symptoms that she exhibited during her lifetime, among them the extreme pain caused by bloodletting injuries. The descriptions of her symptoms insinuate that her illnesses were God’s will:

como queria su Magestad fuese esta enfermedad el crisol donde mi alma se purificase no me hacía provecho ningun remedio que por esta occasion me dieron los medicos unos sudores muy fuertes y luego me dieron unciones. Después de estas unciones me volvieron a dar otros sudores mas fuertes y visto los medicos que con esto no sonaba me dieron un boton de fuego en la mollera que me vi en muy gran detrimento y riesgo de perder el juicio. Mas su Magestad como queria que todos fuesen instrumentos para el martirio que queria que en esto pasase a su imitacion, nada me hacía provecho que parecia el Señor me tenia hechada una soga en la garganta como lo que paso por mi [. . .] (Muñoz 6-7).51

[. . .] as His Majesty wanted this sickness to be the crucible in which my soul was to be purified, none of the remedies did me any good. After these unctions they induced yet stronger sweats and when the doctors had seen that with all this I was not recovering, they applied a red hot iron to the crown of my skull such that I was in great peril and in danger of losing my mind. But His Majesty, desiring that all these should be the instruments of the martyrdom that He wished me to undergo in imitation of His own, let none of this treatment work to my benefit, for it seemed that the Lord had drawn a noose about my neck, like the one He suffered for me [. . .]
Madre María forces the reader’s impression of her broken, useless body to go beyond the views of her day and instead see her afflictions as part of the divine will. God did this because He wanted to unite with her from the beginning. It is because of His desire to remain united with her through shared suffering that He wishes for her pecho y corazón (chest and heart) to be “sagrario” (bloodied) as was His human form Jesus. (Muñoz 52). She also claims that is why God does not allow the doctors to ever discover what is wrong with her: “Después de muchas curas y que no certaban a conocer que mal era que como Dios quería que aquello fuera oculto a los hombres” [. . .]” (“After many treatments that were not able to determine what was wrong as God wanted to keep the problem hidden from the men”) (Muñoz 8).

Although God’s “interventions” caused Madre Magdalena to remain incapacitated and almost completely bedridden for most of her life, she presented herself as reveling in the closeness to God that her body’s state offers for her. In spite of the tremendous pain that it constantly generated, Madre María expresses joy and pleasure at having the opportunity to imitate Christ in his martyrdom. In fact, as we see in the following passage, she thanks God for allowing her to get closer to Jesus by sharing with Him the pain that He felt on the cross:
Another time I was feeling very great pains in my body I placed myself in very profound prayer offering to God those pains and considering them to be like those that Christ had suffered on the cross for my sins and my guilt that I should suffer them for Him.” (Muñoz 40).

Moreover, she welcomed her painful treatments, because they allowed her to share in Christ’s martyrdom:

They hugged me with little knives of fire so fiercely that in this torment I felt many terrible pains and these I endured with such pleasure and happiness because I incorporated them with those that my Redeemer had endured on the cross for my sins that I considered what I had endured to be slight. With these considerations I was in such a profound prayer that my tremors increased in such force that seeing that the human cures were not going to help me and that I had spent time in this cure and as time went on the pain became sharper. Because as I have said the sentiment proceeded from me that God gave my soul from the stations of the holy passion that I mediated because sometimes at the station of the crowning of thorns my Majesty communicated to me that I should feel the same pains in my soul and in my heart. [Thethorns] did not remain in my heart but burst, causing me to give out such great screams and tremors [..
The bloodier her body is made by these treatments the better. In Madre Magdalena’s particular brand of mystical theology, to be covered in blood is to be united with Christ through blood. She feels strongly that nearly all of her visions involving unification with Christ’s body are ones that involve some variation on the theme of being covered in Christ’s blood. For example, at one point while she is in the presence of God, she is shown a vision of Christ’s *santísimo cuerpo muy llagado, y corriendo sangre* ("very wounded and bleeding most holy body"). According to her description of this vision, the blood that is flowing out of Christ’s body reaches into her soul (*aquella sangre participaba mi alma*) (Muñoz 28) and fills it with a peace that takes away the tribulations and anguish that she felt before. She comes out of this vision of union filled with inspiration and *muy grandes y ardientes deseos de amar y servir a Dios y agradarle en todo cumpliendo su santísima voluntad* ("very great and ardent desires to love and serve God and worship in everything fulfilling his holy wish") (28).

Jesus actively covers Magdalena in His blood during her visions. His blood washes over her and she bathes herself—or rather baptizes herself—in His blood. In so doing, she actively unites his detachable body parts—fluids that symbolize his body—with herself. This is why she states that when He provides her with His precious blood to bathe herself when He enters into her heart: “me lavase con su preciosa sangre {y} yo de ver avia entrado en mi pecho” (“He washed me with his precious blood {and} I saw that He had entered my chest”) (Muñoz 26).

Not coincidentally Catherine of Siena also uses the image of a blood baptism in describing her union not only with the divine but also with her fellow human beings. For example in her *Dialogue* she states that, “For if we long for mercy, we have only to bathe our entire being in the blood of Jesus, the cleansing, healing liquid which alone ‘shatters the diamond’ of our resistance and softens our heart to God and one another. No matter how grievous, our every sin can be washed clean by this saving blood that bathes us in..."
Other visions, such as the following, serve to further reiterate Madre María’s connection to Christ, which makes her a direct participant in His ministry but His redemptive grace:

Contemplando los pasos de la cruxificacion: vi con los ojos del alma muy distinctamente como los corporales: un Jesuchristo crucificado en una cruz muy grande y muy sangriento y herido y vi a nuestra Señor al pie de la cruz con un manto asul cubierta y tan gotando de la sangre que de la cruz cacia que estaba toda muy llena de ella y con manos altos por recibir aquel precioso cuerpo; y aunque muy afligida muy bellisima que los via yo muy distinctamente: hisome su Magestad participante desta preciosa sangre y dolor de su Santa Madre y con muy grandes afectos de servirlo (Muñoz 19).\(^5^4\)

Madre María’s connection of herself and her body with Jesus is an important part of the construct of herself as a duplication of God’s power. The blood of Jesus is charged with regenerative powers for humanity, for it is both plentiful by the power (“vertu”) of His divinity and yet is still human blood. Divine power is released by being brought low so as to be spread abroad by the human blood of Jesus. It is this human blood according to Julian of Norwich that, “overflowyth all erth, and is redy to wash all creatures of synne which be of good wyll, haue ben and shall be” (“overflows all the earth, and is ready to wash from sin all creatures that are, have been, and will be of good will”). It also ascends in Christ’s body into heaven, where Jesus continues to bleed “as long as vs nedyth” (“as long as we have need”). For Julian, the intercessory power of Christ’s blood has

the “expansiveness of God’s charity and forgiveness” (4: 32). Later on she states that, “Bathed in the blood of Jesus, we will pass gently through death’s door and find ourselves in the heart of God, the sea of peace” (82: 152).

\(^5^4\) “Contemplating the stations of the cross: I saw with eyes of the soul as distinctively as those of the body: a crucified and suffering Jesus Christ on a very large and bloody cross and I saw our Lord covered with a blue blanket dripping with so much blood that it was full of it and with hands held high to receive the precious body; and although very beautifully distressed that I saw it distinctly: God made me a participant nthis precious blood and pain of the Holy Mother and with many great desires to serve him.”
overtones of the power of infinite and eternal fecundity” (Bauerschmidt 85). Thus, when she becomes joined to Christ’s blood in her text, she becomes infused with His intercessory power. The same phenomenon happens to Madre María Magdalena in her text. When she sees with her “ojos corporales muy distintamente un JesuCristo crucificado en carne humano y muy sangriento su santo cuerpo” (47) (“very distinctly with the eyes of the body a crucified Christ in human flesh and with a very blood holy body”) and joins with him through her bodily seeing (i.e. shared suffering), her blood becomes mixed with His redemptive blood and gives her His intercessory powers.

Once infused with these powers, Madre María Magdalena is able to intercede on behalf of others and ultimately bring them to God. In one of her visions, she sees five religious women on their knees in front of an altar praying for their souls. She returns from the vision full of understanding that it is her duty to help these women find forgiveness and salvation. Having been baptized in Christ’s blood and connected forever to his body, she feels both capable and responsible for interceding on their behalf (Muñoz 43). Later she sees “un hombre muy abominable con el rostro descubierto y de que a su lado le atormentaba muy gravemente” (“a very abominable man with an uncovered face who at his side was being very gravely tormented”) (Muñoz 43). She asks God to save his soul as well, even though he is a great sinner. The fact that she felt confident enough in her powers as God’s intermediary demonstrates just how much her visionary experience had actually empowered her. Later, she sees a sick person who is near death.
She prays for this person’s soul and knows that God has listened to her prayers. She is quite sure when coming out of her suspensión that God saved this unfortunate woman’s life. Madre María now has the power to not only save people’s souls from purgatory, but to also save them from death itself

Once she hears from the other nuns about a comet that has been spotted flying over Mexico, she felt “muy gran pena en [su] alma” (“a very great pain in [her] soul] because she knew that God was unhappy with the Mexican people”) (Muñoz 48). She then prayed fervently for the entire colony, hoping to free its entire people from the bondage of sin:

55 “Another time I was in prayer commending to God a certain person that was very gravely ill and at the point of death and beseeching his Majesty to grant him life I went into trance and Jesus Christ appeared to me: half of the body open above and one side open without a chest and seeing this I heard the voice of Christ tell me that this person would remain alive: I returned from this suspension certain of his health and even that he would get it soon.”

56 And I commended him to our Lord and beseeching Him that the pains that were demonstrated in this City and with this petition I was an entire day in profound prayer [. . .] he did not permit such a great punishment be inflicted upon this City without his great mercy protecting and liberating them. This petition and prayer lasted for a month.”
Madre María Magdalena intercedes for people because she feels great love for them. This love has come through her unification with Jesus, His suffering and His redemptive blood. Her body has become infused with love from contact with His infinitely loving body. Thus, we see the painful side of divine love—wounding, capture, transfixion, penetration (the metaphors come equally from the language of the hunt and from that of the crucifixion)—and a dependence on love for satisfaction. We also see the joys of that love, desire both as pleasure/a process of transformation and the connection that they forge. This connection is between the human and the divine, but also between humans. Such images dominate Madre Magdalena’s text. We see evidence of this kind of human-to-human connection in the form of a soul that is placed in a chair and stamped in the heart of Madre María. Madre María feels bonded to this soul and prays for her. Through their connection, she is ultimately able to save this person:

quede suspense y en ella me llevaron el alma a un campo muy solo y estando yo en esto vi con los ojos del alma me ponian en una silla muy colorada de un muy gran fuego y asi como la pusieron me estamparon en mi alma era aquel asiento por aquella persona a quien yo avia suplicado a Dios por su salvation [. . .] luego se me desaparecio y luego volvi desta suspension con un muy gran dolor y lastima de esta persona y con deseos de encomendarlo a su Magestad (Muñoz 29).57

The many nuns Magdalena sees in her suspension are also stamped within her heart. She sees their bodies right before the time of their death. Madre Magdalena always intervenes on behalf of the sisters. God always listens to her and she is always

57 “I remained in suspension and in it my soul was carried alone to a remote field and while there I saw with the eyes of my soul they placed me in a chair colored red like a huge fire and as they put me in it they stamped in my soul was that seat was for that person whom I had begged to God for salvation [. . .]. Soon
successful, since she is a mediator between her fellow humans and the divine. Once again, she is so successful at saving them because of the great love she feels and which unites her to them and ultimately to God. In the end, it is because of this bodily interconnection between God, Madre María and the rest of the population that her spiritual Vida substantiates the notion that at the very base of philosophical discourse love and the soul cannot be separated.

The experience of love, which often purported to be an ‘out of body’ trance state, actually describes the body in loving through the representation of sensuality, the construction of eroticism, and the description of the ecstasy of physical states, as well as by the attention to bodily functions, such as eating and not eating, and by the manifestation of bodily illness as a symptom of love (Petroff 57).

This discourse of love brings a feeling of jouissance to women such as Madre Magdalena, and thus it is the body—the wounded body with all its connective fissures—that has enabled it:

The body, in particular, its fluids and emissions, becomes the site of this positive and celebratory re-inscription and affirmation of human spirit. Its distinctions are permeable and liable to dissolve [...] here the ‘grotesque body’ with its offshoots, its breasts, its wounds, its fissures, its leaking fluids of blood, milk, and oil, rearticulates itself. It speaks of pain and suffering but it also tells of joy, of an alternative feminine experience derived from an awareness of woman’s own, different body (Ashton 145).

The connection forged between Madre María and the souls for which she prays (and almost always eventually saves) is symbolized by the water that often abounds in the visions that she has involving those whom she saves from the pains of purgatory. For example, in one vision she sees a woman coming out of a great body of water:

it dissapeared and later I came back from this suspensión with very great sorrow and sadness for this person and with desires to commend him to his Majesty.”
Later, in another vision, Madre Magdalena is taken to a field where she sees this same woman. Once again, she asks who she is and is told, that she was, “de aquella persona que avia encomendado” (“the person that you have been praying for”) (Muñoz 38).

Finally, in another vision that she has several days later, God shows her that He has answered her prayers and saved this woman: “Dios havia oydo mis peticiones” (“God had heard my petitions”) (Muñoz 38). Several days after this vision, the husband of the woman comes to ask Magdalena to pray for his wife, who is very ill. Madre Magdalena then realizes that this man’s wife was the woman that she had seen in the lake and for whom she had been praying. It is at this point that she realizes the extent of her prophetic powers and what they can do to help her to intercede for souls that have passed on and for those who love them.

Filled with love for God and for all of his children on earth, Madre Magdalena’s body becomes a body of love just like Christ’s. Christ’s body was transformed from a flesh that bled and died on the cross, and thus was a “failed body,” that is to say “a body deprived of its proper form, because it did not prudently police its boundaries but rather squandered the limited supply of its precious blood” (Lochrie 145). In the same way,

---

58 “One day when I was at prayer after having received communion and in this petition I remained suspended and I saw a very large body of water and I saw emerging from this body of water the upper half of a very corpulent body of a woman [ . . . ] I affixed my eyes on her. I asked who she was because I did not know her and she said ‘I am someone for whom you have prayed to God for a long time,’ and saying this
Madre Magdalena’s body became a salvific body. That meant her body had to be failed in some sense. It is only in her body’s failure that it can unite all of God’s creatures in the compassion of His love and forgiveness. Thus, the Hieronymite nun is able to reach out to all God’s people through a body that remains forever pierced and wounded. Omnivorously seductive in its compassion, assimilating and incorporating all who come within its ambit, Madre María’s bleeding materiality transforms all who encounter it into children borne in Christ’s body. This body is “a social body that quite simply is Christ’s body of compassion” and a body which “gives pride of place not to those who possess the most power, but to those who have been most in need and received the greatest mercy” (Bauerschmidt 146). As she unites all of the needy to God by reaching out and connecting with them through her own corporality, Madre María builds a community of the saved.

The community is not one that she, as an invalid, could have found any other way. Once she builds this community, she is saved from isolation and continual loneliness. Although very little is said about her relationships with the other women in the convent, a sense of unification and connection grounded in Christ’s suffering body and re-articulated in Madre María Magdalena’s Christ-like wounded materiality pervades throughout her spiritual Vida. In spite of Madre Magdalena’s failed body, she is able to become a corporate body and speak and intercede for humankind. Her corporate body becomes empowered. That’s because the more that people heard about her ability to petition God on their behalf, the higher the esteem they had for her. Therefore, the church authorities had to acknowledge her spiritual authority among the locals.

she sank into the sea and dissapeared.”
Inhabiting a failed corporate body that existed somewhere between the spiritual and material plains—like Jesus Christ—Madre María Magdalena could travel both between and within the human and divine realms carrying message from mortals to God. Ultimately, this position granted Magdalena her power and religious authority. She came to be seen as a mystic who had attained direct communion with God and whose revelations were concerned with the way of perfection. Because of her close connection with God’s great power, she also was viewed as a prophet who predicted the future (as she did in the case of the wife of the man who came to see her). Later, she predicted the salvation of a man suffering from great afflictions and pain (“muy gran affliciones y pena”). He was in fact saved because le pidiese a nuestro Señor lo sacase della y lo librase y fuese por el camino (“I asked our Lord to relieve him and to free him and put him on the way”) (Muñoz 37-38).

Conclusions

By insisting that union must come through reflecting upon Christ’s passion, Madre Magdalena takes the next step and forges a connection between her wounds, her pain, and her ever-dripping blood with Christ’s body. In doing so, she constructs herself as a Christ-like figure offering her suffering body to the world, and bathing it in her blood, to bring forgiveness and redemption to all people. She can offer this redemption to others precisely because her body’s fluidity and permeability. Madre Magdalena’s body is like Christ’s body, a “corporate body:” a body characterized by its unification with other bodies and its ability to bring favor and forgiveness to those with whom it is united. What made the border between the flesh that dies and the spirit that lives forever
a site of perpetual vulnerability was “the marginal stuff of the most obvious kind such as
spittle, blood, milk, urine, feces, or tears” that leaked out of the body and “bodily
pairings, skin, nail, hair, clippings and sweat” that bodies continually slough off onto the
world (Bauerschmidt 66).

Because it can bring redemption to all who encounter it, Madre María
Magdalena’s body becomes a force that is deeply positive rather than intrinsically
negative, unlike other fluid, overly “female” bodies. Like Christ himself, she came back
from the point of death, yet she continues despite bleeding and wounds. Madre
Magdalena positions her subjectivity somewhere between the human realm and the
divine. Within this zone, she is able to guide souls who have passed on to the glory of
heaven. As people heard of her ability to do so, her name became known far and wide.
Folks from all walks of life beseeched her to help them in their journey to God once
death inevitably found them. The more the people came, the more spiritual authority
Madre María Magdalena gained for herself. Ironically, once she constructed her body as
a suffering Christ, it is viewed as empowered by the very weakness and fluidity that had
caused it to be viewed as a site of abjection. Therefore, by stressing the similarities that
exist between her “failed” body and the broken body of Christ, Madre María Magdalena
transforms herself from a powerless and unknown invalid greatly mistrusted because her
body was viewed as “endemoniada” (possessed by the devil) (374) into a great spiritual
model possessed of a body that offered the possibility of redemption through
contemplation of bleeding wounds. This transformation redefined an “abject” body
confined to both its bed and materiality into an empowered corporate body spiritually
authorized by its ability to bring God’s forgiveness to the entire world like Christ. Her
re-conceptualization of the permeable body proves that embodiment is boundaries, but boundaries also have thresholds, or the points of opening into which others may enter and from which new lines may proceed.
CHAPTER 4
MARÍA DE SAN JOSÉ’S RETURN TO THE SPIRITUAL DESERT

O lovely desert, filled with lilies and scattered with flowers, the refreshment of the poor of Christ, the dwelling place of the lovers of God, O chaste and pure solitude, long sought-for and found at last, who has stolen you from me, my beloved—John of Fécamp, qtd in Un maître de la vie spirituelle au XI siècle

Introduction

Just as it had for Madre Magdalena, María de San José’s (1656-1719) maintenance of her virginal status helped her to reach an exalted position within her local colonial Mexican community. However, unlike Madre María Magdalena, lack of money, rather than ill health, at first stood in the way of María de San José’s rise to fame and authority. María Magdalena was affluent and thus did not have the problems that María de San José experienced when she tried to meet the financial requirements necessary to enter the convent of her choice. The different economic situations of María

---

59 We know this because according to Kathleen Myers, during the Colonial era many members of the landed gentry such as María de San José’s father felt that they had to spend so lavishly in order to maintain their elite social status that they would oftentimes go into debt. Her family’s impoverishment made evident at the time of her father’s death severely undermined María’s chances of amassing a dowry sufficient for entrance into the convent (Myers, “Studies” 254).
Magdalena and María de San José are a clear indication that although the frontier very often mitigates differences in class, those without the necessary funds often still found it much harder to find access to power than those who were blessed with some form of wealth.

The young Juana Palacios Berruecos (later to become Madre María de San José once she had taken her final vows) was born on the 25th of April 1654 to an impoverished creole family. Her family resided on the margins of society on the Hacienda de Santa Cruz (Hacienda of the Holy Cross) near the village of Tepeaca, which was located in the state of Puebla. Her parents, Luis de Palacios y Solórzano (1629?-67) and Antonia Berruecos Menéndez (1630?-94), were a creole couple originally from the city of Puebla de los Ángeles that Madre María described as being a good distance (about seven leagues) from the family home (Myers, “Studies” 252). After her spiritual conversion at the age of eleven, María de San José dreamed of entering a convent. However, she was one of many daughters, all of whom lacked the dowry necessary to become either wives or nuns, so she did not realize her dream until she was 32 years old. By this time she had already lived a large portion of her life far away from the structures of organized religion, completely removed from the protections of a male confessor charged to oversee her spiritual practices.

Although she lacked the dowry needed to enter into religious life, the young María de San José never gave up on the hope that she would one day become a nun. On the contrary, on numerous occasions she tried to break through the monetary barrier that stood between herself and the feminine community that existed beyond the convent walls. She was so persistent in her quest that she had the audacity to approach the
Archbishop himself in the hopes of enlisting his aid. Three times she approached him; three times she was denied. On the third time, to her great mortification, the Archbishop pushed her away and down the stairs. Finally, in 1687, after much petitioning on the part of her mother, Madre María entered the Colegio de Santa Mónica in Puebla, which later became an Augustinian convent, when one of its spiritual sisters (who also went by the name María de San José) passed away. She lived within this convent community from age thirty-two until her death on March 19, 1719 at sixty-three. During this time she occupied the important positions of founder and director of novices a new Augustinian convent in Oaxaca, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude) (Myers, “Introduction” *Wild Country* xviii).

While it is true that María de San José eventually arrived at a lofty position within the colonial Mexican church community, it took her many years to do so. Much of this time was spent outside of the convent, and thus, far away from the protection offered by an almost completely enclosed physical space. Therefore, in order to justify fully her authority the Mexican Augustinian nun had to somehow transform the many years spent outside the convent into ones that would merit consideration as a biography of a holy person. In this way she actually shared much in common with the other Augustinian studied in this dissertation, Isabel de Jesús. María de San José needed to do this because for over half of her life, her body—(although virginal while Isabel’s was not)—for years had been exposed out in the secular world and thus made imminently vulnerable to all kinds of temptations and demonic influences.
Fortunately for María de San José, her confessors, and in fact even the Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, provided her with the opportunity to enact the transformation of her secular years into “holy” ones. They did this when they ordered her to first write and then later after the first edition was lost, re-write the story of her life. Although it took her over a span of approximately three decades (1691?-1718?) to finish what she was mandated to do, María de San José eventually produced twelve volumes and more than 2,000 pages worth of text recounting her secular and religious life. All of this work is currently owned by the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, (Spanish Codex 39-41). The first two volumes of the series were written in 1703-1705 and are representatives of the genre of autobiographical vidas in that they recount Madre María’s secular life from 1656 to 1687 and her convent life from 1687 to ca. 1690, respectively. Biographical vidas of other nuns as well as several of her confessors comprise the later volumes, (VII, VIII and X-XII) while Volume IV is considered to be an example of a crónica (chronicle) because it describes Madre María’s founding of the Convent of La Soledad in Oaxaca. Volume XI consists of a re-writing of the Stations of the Cross and was Madre María’s only published text. It was printed at least five different times during the eighteenth century (Myers, “Introduction” Wild Country xx). María de San José’s narrative re-construction of the events of her life, both religious and secular, would ultimately turn out to be a most fruitful endeavor. Church leaders not only approved her writings; they also lauded them for their instructional potential. Ángel Maldonado, even praised the Mexican nun profusely during her heavily attended funeral. Later he unsuccessfully petitioned the Pope for her possible beatification (Myers, “Introduction” Wild Country xviii).
When she discovered them in the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, colonial critic Kathleen Myers sifted through all of Madre María’s volumes of text in order to bring them to public attention. In 1993 her efforts resulted in publication of Volume I in its entirety and in its original Spanish under the title of *Word from New Spain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656-1719)*. In addition Myers has published two articles about the writings of the Augustinian nun: “The Addressee Determines the Discourse: The Role of the Confessor in the Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San Joseph (1656-1719)” (1992), “El Discurso espiritual en la fundación del Convento de la Soledad: La crónica de Madre María de San José” (1996). She has also included a chapter of María de San José titled “The Mystic Nun: Madre María de San José (1656-1719)—Confession and Autohagiography” in her book *Neither Saints nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* (2003). Importantly, in 1999 Myers and Amanda Powell published an English edition of selections of Volumes I-XI titled *A Wild Country Out in the Garden: The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun*. In this dissertation we try to both work and quote from the original Spanish text, hereafter designated as *Word from New Spain*, whenever possible. However because only Volume I has been published in the original Spanish, any citations involving the later volumes in translation are of necessity in English. Obviously we do not attempt to re-translate these quotes into Spanish because they would not be an accurate reflection of María de San José’s original words but rather translations
of the work of Myers and Powell. All the English translations from Volume I are the work of Myers and Powell, hereafter designated as *Wild Country*, except for various ones which are not included in *A Wild Country*. These translations are my own and will be indicated as such by the phrase “my translation.”

María de San José’s male superior’s approval of her life owed much to the Mexican nun’s textual reconstruction of it within her *Vida*. In her role of spiritual autobiographer, María de San José borrowed from several previously published scripts. Among the scripts included were those of the Spanish Saint Peter of Alcántara’s guidebook on how to attain devotion, *Tratado de oración y meditación*, (1624), the hagiographies of St. Francis, St. Clare of Assisi and St. Anthony of Padua, as well as the spiritual *vidas* of the founder of her convent, Mariana de San José, and of her great spiritual foremothers St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa de Jesús. She did so because she wanted to highlight her isolation, continual suffering and everlasting extreme spiritual martyrdom. Thus, although she also borrowed from the life stories of women religious such as Sts. Catherine of Siena and Teresa de Jesús, the only narratives that she explicitly stated that she modeled herself after were those of St. Francis, St Clare and St. Peter of Alcántara. This composer selected these texts because they represented the culmination of the description of the life of the desert hermits. Centuries ago the hermits had set upon a path of extreme isolation and asceticism in order to shelter themselves from the corrupting influences of the secular and material world that continually blocked their path to God.\(^{60}\) María de San José’s extensive incorporation of these textual models into her

---

\(^{60}\) According to C.H. Lawrence, Christian monasticism made its earliest traceable appearance in Egypt and Palestine toward the end of the third century. In its primitive form it was a way of life adopted by solitaries, or anchorites, who lived in the desert (1). “The people that had taken up residence within the
Vida for the purpose of constructing an idealized hagiographic self set her text apart from the other spiritual autobiographies written by fellow medieval and early modern women religious that are alluded to within its pages.

Although María de San José incorporated almost verbatim whole passages from the lives of many female saints, (such as her founder Mariana de San Joseph’s Vida de la V.M. M. Mariana de San Joseph edited by Luis Muñoz (1645), Raymond of Capua’s vita of Catherine of Siena, and St. Teresa of Jesús’s Vida, (Myers, “Studies” 308), these models are never explicitly named as such by the narrator. They are not even named in the later volumes which treat María de San José’s life lived outside of the convent. When they are mentioned it is usually in order to set up a contrast between the Mexican nun and her spiritual foremothers. As an example of this, she sets up a contrast when the narrator of the Vida stresses how she was able to suffer even more than her founder Mariana of San Joseph who could not abide the same lice that she embraced as instruments of suffering.

Moreover, in addition to not being mentioned anywhere within María de San José’s numerous pages of text, in the first volume of her Vida the Mexican nun very effectively distances herself from the feminized hagiographic models that they represent. In Volume I María de San José models herself after St. Francis of Assisi, St. Clare and St. Peter of Alcántara rather than follow the same spiritual path as her famous spiritual foremother. The narrator of her Vida at one point quite emphatically tells the reader that the Mexican nun was following in the spiritual path of St. Francis of Assisi, who was best

unforgiving desert terrain were for the most part not clergy but rather lay people who had migrated into the solitude of the waste places found in the isolated deserts of Syria, Judea, and of course Egypt from the urban society of late antiquity in order to escape religious persecution an/or find a spiritual haven that
known for his poverty and affective piety (that is, direct spiritual experience rooted in the
love of Christ and described with highly charged emotional language) (Robson 21). She
also informs them that Madre María was modeling herself after St. Francis’s spiritual
followers: the famous thirteenth century St. Clare of Assisi and the Spanish desert hermit
St. Peter Alcántara. The latter is famous for his life of enclosure and the strictest of
spiritual penances in the midst of the Tuscan desert. These three saints had, in turn,
modeled themselves after the popular and frequently read Life of St. Antony of the Desert,
which is attributed to Athanasius (Ghezzi 46). The Spanish desert hermit St. Peter
Alcántara of whose Tratado de oración (1562) had inspired many to leave the secular
world in search of spiritual seclusion. Because of these very explicit statements
regarding her choice of hagiographic models in Volumes I and II, we see that Madre
María de San José is most identified with St. Francis and his movement, not the famous
Carmelite St. Teresa de Jesús and her spiritual foremother St. Catherine of Siena.

The choice of hagiographic models used in the first volume of María de San
José’s Vida contrast directly with those used in the subsequent volumes. The later
volumes relate to convent foundations and spiritual treatises and are therefore not only
full of images of the Mexican nun’s spiritual sisters but also partake of these women’s
mystical imagery. The question to be asked then, is why the stark difference in textual
models used in the first volume and the last eleven? The answer to this question can best
be found within María de San José’s spatial location and how it affected the construction
of her textual subjectivity, identity and body. When describing her life as a nun, Madre
María felt free to invoke the words and images of the mystical writings of other female

would be far away from a world infected by moral laxity, depravity and mortal sin” (Lawrence 1).
women religious, even if they often involved an over abundance of somatic female imagery. However, when describing her own life lived outside of the convent, the Mexican nun had to rely on models that would de-emphasize rather than highlight her connection with the femininity and the female body. She wanted to prove that during this unenclosed time in her life she was in fact safe from the spiritual corruption that often plagued the “weaker” female sex. Thus the models that she chose in the first volume of her text are ones that harkened back to the extreme asceticism of the desert fathers and mothers who, in the enactment of their severe lifestyle, showed that rather than being female or male, the suffering body was genderless.

In Volume I María de San José wanted to subjectively fashion herself as one of those early desert hermits or desert fathers/mothers who were dedicated to a life of extreme acts of penance while living in strict isolation. She believed she needed to do this because a secular life in the colonies, and thus amidst the “evil” influences of the more “idolatrous” indigenous peoples and the “unclean” castes, posed dangers for an unmarried woman. White creole women such as María de San José were not supposed to be living amongst the other races because their fertility was seen as the key to preserving the conqueror’s racial integrity and economic dominance. For this reason, María de San José had to depict her life on the hacienda as completely separated from the many indigenous and mulatto peoples that were in abundance at the place where she had spent the first thirty-two years of her life. In order to do this, she creatively positioned herself as simultaneously living amongst the peoples inhabiting her hacienda while at the same time she was safely hidden away from them within the confines of a metaphysical desert enclosure inspired by the actual Mexican desert terrain in which she lived.
As she inscribed the life story of the many desert hermits into her own, in Volume I María de San José became a part of the great tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Her membership within this tradition had profound implications on the way in which her textual body became visible within this volume. Like the other great followers of the hermetic desert tradition, the subjectivity constructed within it is one that is continually subjected to an extreme ascetic lifestyle. It is portrayed by its creator as a form of subjectivity freed from the confines of the female body through isolation, flagellation and starvation. The transformation in her subjectivity and her body in this first volume of text ultimately enabled María de San José to convince all who read her text that by drying out her body in the spiritual desert, and in the process erasing the signs of dangerous femininity, she became a body that, although female, had transcended its gender. As such she would no longer be considered to be needful of enclosure in the way that other early modern Hispanic women were. Ultimately, María de San José’s distancing of her textual body from the “feminine” enabled her to spiritually authorize a secularly lived life.

In the later volumes of her life writing, however, Madre María’s subject is her convent life. Therefore, within them the author did not have to hide the presence of everything related to the feminine. For this reason, the female body is made readily visible rather than erased within these volumes of writing. This dissertation postulates that the transformation of Madre María de San José’s corporality within the Volume I and

---

61 One could become part of the “desert tradition” without actually relocating to the ancient Christian desert regions of Northern Africa and the Middle East. However, it was much easier to experience it in isolated regions that were similar to these legendary lands because it is the desert, (“heremos:” the Greek word for desert that is the root of both the words hermit and eremitic) whatever its physical location, “that provides the hesychia or solitude for prayerful transformation may be experienced within or on the periphery of the inhabited world or in a more desolate and uninhibited location” (Keller 4).
Volumes I-XII of her text was grounded within, and in many ways depended upon, the different spaces in which she lived throughout her life: an unenclosed hacienda in Mexico’s harsh desert region and a cloistered religious community in Puebla. The study ultimately hypothesizes that Madre María de San José’s subjective strategies of self reconstruction through the process of bodily re-imagining provide compelling evidence that physical bodies and physical spaces are simultaneously and mutually constitutive; that, “bodies and places are woven together through intricate webs of social and spatial relations that are made by, and make, embodied subjects” (Nast and Pile, “Introduction” 3).62

**Volume I: María de San José’s Return to the Spiritual Desert**

As it makes the case that Maria de San José textually constructs her autobiographical “I” as one who pursues a severe ascetic lifestyle because she intended to find authority by way of making her de-sexed body textually vivible, this chapter departs not only from Myers’s studies of María de San José but also from those of one of her doctoral students, Kristen Routt. This critic argues in a chapter, “Sanctity or Self-Will:

---

62 This mutual construction of bodies and space had long been an underlying factor in the spread of the “desert” tradition across Western Europe before it came to the Americas. “In the early fifth century, the ascetical tradition of the Eastern desert had been transmitted to the West by way of Italy and Southern Gaul. It had been carried to these regions in large part thanks to the movement northward of the writings of Cassian that ultimately supplied the Western ascetical movement with a theology” (Lawrence 6). This new theology was especially important in places that had harsh and isolated terrains reminiscent of that of ancient Egypt. For example the mission of St. Patrick, who died in 461, created in Ireland an Episcopal organization like that existing in Gaul while St. Bridget formed her monastery in Kildare—both of which were areas of Ireland that had been for the most part completely uninhabited because of their isolation and difficult terrain. Other “desert” monasteries and religious communities such as Clonmacnoise, Clonfert, Terryglass were established shortly thereafter. In these monasteries subjects constructed their hagiographic personae from their natural environment. Living in isolated “rural” regions, they became inspired to model themselves after the ancient hermetic desert fathers and mothers. This dissertation argues that María de San José’s textual process of hagiographic identity construction was also influenced in this way.
Maria de San José (1656-1719) and the Ascetic Path to Holiness,” of her doctoral thesis that María de San José’s extreme asceticism would have caused her to be looked upon with suspicion on the part of her ecclesiastical superiors.

Although The Council of Trent (1545-1563) had insisted that Christians must provide ‘satisfaction’ for their sins by performing acts of contrition and penance, either those imposed by the priest who received the confession or those voluntarily undertaken, these were supposed to be relatively moderate in nature for women religious. These acts of contrition and penance were not supposed to interfere with their communal activities (97-99). In addition, women’s penances were supposed to be closely monitored by male religious authorities since women were susceptible to demonic influence. The ascetic practices that María de San José undertook during her years lived on the family hacienda departed from the dictates of the Council of Trent in that they were characterized primarily by seclusion and self-direction. Thus they would have been considered to be a dangerous assertion of self-will on the part of a female penitent. These practices would be considered dangerous because they only served to distract her from her primary duty of contributing to the convent’s collative duty of serving as a model of sanctity for the neophyte Christians who constantly looked to them as a source of spiritual inspiration. Those that did not were often denounced as frauds who sinned through active will, pride, self-delusion or even demonic possession. Thus they were subjected to Inquisitional inquiry, which is why they often tried to hide the evidence of their extreme penances (36).
Although placing emphasis on her extreme ascetic practices would have caused her to be viewed as even more suspect in the eyes of her superiors, in Routt’s analysis María de San José filled her text with lengthy descriptions of exaggerated acts of suffering in order to distinguish her from the *alumbrados*. 63 The latter were currently being censured, tried and convicted of heresy both in Spain and its colonies. In the process she aligned herself with the more orthodox spiritual tracks of her time (38-39). She did so because the active way of asceticism and purification of the senses and the spirit was one of the few elements that distinguished the orthodox mystic path to God from the heretical *alumbrados* who practiced *dexamiento*, or the complete surrendering of the will to God and encouraged individual, unmediated experiences of God in prayer (Ahlgren 11-12).

Although Routt’s argument is well articulated it does not fully explain why María de San José felt the need to place such extreme emphasis on the practice of penances that were much harsher than those of other nuns such as St. Teresa of Ávila who was also suspected of *iluminismo* (illuminism). 64 That is to say, if insistence on exaggerated suffering and extreme asceticism were strategies for avoiding being accused of the heresy of *iluminismo*, why is it then that the *vidas* of other early modern Hispanic women are not characterized by an emphasis on ascetic practices? Why do not their *vidas* fly in the face of the orthodoxy expected of nuns?

---

63 Spanish term for the Ilumanists in Spain, who, like their continental counterparts believed that they had direct access to an understanding of divine will without the need for Church mediation (Myers, *Saints nor Sinners?*).

64 According to Stephen Haliczer in *Between Exaltation and Infamy: Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain*, the Illumanist’s were a Christian group that differed from the typical medieval and early modern Christian orthodoxy in that they “believed that internal devotions were superior to exterior ones, which is why they questioned the value of ascetic practices such as fasting and physical discipline.” The members of this group were greatly mistrusted by the church hierarchy because they seemed to be suggesting that God could be understood and salvation could be obtained without the help of the clergy (317).
of the Council of Trent in the same way that María de San José’s does? Moreover, why
then would important women religious such as St. Teresa of Ávila go so far as to
denounce the practice of exaggerated acts of asceticism on the part of female penitents if
in fact they were needed to help religious women such as herself avoid such a damning
charge? These questions certainly problematize Routte’s principle thesis and highlight
the need to consider other reasons why María de San José felt the need to highlight her
extreme lifestyle within her *Vida* in the way that she did. Once again, in order to better
understand the Mexican nun’s motivations it is important that we think in terms of the
spatial orientation of María de San José’s body and how it affected the models on which
she chose to base the construction of her textual subjectivity. It is through gaining an
understanding of the placement of her corporality that we will be able to better
understand the reasons why María de San José felt that emphasizing her questionable
penitential practices was worth the Inquisitional censure that it might provoke. María de
San José’s spatial location during her years spent outside the convent and its relation
to her rhetorical purpose of constructing authority through autobiography is the subject of
the discussion that follows

Biological *mestizaje*,65 a reality since the earliest encounters between Spanish
men and indigenous women, presented social, legal and religious challenges in colonial
society. Despite creole assertions to the contrary, the line separating American born
Spaniards from non-white castes was a thin one. Attempts were made to maintain the
physical boundaries between the “República de Indias” and the “República de los

---

65 *Mestizaje* is the Spanish term for the mixing of Spanish and indigenous and African blood that occurred in the New World. People with this type of mixed blood were called *castas.*
españoles” (Republic of Indians and Republic of the Spanish) but these experiments in apartheid were doomed to failure. The voracious need of Spanish residents for cheap labor drew thousands of natives to both the cities and haciendas of the creole elite. For this reason, within colonial cities, the presence of indigenous peoples was a necessity as much as it was a menace. “Economically, culturally and sexually the European impulse to embrace the Indian contended with fears of engulfment and a consequent determination to ensure subordination and maintain boundaries” (Greer 241).

In a colonial society dedicated to the unobtainable goal of both exploiting and avoiding the native peoples, it was up to creole women to ensure the continued purity of the white caste. They did this by zealously guarding their bodies from the defilement of the hybridization that resulted from interracial sexual contact (Bilinkoff and Greer, “Introduction” xix). Since mixing with more “pagan” peoples was also thought to greatly jeopardize the state of one’s soul, by guarding their bodies from this kind of contact, creole women would of course also maintain their spiritual purity as well. Given the widespread view that colonial creole women had to vigilantly protect their bodily and spiritual purity, it was especially crucial that María de San José draw a strict line of separation between herself and the native and mulatto people. This boundary line would of necessity involve nothing less than a hagiographical tour de force heavily freighted with a series of specifically American issues. These issues had to do with questions of colonial identity and proto-nationalism, and especially race and class that emerged from the impact of European colonization on Indian peoples and enslaved Africans. To meet this considerable discursive challenge María de San José contrasted her spiritual purity with the depravity of indigenous and mulatto peoples
within the visions depicted in her *Vida*. She was not convinced that this would be enough. Therefore, later, when she set about to re-write the first volume of her life, Madre María de San José placed her textual self within a physical and metaphysical spiritual desert that effectively severed all ties between her and the outside world. In the process she isolated herself from the negative effects of sharing a day to day existence with the bodies of those who were thought to be spiritually impure. Because she was unable to escape the dangerous secular colonial society due to her diminished economic situation, María de San José’s *Vida* was built upon a construction of herself as a desert hermit living in self-imposed exile from her corrupting surroundings.

As was typical of numerous family-run haciendas, the Palacios enterprise resembled a small town, which would explain why in volume I of her autobiography Madre María describes her home as resembling a large village. Like the many other bustling ranches that dotted the Mexican countryside, the Hacienda de Santa Cruz was the site of much economic, religious and social activity involving people representing a variety of different castes (Myers, “Studies” 259). This early life story set in a village rather than a simple home is able to narrate the various problematic race relations that existed there. Although María may elude to the importance of indigenous household workers within her every day life, she does not provide a wealth of information about them. “In this regard, María de San José’s written version of her life story may be bowing to social conventions about racial diversions in a way that her behavior on the hacienda did not” (Myers, “Studies” 259). The embarrassment that the narrating “I” says that she felt when a large crowd of the hacienda’s “indios i indias” (“indigenous inhabitants”) came out to see her off to the convent is an example of her respect for these
conventions. She says that their behavior was “una mortificación grandíssima” or ‘great embarrassment. Moreover, it was her “primer motivo que tenía para desear tanto el salir de aquí para la religion” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 187) (“principal motive for wanting to leave right then for the convent”) (María de San José, Wild Country 57).

A series of other comments that María de San José makes about indigenous and mulatto peoples within the later volumes of her Vida shed even more light on the discomfort that she felt over having shared her secular life with them. Although she sometimes describes the indigenous people living on the hacienda—including her own servants—as “good Christians,” more often than not she portrays them as ignorant and decadent “Indios” who, despite surface attempts to be viewed as such, were in actually anything but good Christians. Because she knew that they were seen by colonial society as morally and spiritually inferior to members of her social class, within her writing María de San José makes a point to distinguish herself from the members of the other castes at various points throughout her Vida. For example, in one of her later volumes she forges a connection between the indigenous communal bath system and their unwillingness to give up their depraved “pagan” traditions and adopt a virtuous Christian lifestyle.

One day I saw Saint Anthony again, on one side of the altar that is in the choir, and at his feet I saw a fountain of water as beautiful as glass. Then I saw many naked Indians, both men and women, all together in some baths they use, when they are all bathing. And I saw a demon among them that was urging them to do indecent things, things against God. And among them I saw some that I had known before I entered religious life. While I was seeing this I felt our Lord beside me, and He told me: ‘Behold the aridity and carelessness in which these Indian people live, by not coming often to confess and wash themselves in this fountain of water that I have established for the remedy of all souls.’ I turned into a sea of tears when I

207
saw the harmfulness and perdition of how these people are living, oblivious and careless of the things of God and of the salvation of their souls. And this has stayed so much in my memory that I am still praying to Our Lord for these souls (María de San José, *A Wild Country* 91).

At the end of her description of this vision María de San José portrays herself as lamenting over the native people’s unwillingness and/or inability to turn to God. In doing so, she manages to effectively separate herself from them by creating a textual “us vs. them” scenario in which she is the epitome of the good and pure Christian while the indigenous people in the vision are savage and immoral heathens. Later on in her spiritual writings, she sets up this same dichotomy: only this time the “they” consists of the mulattos as opposed to the native people. And in this vision either God or one of his representatives asks María de San José to pray for the sinful. In making this request God then acknowledges that the Mexican nun is possessed of a moral and spiritual compass that is imminently superior to the members of the non-white groups.

Here I had a vision, which was with the interior vision of my soul I saw a village of people. The people who lived in this village, by what I saw and as it seemed to me, were all blacks. Among those I saw were all men; I did not see a single woman. They were young people, some more and less so. They seemed to spend their time amusing themselves or with pastimes (which is all one and the same), now here, now there, with a great deal of jesting and backslapping. I saw them with very dark faces, the faces of blacks. This has stayed so firmly in my memory that now as I write it, it seems I am watching them again. While I was seeing that, I heard a locution, and as I understood and it seemed to me, it was the Lord. The words I heard were these: “Pray to Me for these souls who live so wantonly, as if they had no great Law nor any knowledge of Me” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 186).

María de San José is careful to couch her visions of the sinful in racial and ethnic terms because she strongly felt the need to disassociate herself from those castes that were considered to be morally and spiritually inferior. It is for this reason that there is no
place in her text where she discusses the sinful nature of creole peoples. Rather, the only people ever portrayed as sinful and immoral are either indigenous or mulatto. In addition, and as seen in the above vision in which the immoral blacks are all men, it was important for her to set herself up as a virtuous white woman who steered clear of any potentially defiling interracial mixing. It was crucial that she do this since she had lived for years on a ranch where the races and castes interacted with each other on a daily basis. In the eyes of her readers and spiritual judges, she would have been continually subjected to corruptive influences that could have compromised her claim to spiritual authority. In addition, they could have made her visionary powers seem suspect. To avoid this possible interpretation of her life lived in contact with diverse members of the colonial population, María de San José made sure to make pointed references, such as those cited above, to her “difference” from the mulattos and indigenous peoples that populated her family’s hacienda. The difference between herself and these peoples is, in fact, set up in the very beginning of the Vida when the narrator offers her family’s pedigree to her readers. The narrator claims that María de San José was the “nieta y hija de padres miu cristianos cuatro abuelos eran gachupines de España, i que se allaron en la conquista destos rei(n)os de las Indias” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 85-86) (“the granddaughter and daughter of very Christian parents and all four of my grandparents were gachupines from Spain, and that they took part in the conquest of these lands, the kingdom of the Indies”) (María de San José, Wild Country 9).

66 According to many Colonial critics the denial of the possibility of saintly behavior on the part of indigenous peoples was one of the main reasons why extreme asceticism among the indigenous was so widespread. According to Arenal and Schlau “indigenous peoples with aspirations to power were especially cruel to their bodies so much so that the denial and punishment of their flesh reached such intensity among them that their biographies cause great consternation” (Untold Sisters 357).
By injecting this description of her family history into her *Vida* María de San José very quickly establishes her possession of the purity of blood, the “*limpieza de sangre*” which was an essential requirement for entrance into colonial Spanish American convents. María de San José’s claim to purity of blood turned out to be essential to her spiritual ambitions given that the Convent of Saint Mónica which she finally entered was only open to girls of “de ser nobles i de buena gente i que fuesen de buena cara” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 154) (“gentile birth, from good families, [and] with good-looking faces, for the very first thing that he asked was whether they were from good families and were nice-looking” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 39)).

Indigenous women, on the other hand, at that time only entered the convents as servants. They were not allowed to become full-fledged nuns until the eighteenth century (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 339). It took these subaltern members of colonial Latin American society so long to be permitted to form their own convents because “as objects of erotic desire, the native woman’s body also represented the dangers of breakdown and assimilation that haunted the psychology of colonialism in that it implied the emergence of a bastard race that would leave no trace of the Spaniard’s identity” (McCintock 241).

This could not have been lost on María de San José. Yet, because indigenous women had played such an important role in her upbringing, it was impossible to leave them completely out of her text. An indigenous nurse helped to raise the young María, in a domestic environment where servants’ children were raised together with the Palacios

---

67 “Pure blood was so important to Colonial nuns that not only did they have to provide proof of it, but those who didn’t have it, in order to be deemed saintly, often had to construct it textually. For example, the hagiography of the indigenous woman Catarina de San Juan is a revealing attempt on the part of the *beata* and her confessors to construct for her a noble, Christian and light skinned lineage through hagiographical writing” (Greer 175).
sisters. In addition, as a social center, the hacienda was a gathering place for the owner’s friends and their families as well as for the daughters of indigenous servants. María’s conversion experience at age eleven demonstrates that she was aware of the need for creole girls to separate themselves from the members of the other classes and ethnic groups at adolescence in that it is underlined by a call to separate from a secular and material world filled with racial, ethnic and class diversity.

María de San José’s narrator states that María’s dramatic conversion began when she was grinding grain with the many young girls of different classes and races—including indigenous women—who she had always played with. When María cursed one of these young girls for making an error she was punished for blasphemy. A “rayo” or lightning bolt that she concluded was aimed at her “corazón,” (heart) was hurled at her by God. When it landed it split apart a wall and killed an animal that was close by.

Una tarde me salí de la sala de mi madre a el patio, i me puse a moler arena [sic]. Aquí se me llegaron otras de mi edad, como lo acustunbrávamos las más tardes divertirnos en moler arena. Io era la molendera. Estábamos todas arimadas a la pared que sercava el patio. Una de las que me rodeavan me hiso no sé qué perjuisio. Io, como mal avituada, le eché una maldisión, i antes de acavar de pronunsiar la palabra, permitió Dios que caise un rayo. I aunque a lo que paresió fue rayo natural, mas para mí no fue sino rayo de lus que el Señor tiró a mi corasón. El rayo caió en medio de todas las que estávamos juntas, i aunque nos dejó a todas tendidas por aquel suelo, no hiso daño a niguna. Más partió la esquina de la pared, i por la avertura que hiso, salió afuera y mató a una bestia que estava en el canpo serca de la misma pared. O válgame Dios, qué claro i patente me mostró Su Magestad que como quitó la vida aquella bestia, pudo con más justa rasón quitármela a mí! Pues no Le servía más que de ofenderLe(s) i dejarme sepultada en el avismo del infier(n)rno. Infinitas gracias sean dadas sean dadas a tan inmensa vondad i misericordia, que así save obrar con quien merese estar en mil infiernos por mis grandes pecados i maldades (María de San José, Word from New Spain 95).68

68 “One afternoon I left my mother’s sitting room and went out to the patio, where I set about grinding flour. There I was joined by other girls my age, for we usually amused ourselves, most afternoons, by
The lightning bolt separated the group of girls both literally and metaphorically in that from this point on they would never again congregate in the way that they were used to. In addition, the fact that the lightning bolt kills an animal is also highly significant. According to Marta Bermúdez-Gallegos in her study of eroticism and sexual agency in the works of three colonial women religious, including María de San José, “the language configuration produced by the incident could respond to a repressed desire to have the ‘animal’ within her (her carnal desire) ‘speared’ and killed” (365). I would add here that as the ‘animal’ within her was connected with the indigenous and mulatto people that she had associated with in the past, by having the “animal” within her killed by God she was separated from these castes by the work of the Supreme Being. This separation freed her from the presence of the impure bodies on the hacienda as well as the “animalistic” urges provoked by the close proximity of their presence.

Madre María de San José’s “rescue” from these groups is later reiterated by her description of her escape from an interracial demon that coincides with the constructs of a mestizo and mulatto devil that immediately follows God’s killing of the animal with the thunderbolt. The nun describes her childhood self as seeing the enemy in human form, like an ugly mulatto, with flames of fire coming from his mouth and nostrils.
According to Bermúdez-Gallegos, in this passage the mulatto devil “emphasizes the animal quality of interracial desire and the possible contradicting desires felt by the subject-who-writes before her own sexuality” (365). The mulatto symbolizes all the “beastly” desires that María de San José had been forced to contend with before her spiritual conversion. These desires caused her to live for ten years not as a rational being but rather in ignorance of morality and God’s law, not unlike the “uncivilized and ungodly” indigenous and mestizo peoples that inhabited her family’s hacienda. During this period she wrote that she was “más de animal que la de persona rasional” (“more like an animal that a rational person”) and that she had never “llegué a tener uso de rasón nil us ninguna para conocer que ofendía a Dios en las cosas malas que hasía. Ni savía que avía Dios, ni sielo, ni infierno, tanto era como todo esto la i(n)g(i)norancia con que vivía” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 92) (“I never gained the use of reason nor any power of understanding to know that I was offending God with all the bad things I was doing. I did not know that there was God, or heaven, or hell, so great was the ignorance in which I lived” (María de San José, Wild Country 13).

It is important to point out that the young does not respond to the mulatto’s assertion of “Mía eres.” This has led Bermudez-Gallegos to assert that “in this sense, she expresses solidarity with the ‘illicit’ since she does not express an opinion” (365). I

---

69 “He was seated on the bottom step in human form, like a naked mulatto. He was gnawing at one of his hands. Just as I saw him, he raised a finger as if to threaten me: “You are mine. You will not escape my
would contend however that her failure to answer the mulatto’s possessive call represents Madre María de San José’s textual attempt to show that the mulattos and their “evil” ways were not influencing her. Nor has she ever been unduly influenced by their immorality, because unlike mulatto and indigenous women (who according to the religious authorities of the time could not control their sexual desires,) she had managed to keep hers completely in check, even from a very young age. She reinforces this fact by stating that “I never kept company with a single male, because I have always felt an unspeakable horror and dread of them, which always made me flee as soon as I could at times when I had to speak with some man; I’ve had very few such occasions, because I have always lived withdrawn in solitude” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 96).

Instead of accepting the possessive embrace of the mulatto demon mentioned above, the young María rushes past him and enters into her mother’s bedroom. Once she is within the safety of her mother’s bedroom the Virgin Mary presents her with a ring; María promises to the Holy Virgin that even though she lives outside the walls of the convent, she will remain chaste living on this earth like an angel of the Lord. She makes this vow because the Virgin has told her in no uncertain terms that in order to live a virtuous and spiritual life that would ultimately unite her with God, she must first and foremost guard her body. The way to do this was to remain chaste and to preserve this chastity by way of enclosure:

> En cuanto a la castidad, no solo la has de quardar en el cuerpo, sino en el corazón, viviendo en la tierra como angel del Señor. En cuanto a la clausura, has de vivir i estar en tu retiro en soledad, tratando solo con Dios, austraida de todas las cosas del mundo, sin tratar ni comunicar con

clutches. I saw this more with my soul’s interior vision than with the eyes of my body” (*Wild Country* 5).
By citing these words from the Virgin and repeating this vow, within her text María de San José signals to her readers that although she had lived in the world amongst other people and temptations. When she underwent her spiritual conversion she rejected the presence of impurity as symbolized by the mulatto devil and made a promise to make herself into a sealed body capable of protecting itself from any and all possibly corruptive foreign influences. The Virgin Mary would be there to help her in this endeavor.

Later, María de San José’s narrator describes how María saw the mulatto devil once more. However, her guardian angel kept her safely out of his clutches. Thus, once again purity won out over the immoral influences of the non-white castes.

---

70 “With regard to chastity, you must guard not only that of the body, but of the heart, living on this earth like an angel of the Lord. With regard to enclosure, you must live and keep to your retreat in solitude, speaking only with God, withdrawn from all things of this world, without speaking or communicating with a single person who is not someone you know” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 19).
Por tal i tal rasón, eran tantas i tan eficases las rasones que el enemigo
alegava para afirmar i desir que no podia ser perdonada de Dios Nuestro
Señor, que de justisia era susia I estava ia en su poder; I como desía esto
con tanto aínco I eficasia que ia me tenía en su poder (María de San José,
*Word from New Spain* 190). 71

Thus, even at the point of entering the convent María still has to contend with the
influences of the “mulatto devil” and all that he symbolizes. It is evident that María de
San José is never able to erase the presence of the indigenous castes in her life or in her
text. This is because they were an integral part of her childhood, adolescence and young
adulthood. In fact, she admits in her *Vida* that she depended upon them to help her
establish her ascetic spiritual routine on the hacienda. Her servant Apolonia, “La India,”
helped her build the hut in the garden where she went to practice her spiritual exercises.
She also gathered the greens that she ate and made sure that no rich foods ever found
their way on her mistress’ plate (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 110).

Apolonia was such an integral part of María’s spiritual life that the would-be hermit’s
sister Francisca viewed her with suspicion. As the following passage illustrates, every
time Francisca saw her younger sister talking to Apolonia she would become enraged
because she felt that the close association between the two young girls would place a
stain on their family’s pure lineage.

I como mi hermana me vía ablar en ocasiones con la India Apolonia, que
era la mosa que mi madre me avía dado por mí sola haserlas—tocante a
las penitensias que hasía, como lo tengo ia dicho—esto le causava a mi
hermana maiores sospechas, afirmándose más I más cada día en que

71 “Later I saw the Holy Virgin my mother a bit apart from where I was. I also saw my guardian
angel, and I saw her so confused. Here I also saw a demon in the figure of a human, like a very
ugly mulatto. He carried a book in his hands. He began to read in a very loud voice what he had
written in it, that was all of my life and what I had done up until now. He was reading and saying
in a loud voice all of my private sins [. . .]” (María de San José, my translation).
andava en malos pasos, i que avía de parar en haser alguna ruinidad, i desonrrar i quitar el crédito a todo el linage (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 164).  

Because she greatly feared that her sister’s close association with the Indian girl would bring dishonor to the Palacios family, Francisca ultimately chased Apolonia away. “Tanto la llegó a apretar i afligir, que una noche anochesió i no amanesió en casa. No pudo sufrir la Guerra que tenía con ella sin dar más causa ni otra occasion que ver mi hermana que en algunas ocasiones me ablava” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 166). (“In time my sister came to bear down and afflict her so hard, that one dark night fell and when morning came [Apolonia] was not in the house. She could not bear the battle waged against her with no other cause or occasion than my sister’s seeing that on some occasions she would speak to me” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 46)). María de San José then obtained another servant, Nicolosa, who “también India i mui buena cristiana” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 167) (“was also an Indian and a very good Christian” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 46)). She withstood Francisca’s scorn and eventually entered the convent with María de San José and thus continued to play a role in her mistress’s spiritual life throughout her years as a nun (Myers, *Studies* 259). The fact that years later María would confess to having ‘too much love’ for

---

72 “Sometimes my sister saw me speaking with the Indian girl Apolonia, who was the girl my mother had given me to be of use to me with things that I could not do at all by myself—for the penances I made, as I have already said—this caused my sister the greatest suspicions, convincing her more and more every day that I was on a sinful past, and that I would end up sinning and dishonoring all of my lineage.
Nicolosa (III, f. 58r) is a clear demonstration of the close relationship that came to exist between the white Madre María de San José and her indigenous companions. Another indication of this closeness is the existence of evidence that María de San José and her sisters spoke some Nahuatl (Myers, “Studies” 259).

Faced with the reality that a colonial creole woman would of necessity have to interact on a daily basis with the indigenous peoples that made up the servant class, María de San José could not simply erase their presence within her text. She could not have lived her spiritual life on the hacienda without their help. However, she could mitigate the dangers presented by their close proximity by the insistence that she had spent her entire post conversion years shielded from them both in body and in spirit. She did this by constructing herself as a holy woman whose self-imposed asceticism, silence and enclosure were so extreme that they transformed her permeable, susceptible female body into a soulless “athlete of Christ.” As such she had transcended materiality and thus was safe from all corruptive influences, including those that emanated from the racial and ethnic classes deemed to be most morally and spiritually inferior.

The Ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers

María de San José’s textual self subjected herself to the most severe form of penances. Thanks to the excellent scholarship of Carolyn Walker Bynum, Laura Finke and Ruth El Saffar who have written comprehensive studies of both medieval and early modern women’s asceticism we know that María de San José’s harsh penitential practices were certainly not out of the ordinary. Women living during these particular periods in Western history often resorted to rather extreme forms of bodily abuse to prove their worthiness as great spiritual leaders. By punishing their bodies and yet still managing to
survive they could prove to the church authorities that they were in a sense more than their female bodies. They were more than just normal flesh and blood human beings controlled by bodily necessities such as digestion, excretion, sleep and menstruation. According to Bynum, for women to punish their bodies in this way was not a sign of masochism or pathology (*Holy Feast* 11). Nor was it an indication of their hatred of the feminine body as Laura Finke (90) has suggested or adoption of masculinist terms as Ruth El Saffar has proposed (9) but rather an attempt to find power and authority through their corporeality (41).

María de San José, however, carried these practices to a much greater extreme then most of her spiritual foremothers and/or contemporary women religious. Her extremism in regard to her self-induced suffering made her out of step with the post-Trent recommendations for Hispanic female penitents. This is perhaps why her biographers have noted that within her *Vida* the Augustinian nun stresses that she often tried to conceal the evidence of her strict penitential practices. An example of this is when she attempted to hide her hair shirts (Santander y Torres 45) eat grass when she found herself alone (51) and sleep with her sisters just as she was supposed to (48).

One of these involved some hair shirts that she found among her father’s possessions after his untimely death. Her father was a follower of the ascetic lifestyle and María de San José makes it quite clear that it is his model that she is following and not that of her mother. In narrating her childhood, she briefly pays homage to the piety of her mother in reference to female holy tradition by mentioning that “Mi madre la avía Dios dado gran ingeno de saver haser cosas curiosas i todo aquello que es nesesario saver a una madre para enseñar a sus hijos” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 87).
(“God had given [her] mother great skill in doing clever and neat handiwork and everything that a mother should know in order to teach her children” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 10)). After making this statement however, the narrating “I” very quickly turns to describing her father and his severe ascetic practices at great length. She relates how after his death she adopted his lifestyle, which was of course strikingly similar to that of her hero, Francis of Assisi. For example, in the passage below she describes how she found his hair shirt and begins to use it in her own spiritual practices. “Boi ablando de mi padre. Aiunava todos los Viernes i sábados del ano, fuera de las Cuaresmas i Vigilias. Después de pasado el tropel de su fallesimiento, llegué io a aprir una caja que era suia, i allé en ella dos silisios que se conosía bien que los husava. A mí me sirvieron muchos años” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 88). (“To go on telling about my father: he fasted every Friday and Saturday all year long, apart from the fasts of Lent and of the vigils before feast days. After the upheaval of his death had passed, I happened upon a box that belonged to him, and in it I found two haircloths which it was evident he had used. They served me well for many years” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 11)).

It is clear from Madre María’s adoption of her father’s Franciscan model rather than her mother’s submissive piety that she is following in the footsteps of the Italian spiritual reformer rather than more passive, more “female” religious reformers. But in case the reader has missed this, Madre María’s autobiographical “I” later emphasizes the point by confiding to her readers that although her older sister Leonor might have helped her make more haircloths, but she would not wear them herself because she was on a different, less harsh, spiritual path. Later she lets her audience in on the secret that the hair shirts that she wore were in fact so tight that they wounded her and that the wounds would become
infested with lice. The following description of the pain and torment of these lice
infested wounds is so graphic and sensationalized as to seem masochistic to the modern
reader. However, to María de San José and her early modern readers it would have
seemed as compelling evidence of the narrative subject’s eminent holiness rather than
testimony to her shocking masochism: “Fue mucho lo que padesí, i grande la molestia
con esta mala gente. Los sentía andar como ormigas en las llagas que se me avian echo
en la sintura, que casi me andavan comiendo sobre los uesos de las costillas” (María de
San José, *Word from New Spain*) (“I suffered greatly and was heartily troubled by these
bad folk. I would feel them crawling like ants in the wounds that had opened at my
waist, for they were almost feeding on the very bones of my ribs. In the morning the pus
would lie in puddles on the floor where I slept from the seeping of my wounds”) (María
de San José, *Wild Country* 25). The narrator’s reference to her bodily fluids in the above
passage is an example of the same form of “embodied mysticism” that we saw in Madre
Magdalena’s *Vida*. María de San José employed it here in an attempt to conflate her
bodily suffering with that of Christ. As she does so she made interior bodily fluids
visible in the same way that María Magdalena did. Yet the suffering that María de San
José claimed she underwent was self-induced, Madre Magdalena’s resulted from bodily
injury.

María de San José’s narrating “I” says that the pain and the blood caused by the
hair shirts that she wore were nothing to her. In fact, she declares that “nada desto me
paresía mucho; antes deseava haser más i más rigors i penitensias” (María de San José,
*Word from New Spain* 116) (“none of this seemed too much to me; rather I wanted to do
more and more rigors and penances” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 25)). The
narrator accepts and even celebrates her pain and her wounds because in her eyes they stood as proof of her chosen status as emissary of God. Moreover, they clearly indicated her ability to become as saintly as Jesus by willingly adopting his life of pain and suffering in the same way that the Desert Mothers and Fathers did many centuries ago:

[. . .] en esto me dava Su Magestad a entender que la crus que avía de cargar en el discurso de mi vida avía de ser mui pesada, como lo tengo experimentado en la que siempre e cargado, que es I a sido de gran peso. Grasias a el Señor, que siempre me a tenido agoviada con el peso del continuo padeser, que éste a sido es un beneficio que io e estimado en mucho (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 93)\(^{73}\)

Like many of her early modern spiritual sisters, within Volume I of her *Vida* María de San José articulates a strong desire to flee from home and suffer and die for the Lord in the same way that the ancient martyrs had done. “Assentóme el Señor en el alma una gran verdad i creencia de Su vida i doctrina, que me paresía muriera io en Su defensa i en la de Su persona; que se imprimía en mi corasón” (“The Lord placed in my soul a great true belief in His life and doctrine, that it seemed to me that the desire to die in defense of His person had been imprinted on my heart”) (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 138) (my translation).

As the following passage makes clear, María’s desire to imitate the ancient martyrs was so strong that she would feel it every time she listened to her brother as he read about them. “Ia e dicho que mi hermano Tomás no tenía otro entretenimiento más de leer, i como oía leer las vidas de los santos mártires, comensé a sentir unos deseos

\(^{73}\) “[. . .] in this way His majesty was letting me know that the cross I would have to bear in the course of my life would be very heavy, as I have indeed experienced with the cross I have always borne, which was and is of great weight. Thanks be to God, Who has always kept me worn out with the weight of my constant suffering, for this was and is a benefit that I have held in high esteem.” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 13-14).
vivíssimos de morir mártir i deramar mi sangre toda por quien tan liber (ar) almente la
deramó por mi” (“And I have said that my brother Thomas had no other past-time than
reading, and as I listened to him read the lives of the saintly martyrs, I began to feel great
desires to die a martyr and spill all my blood for the one who had so freely spilt it for
me”) (María de San José, Word from New Spain 138) (my translation).

However, unfortunately for Madre María, the age of the early Christian martyrs
was a bygone era; Romans no longer persecuted the Christians during the early modern
era. María de San José could still, however, re-create a kind of physical martyrdom by
living a life of self-induced suffering in the same way that the ancient desert fathers and
mothers had done so many years ago when they left the secular and material world and
fled to the harsh and unforgiving Egyptian terrain. It is not at all surprising that these
early Christians fled the cities for the desert in order to find salvation through a kind of
spiritual cleansing given that renunciation of the world was rooted in the Gospel
(Lawrence 2).74 The desert was the place to enact this complete rejection of human
society and all that it implied in favor of a life given completely over to God because it
constituted primarily a place of sterility and death. At the same time it was also “a place
of supreme purity where the air is more pure, the sky more open, and God more familiar”
(Elm 260). At the same, however, it was also […] a place where Jesus fought

---

74 “The earliest of the Gospel narratives, those of St. Mark, begins in the desert with the prophetic voice of
the Baptist crying in the wilderness. Before beginning his public ministry, Christ was led by the Spirit into
the desert, where he fasted for forty days. Ecclesiastical tradition saw in this a parable of the conflict
within the soul of the Christian: the quest for God involved separation from the world and the conquest of
sensuality and human ambition. In fact one of the passages in the Gospels that launched many ascetics on
their spiritual career was the invitation of Jesus to the rich man who had at one time asked the Lord, “What
must I do to be saved?” He was told, “Keep the commandments; love your neighbor as yourself” “If you
would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”
(Lawrence 2).
temptations, and where his followers, the ascetic, battles against his internal demons, his temptations, and afflictions” (Elm 260). Therefore, the desert was the ultimate arena, where the true athletes fought to achieve the ‘imitatio Christ’” (Lawrence 5).

The athletes that underwent this battle in the desert arena were not just male but female as well. Since the severe rule of the desert offered women a way to defeat their flesh and live as a genderless spirit, many women flocked to this harsh and unforgiving terrain. These women became known as the Desert Mothers. One of these spiritual mothers--Theodora of the desert—was, like all the Desert Fathers, a charismatic, a pneumatophoros, and therefore a model to emulate. In becoming one, she supposedly transcended her sex and actually became, in the eyes of her society, a non-gendered being capable of living amongst the rest of the desert hermits without leading them to temptation. Amma Sarah also reached this state of perfection and in acknowledgement of the feat became the subject of the following statement, which is Saying 9 in the Book of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers: “It is I who am a man, you who are women” (Elm 265). These women transcended the limitations of feminine corporality by going to the desert and punishing their bodies within the confines of its harsh environment. They and other Desert Mothers like them (for example, Bessarion’s desert mother, Theodora, Sarah and Syncletica) became real life adaptations of the images of the perfect ascetic. A perfect ascetic, according to Basil of Ancyra’s De virginitate, or indeed to Gregory of Nyssa’s eulogy of Macarina, was one for whom “the question of male or female no

75 Melania (372), a wealthy Roman widow of Olives, had managed to find a space of solitude and bodily purification in the deserts of Nutria. Even defiled women such as Paesia the prostitute and Saint Magdalene managed to find redemption in the desert. Magdalene’s desert solitude was a place of penitence, “a secret celestial place where no man human might come” (Elm 257).
longer exists, because he or she has risen above the limits determined by the body; asceticism means annihilation of sexual distinction “(Elm 267). A few of these women even managed to “‘became men’ in the strength of their soul and the success of their ascetic achievements, and at times also in their outer appearance” (Elm 271). The transformation of these early Christian women heroes into spiritual athletes, and, thus, into men, was not a solely a metaphorical concept or the momentary transfiguration of vision, but rather both physically real and permanent. After long periods of severe fasting, menstruation ceased and all external remnants of feminine features disappeared. Perhaps, this is why the young Carthaginian Desert Mother, Perpetua, reportedly even showed external manifestations of internal manliness after she moved to the desert and adopted the Order of the Hermit in order to become a genderless fighter for Christ, a true athlete rather than a weak body (Elm 267). In so doing, she reached a level higher than even the Desert Fathers since “weaker” and “softer” women were considered to achieve greater ascetic achievements than men.

Hagiographic Auto-construction as a Desert Mother

The ascetic feats of the Desert Mothers inspired María de San José’s autobiographical alter-ego. They instilled within her a strong desire to flee to the spiritual desert, escape the sinful world that surrounded her, and in the process transform herself into a de-sexed, or perhaps even “manly” “athlete of Christ. She was unable to make the trek to ancient Egypt and Syria however. Consequently, within her narrative she attempted to textually transform the Mexican desert in which she lived into this far away holy land. Once placed into this new setting, her textual self would be able to
emulate the hermits of long ago and build a crude dwelling and live in purifying spiritual isolation safely within it. Her first attempt at the transformation of her spatial and spiritual orientation ended however when she was foiled in her attempt to escape to an isolated cave that housed a hermit and that was rumored to be located near her family home.

When she heard of the existence of this cave and its hermit resident, María de San José became determined to dwell there with nothing other than her penitential instruments to keep her company:

> Estava serca de la casa de mi madre un serro que avía de distansia como una legua de camino. Avía oído desir que en este serro avía una queba o concavidad mui acomodada para haser en ella vida solitaria de ermitaño. . .Dispuse el salir a voca de noche, por no ser vista de nadien, i caminar a esta cueba i ensararme en ella a haser vida de ermitañía. La prebensión que llevava no era otra más de las armas e instrumentos que tenía de silisios i disciplinas (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 139)  

However, once her brother Thomas got wind of María’s plans he stopped her from living out the rest of her life as a hermit in an isolated cave located within “tierra inútil i estéril,” (“sterile and not useful”) (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 139). After her brother prevented her from living in her hermit’s cave, the narrator admits that she was forced to never think of living alone out in the desert again. In the era in which she lived, people would have thought it unseemly for a young creole woman to live as an ancient Desert Mother, no matter how much she might have desired to. The narrator

---

76 “There was close to my mother’s house a hill that had been a about a league of walking distance from my house. I had heard it said that in this hill a cave or a hollow that would be very accommodating for the solitary life of a hermit [. . .]. I arranged to leave the house at night, so that I would not be seen by anyone, and walk to this cave and within in teach myself how to live the life of a hermit. The religious tools that I was going to take with me were no more than the arms and instruments that I used for my hair shirts and disciplines.” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 139) (my translation).
demonstrates María de San José’s awareness of this potential perception of her actions when she states that living alone in the cave all alone would have put her soul in great “peligro” (“danger”) (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 140).

Although her brother thwarted her efforts to become a real-life desert cave dweller, María de San José did not let go of her dream to live the order of the hermits. Instead, she followed in the footsteps of her saintly spiritual foremother, St. Clare of Assisi, and decided to continue to live as a desert mother, but in a way that would be possible for a young Mexican woman of her station. According to the narrator, St Francis of Assisi, the same saint who had guided St. Clare so many years ago, gave María de San José the guidance that she would need in this endeavor. His spiritual guidance is symbolized by his gift of a nun’s habit that he had especially picked out for her. St. Francis instructed his “new” recollect about the strict and isolated spiritual practices that would ultimately transform her into a “de-sexed” body that was fully capable of living within an unenclosed environment. Within the text, St. Francis transforms María de San José into a carbon copy of Clare, his original female protégé, who was just like him, but with one exception: she remained enclosed rather than traveled the countryside evangelizing (Matter 82).77

The Lord introduced María to the Order of St. Clare when he told her to go to the sitting room and listen to *The Chronicles of the Seraphic Saint Francis*, a spiritual book that her brother was reading. It was from that particular book that she would “tendrás lus

---

77 Although Franciscan friars became famous for preaching and traveling the world, Franciscan women had to find some other model for a life of evangelical poverty. The requirement of enclosure for the Poor Clares underlies the major difference of life between the male Franciscans, an itinerant congregation, and the female Franciscans, a cloistered community (Matter 82).
del modo de vida que has de tomar” (María de San Jose, *Word from New Spain* 107)

(“receive light as to the way of life you must lead” (20)). From the moment she entered into this room and discovered the path that she was supposed to be on, the path of St Clare established by St. Francis, the narrator states that María de San José decided to follow in these two glorious saint’s footsteps:

I me dijo que [el libro que leía] era el de Las *corónicas del seráfico San Francisco*. I le digo que me leíera la primera regla que el glorioso padre San Francisco insistió i ordenó a Santa Clara i a sus monjas. Me la leió. Io estube oiendo con mucha atensión, i todo lo que ella iva oiendo en el corasón i en la memoria, sintiendo efcassíssimas ansias i deseos de seguir i imitar este mismo modo de vida, toda de rrigor i asperesa, que San Francisco institió a sus monjas. Mas eran muchos los atajos imposibles que allava para haser esta vida (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 107)78

María de San José’s decision to portray her desire to emulate the saints that she heard her brother read about is reminiscent of St. Teresa de Jesús’s *Vida*. The narrator of Teresa’s text describes the famous Spanish nun as also having been inspired to act out the lives of the saints after she and her brother read about them. Teresa’s narrator even goes so far as to state that the young protagonist and her brother were so inspired by what they read that they tried to run away to the Holy Land in order to become martyrs:

Tenía uno casi de mi edad (juntávamonos) entrambos a leer vidas de santos (que era el que yo más quería, aunque a todos tenía gran amor y ellos a mí). Como vía los martirios que por Dios las santas pasavan, pareciame compravan muy barato el ir a gozar de Dios, y deseava yo mucho morir así (por no amor que yo entendiese tenerle, sino por gozar

78 “He told me that [the book from which he read] was Las *corónicas del seráfico San Francisco* And I asked him to read me the first rule that our glorious Father Saint Francis instituted for Saint Clare and her nuns. He read it to me. I listened most attentively, and as I was hearing everything in that Rule, it seemed it was being imprinted and stamped in my heart and my memory; I felt the most efficacious longings and desires to follow and imitate this very way of life, all severity and harshness, that Saint Francis instituted for his nuns. But many were the obstacles before me to make this way of life impossible” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 20).
Notably, Teresa’s textual “I” states that she and her brother decided to become hermits after their parents thwarted their efforts to travel to the Middle East and die for the Christian cause: “De que vi que era imposible ir adonde me matesen por Dios, ordenávamos ser ermitanos; y en una huerta que havía en casa procurávamos, como podíamos, hacer ermitas, poniendo unas pedrecillas, que luego se nos caían. Y ansí no hallávamos remedio en nada para nuestro deseo; (Teresa de Jesús, Vida 29). (“As soon as I saw that it was impossible to go anywhere where I should be put to death for God’s sake, we decided to become hermits; and we used to try very hard to build hermits’ cells in an orchard belonging to the house. We used to pile up heaps of small stones, but they immediately tumbled down again, and so we found no way of achieving our desires” (Teresa de Jesús, Life 24). This episode finds its counterpart in the scenes in María de San José’s Vida that describe the Mexican nun’s decision to build her own isolated hut after her trip to the isolated wilderness cave by her house was prevented by her brother. Obviously, a major difference between the two accounts is that in María de San José’s

---

79 “I had one brother almost of my own age, whom I loved best, though I was very fond of them all and they of me. We used to read the lives of the Saints together, and when I read of the martyrdoms which they suffered for the love of God, I used to think that they had bought their entry into God’s presence very cheaply. Then I fervently longed to die like them, not out of any conscious love for Him, but in order to attain as quickly as they had those joys which, as I read, are laid up in Heaven. I used to discuss with my brother ways and means of becoming martyrs, and we agreed to go together to the land of the Moors, begging our way for the love of God, so that we might be beheaded, there. I believe that our Lord had given us courage enough even at that tender age, if only we could have seen a way. But our having parents seemed to us a very great hindrance” (Teresa de Jesús, Life 29)
case the brother is portrayed a co-conspirator rather than an antagonist. Perhaps, their different birth order is the reason for this difference in the role of the two brothers. A younger brother, Teresa’s brother would not have been the same type of paternal authority figure that María de San José’s was to her. Either way, however, in both episodes the building of the huts directly followed the loss of a dream. The dream lost was the desire to find martyrdom far from the home.

After she describes the Lord’s presentation of the Rule of St. Clare, María de San José’s narrating “I” describes how the Lord sent St. Francis to her in a vision in order to reconfirm His desire that Madre María follow the Franciscan path. In this vision St. Francis asks Madre María to choose between the two nun’s habits that he has brought with him. The Augustinian nun’s adoption of a habit from St. Francis is symbolic of her adoption of his particular spiritual path for women religious.

Estando una manana a las horas que aconstunbrava siempre tener mi orasión, aquí vide que, según me paresió fue con vista interior del alma, a nuestro padre i ceráfico San Francisco de Asís (is), parando sobre un alto con su ábito de religioso, como andava acá en esta vida. Tenía en cada mano un como pedaso de retaso, como quando una persona quiere comprar algún género para haser un vestido, i otra le muestre dos colores para que tome de qué le quadrare. Así fue esto. Así que vide a mi padre San Francisco, lebantó las dos manos i me mostró los dos retasos que traía, como ensenándomelos, i me dijo—‘Escoge el color que quisieres’ (María de San José, Word from New Spain 143).80

80 “One day at the hour when I was accustomed to say my prayers, here I saw—as it seemed to me, with the interior vision of my soul—our Father the seraphic Saint Francis of Assisi, standing on high in his monk’s habit, just as he went about here in this life. In each hand he held something like a length of cloth, as when one person wants to buy fabric to make a dress, and another displays two different colors so that the first can choose the most becoming one. This was just like that. As soon as I saw my Father Saint Francis, he raised his two hands and showed me the two pieces of cloth he had brought, as if to display them to me, and he told me: “Choose the color you like.” (María de San José, Wild Country 32).
This vision is also symbolic of how Madre María had to embark upon her spiritual journey with nothing more than the words and visionary presence of St. Francis and his followers. These holy exemplars became her guides because there were no openings for a virtuous yet impoverished young *criolla* in the Convent of the Order of St. Clare in Puebla.

María de San José stresses in her *Vida* that the instruction of Francis and his followers was so dedicated that she could transformed herself into a holy woman without the benefit of confessors or the convent. For example, according to her narrating “I,” she did not need formal spiritual instruction because one of St. Francis’ most loyal disciples, St. Anthony of Padua, had already taught her to read in the interest of helping her to better follow in the Franciscan spiritual path:

> Tomé el *Libro de la vida* deste milagroso santo, i comensé a deletrear en él, que (i)ni aún esto savía [. . .]. Lo hasía con mucha caridad, más le duró mui pocos días el travajo de darme lisión, porque mi padre San Antonio de Padua hiso luego el milagro de alcanzar de Nuestro Señor el que aprendiese a leer sin que me costarse travajo ninguno, mi detensión de perder tiempo [. . .]. Desde este milagro, quedé mui agradesida i afecta a su intersession i e procurado conplir con la promesa que le hise de ser toda mi vida mui su devota, aunque tan indigna (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 124).81

---

81 “I took the *Book of the Life* of this miraculous saint, and I began to spell out each word in it letter by letter—for I did not even know how to do that much [. . .] because my Father Saint Anthony of Padua worked the miracle right away of obtaining my ability to read from Our Lord, without its costing me any labor at all, nor any delay that would lose time [. . .]. From that miracle on, I remained most grateful and fond of his intercession, and I have done my best to fulfill the promise I made to be very devoted to him all my life, unworthy as I am’ (María de San José, *Wild Country* 28).
Once she learned to read the autobiographical María de San José began to carry
the *Life of St. Peter of Alcántara* with her at all times. She consulted it with the same
dedication that most would have reserved for the Bible. She says that she did so because
she intended to imitate his ways and adopt his most severe “desert” lifestyle.

[.. .] comensé a leer el *Libro de la vida* de San Pedro de Alcántara, i
también leía en el de Meditasione i modos para tener oración mental.
Este, como era pequeno, traíale siempre conmigo, junto con el líbrito de
Combate espiritual. I en cualquiera parte que me hallava sola, leía en
ambos i en el de San Pedro. Leía el passo o misterio en que en aquel día
señala de la muerte i passion de Christo Señor Nuestro i de las
postrimerías. Traíame estas consideraciones arto ocupado, tanto que no
podia atender a otra cosa con la lesión destos libros [ . . . ] (María de San
José, *Word from New Spain* 125).

The *Life of St. Peter of Alcántara* was not the only guidebook for a strict ascetic
lifestyle that María de San José’s narrating “I” indicates that she not only read but also
diligently consulted on a daily basis. She says that she also read and followed the
guidelines laid out in the Mexican Bishop Juan Palafox y Mendoza’s *Semanas
espirituales* (*Spiritual Weeks*) (1662), a guide that observes the tradition of recollection
and outlines weekly topics for prayer and spiritual labor; and a spiritual combat book. In
fact, she always read this book after she prayed: “En acabando de resar, me ponía a leer
en estos libros que e dicho, en el de Meditaciones i en el Conbate espiritual, i en ot(o)ro
del señor don Juan de Palafos, *Semanas espirituales*. (“Having just prayed, I set about

---

82 “[.. .] I began to read the *Book of the Life of Saint Peter of Alcántara*, and I also read the *Meditations
and Modes for Having Mental Prayer*. This, like the small one, I always carried with me, together with the
*Booklet of Spiritual Combat*. And where ever I found myself alone, I would read from both of these and
also from that of Saint Peter. I would read about the mystery in which the day of Christ’s death and the last
years of his life. These considerations would keep me very busy, so much so that I could not attend to any
other thing related to the lessons of these books [ . . . ]” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain*, 125)
(my translation).
reading these books that I have mentioned, the *Meditations of Spiritual Combat*, and in another of Mr. John Palafox, *Spiritual Weeks*” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 126). The *Meditaciones i en el Conbate espiritual* which her narrator also describes as consulting before prayer is not readily identifiable but is according to Myers possibly the popular translation of Lorenzo’s Scupoli’s book *Combattimento spirituale* (1598). Early modern readers used this particular book to root out the passions and follow the inner way, something, which, according to its author, required discipline, strength, and willingness to fight as a soldier for Christ (Myers, “Studies” 281). If this is indeed the book that she read, it is certainly yet another in María de San José’s arsenal of guidebooks for living a life of unrelenting strict asceticism. The fact that she consulted this collection daily is a clear demonstration of the very important role that pain and suffering, seclusion, silence and enclosure played in her daily life on the hacienda, and that in rural Mexico she was applying those readings.

María de San José was barred from convent life because of a lack of funds. In order to follow the rule of St. Clare, the *Vida* asserts that she had to instead transform her rural hacienda home into the type of secluded and enclosed location suitable for the life of a sister of the Poor Clares. With this in mind, María de San José made her first person narrator declare that she had diligently tried to adopt the way of life passed down from the desert fathers/mothers to St. Francis of Assisi to St. Clare. This narrator states that, by age fifteen María had pledged to follow in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi and had taken third-order vows, which meant she followed the Rule of the Order of St. Francis but was not cloistered. In order to realize this transformation, the young autobiographical protagonist dressed in a wool tunic resembling a religious habit and constructed a small
hut in the garden, where, when possible, she retired for some five hours a day of mental prayer and self-mortification.

In a move reminiscent of St. Clare’s flight from her exceedingly disapproving family members, María de San José fled from the rest of the family into the safety of the enclosed space of a garden hut:

La casa de mi madre era mui bien, aunque corta, porque solo tenía tres piesas, una sala i dos aposentos, i así no tube parte ninguna dónde retirarme a solas, si no fue en la forma i manera que aquí diré, con grandíssima incomodidá i travajo. Avía una uerta mui grande donde avía muchos árboles i otras plantas senbradas. Para entrar en esta uerta, se pasaba por un aposento que estava pegado a la pared de la uerta. Este aposento estaba techado de paja o sacate como se acostumbra en el campo en las asiendas de labor. Este aposento servía de guardar en el trastes, i a tiempos solía servir de gallinero. Ia se entiende lo incómodo que estaba para abitar en él. Pues en éste acomodo, siendo tan inmudo por no aver otra parte más desente. La uerta era todo mi consuelo, con ser que estaba a las inq(u)lemensias del sielo sin tener dónde hestar que no fuese a el sol i a el aire i a el agua (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 110).  

Her decision was not at all popular with the rest of her family, especially her very controlling older sister who according to the young narrator, for years did everything she could to prevent María de San José from achieving her divine calling. Within the *Vida* the narrating “I” describes how the harsh extremes of the weather forced her to replicate the desert experience without ever leaving the hacienda. The young narrator dedicated

83 “My mother’s house was very fine, but quite small, because it only had three rooms, a sitting room and two bedrooms. So I had no place where I could retire to be alone, except with the greatest discomfort and travail, in the way and manner I’ll describe here. There was a very large garden where many trees and other plants grew. This garden was entered through a shed right up against the wall of the garden. This shed was thatched with straw or hay as is the custom in the countryside on the farming haciendas. This shed was used to store old castoffs and at other times it had served as a chicken coop. Now it will be understood how uncomfortable it was to stay there. Well there I would settle myself, filthy as it was, for lack of any place more decent to go. The garden was my entire consolation, even though I was exposed to all the rough weather under heaven and had no other place to go that wasn’t out in the sun, and the wind, and the rain” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 20).
hours of her time to prayer and contemplation within this enclosure in an effort to faithfully emulate the ancient desert fathers and mothers as well as like St. Clare, their spiritual descendant who re-enacted their lives everyday within her Order of Poor Clares. The autobiographical María de San José’s actions were similar to those of Raymond de Capua’s biographical St. Catherine of Siena. According to de Capua’s spiritual autobiography of the thirteenth Italian saint, the young St. Catherine also “established a desert within the walls of her own home and solitude in the midst of the people” (Ashton 85). She had become inspired to do so by her reading of the *vitae* of the ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers.

The fact that María de San José discursively portrayed herself as willingly imprisoned in her desert hut is very significant to her self-construction as a holy woman, because the concept of imprisonment is very important in hagiography; especially that involving female protagonists. In the interior space of continuous imprisonment the virgin martyr’s faith is perfected, and the theological self-knowledge, pre-requisite of divine union, finally achieved. Ultimately within the space of enclosure holiness is inscribed upon the contained and isolated female body. Its exemplary *integritas* pleases the masculinity of the church hierarchy. “The multivalency of this space, with both its religious and patriarchal symbolization, nevertheless ensures that woman is fully appropriated, for, imprisoned, she exits as the hagiographer’s subject and man’s other” (Ashton 82).

María de San José constructs herself as a holy woman who was even more enclosed than her model because an insistence on absolute enclosure was of paramount importance to her. St. Clare of Asissi could remain “intact” while she gave to the poor
because she did so from behind the convent walls. Madre María’s narrating “I” never once mentions that she gave to charity in the same way that her spiritual foremother did. Most likely María de San José did not want her to do so because she did not want to give the impression that the historical María de San José actually traveled around the hacienda helping the less fortunate and as a result of her actions becoming “corrupted” by those “spiritual inferiors,” (the people of different casts) that she assisted. In this way, María de San José signaled her distinction from women such as Catherine of Siena and other “tertiaries, lay converts and penitents who chose to risk their chastity in dangerous engagement with the world, sustaining the poor, caring for the sick, comforting the dying, promoting peace and performing other works of mercy” (Bornstein 3). Her distinction between her narrator’s actions and those of St. Catherine of Siena was of the utmost importance. A life of evangelism, charitable giving and direct interaction with the undesirables of society such as lepers might have worked for the medieval Catherine of Siena, but it most certainly would not have been appropriate for a young creole girl living in the heavily stratified world of colonial Mexico.

It would have been indecent for María de San José to spend all of her time out in her hut. However, this alone did not stop her from constructing herself as a Desert Mother inspired saint who spent as much time there as she possibly could. María de San José’s narrating “I” states that she would try to practice the same austere lifestyle as she did while in the hut whenever her mother and brother forced her to stay in the house with the rest of the family rather than remain outside. Her construction of her textual self as “holy” even among secular community extended to her speech acts, or rather lack there of.
Nunca comuniqué ni traté con persona niguna de fuera ni de c(o)asa. I caundo se ofresían algunos negosios I cuidados en casa, nunca me metí en nada, ni aún en abler una palabra en material niguna, ni dar mi pareser ni voto en nada. Siempre me estube en mi rincón, que era el húltimo lugar de todos. Llequé a estar tan austraída i remota de todas las cosas desta vida que vibía como si no hubiera mundo para mí, que casi paresía estar más muerta que vibía [. . .]; i cuando alguna persona de casa llegava a desirme alguna cosa, i, después de averme ablado i dicho lo que quería, me quedava suspensa, sin allar que responderla, por no aver atendido a lo que me avía dicho, porque estava toda enbrevida en Dios, que no podía ni tenía sentido para atender a las cosas de acá (María de San José, *Word from New Spain*) 84

The above passage gives the impression that María de San José maintained a lifestyle of self-imposed perpetual silence even while outside of her enclosure. This particular impression of her is buttressed by her narrator’s claim that her silence lasted for twenty-one years. The *Vida*‘s autobiographical “I” declares that after those twenty-one years were over she was finally able to join a religious order. However, in order to do so she first had to ask her youngest sisters—Isabela Margarita and Catalina—to teach her how to speak again since she “avía olvidado tan en el todo que no savía ia hablar” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 119) (“had forgotten how to talk after so many years of being silent” María de San José, *Wild Country* 26)). The fact that within her autobiography she does in fact engage in several conversations, for example with her mother, brother and sisters, contradicts this statement and thus exposes the constructed nature of the narrator’s fictional claim.

84 “I never communicated or spoke with a single person, neither from outside nor from my home. I always sat still in my corner, which was the lowest place, lower than all my sisters. In time I grew so remote and withdrawn from all things of this life that I lived as though the world no longer existed for me, so that I almost seemed more dead than alive [. . .] Indeed I had forgotten it so completely that I no longer knew how to speak or respond when others spoke to me, thanks to
Madre María had to transform her real lived experience into the invention described above in order to create within her autobiography the perfect reflection of the medieval ideal of the silent female. This perception was both created and then later reinforced by biblical teachings such as those of the first Epistle of Timothy, which commands: ‘Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent’ (Timothy 2: 11-12). And St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians which urges, “Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Keeping silent helped to separate María from the rest of the community and also helped her to maintain an image of the utmost purity. The construction of this type of self-portrait was of paramount importance because during the time in which she lived, male religious and political equated a talkative woman to the assertion of a threatening sexuality. In those days these leaders preferred full feminine bodily integrity in the form of a virginal body un-breached in every way (Ashton 103).

María de San José’s textual “I” did not just live in a hut in the garden and remain in a state of “continual” silence. She also willingly freed herself from all material possessions while living in her carefully constructed site of both physical and spiritual enclosure. The Vida’s narrator states that words alone could not express the state of poverty in which she forced herself to live “Fuera alargarme mucho el desir todo lo que ai que desir aserca de la estremada i suma pobresa con que siempre vibí. Nunca tube cosa mia, ni la quise, ni la desé, ni grande ni pequena” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 113). (“I would have to go on at great length to say all there is to be said about the my habit of so many years when I neither spoke nor conversed with anyone but God; so I knew no
extreme and utter poverty I lived in at all times. I never had a single thing that was my
own, nor did I want or desire anything, large or small” (María de San José, *Wild Country
23)). The narrating “I” uses passages such as the above to construct herself as a Desert
Mother determined to live in the most abject poverty, even if this meant giving up nice
clothes and cutting off all her hair. She chooses to walk around in a plain bodice of
goat’s hair, a very stark cotton shawl or ‘rebozo’ and cast off shoes from her sisters.
The *Vida* constructs a subject who was just as sparing in regard to what she put in
her mouth as she was in what she put on her body. The narrator consistently
turned away from everything except greens and a few tortillas. Her fasting was
perpetual, even on Sundays, feast days and Christmas (María de San José, *Word
from New Spain* 23). The food she did eat she would measure out on a scale; if it
weighed more than ounce she did not put it in her mouth—and this she did only
three days a week. On the other days “no llegava cosa ninguna a mi voca, aunque
me via en es(e)trema necesidá i flaquesa” (María de San José, *Word from New
Spain* 113) (“I never put a single thing into my mouth, even if I found myself in
extreme need and weakness”) (María de San José, *Wild Country* 23)). Even though
on these days she burned from acute thirst she still “no tomava nada; ni una sola
gota de agua” (María de San José *Word from New Spain* 113) (“would not drink a
single sip of water”) (María de San José, *Wild Country* 23)). Not a single drop of
water passed her lips even though they were so “tostados i abrasados de la terrible
sed que padesía, que fue el doble el martirio i tormento que en esto padesía que en
la comida” (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 113) (“parched and burning
from the terrible thirst I suffered, for the martyrdom and torment I suffered from that was twice what I suffered with food” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 23)).

In starving herself on a daily basis, María de San José acted in a fashion similar to the many medieval Italian female women religious, who because they lived in the dry Italian terrain like María de San José, also tried to re-enact the lives of the ancient desert dwellers (Sensi 68). Just like these women, María de San José fasted compulsively in order to cause her femininity to dry up and wither away in the dry desert in the same way that the Desert Mothers had years before. Her reliance on fasting to accomplish this change in body and gender represents yet another demonstration of the way in which during the medieval and modern periods fasting had become a vehicle for transmitting the body’s purity to the unclean world. As Bynum has so clearly demonstrated during this era “voluntary starvation, deliberate and extreme renunciation of food and drink, seemed to holy people the most basic asceticism, requiring the kind of courage and holy foolishness that marked the saints” (Bynum, *Feast* 139).

In refusing nourishment Madre María de San José became like the many early modern women who Bynum declares were profoundly afraid of the sensations of their body, especially hunger and thirst (*Holy Feast* 139). María de San José rejected food in order to train herself to complete her ultimate mission to purge the world of sin and error. Unlike other women who found nourishment in the Eucharist, María de San José’s textual self adhered to her fasts so extremely that she even went so far as to reject the

---

85 Such as María of Venice whose most notable characteristics was the fervor with which she performed her ascetic and penitential practices: restricting or depriving herself of clothing, food, and rest, observing silence for long periods, scrounging herself with a whip, and wearing hair shirts and a chain under her clean clothes (Sensi 68).
communal wine and bread, which, according to Bynum, medieval and early modern religious leaders associated with life, birth and nursing” (Bynum, Fragmentation 48). (17). In this way she distanced herself from the very feminine image of “Women, [becoming,] in mystical eating, a fuller version of the food and flesh they were assumed by their culture to be” (Bynum, Holy Feast 151).

María de San José’s youthful autobiographical self avoided the pleasures of food so intently that she went twenty-one years without even bread, fish or milk or anything else that would be put on the family table. She preferred to scrounge among the scraps that were given to the dogs (María de San José, Word from New Spain 24). María de San José presented herself in this way because as her first person narrator declares: “Io me allava mui indigna de comer destas que se ponía a la mesa; i como io era la que cuidava del sustento de los perros de la asienda, que son mui necesario en el campo, de las tortillas que les davan tomava para comer io, que ni aún esto meresía [. . .]” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 115). The narrator declares that on at least two occasions mothers superior turned her away from their convents because she had eaten so little throughout her life on the hacienda. She had become so “flaca i pálida i consumida” (María de San José Word from New Spain 155) (“thin, pale and emaciated”) (María de San José, Wild Country 40) that she looked as if she “no tenía

86 “Having embraced their humanity, early modern women were known for setting out to defend the inner citadel of clerical authority that was the Eucharist. They commanded a powerful arsenal of revelations and miracles centering on the sacraments as vehicles of salvation and denied that loss of purity after initiation could ever be retrieved through penitence. Some were so intent on defending the Eucharist that they deemed heretics those that would deny its power” (McNamara 17).

87 “I thought myself unworthy to eat the ones put on the table; and as I was the one who took care of feeding the dogs belonging to the hacienda (which are so necessary in the country), from the tortillas that were given to the dogs, I would take some to eat. For I was unworthy even of this, of eating what the dogs and greyhounds ate [. . .]” (María de San José, Wild Country 24).
figura de gente—en los pueros huesos” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 169) (“no longer had a human face [but rather] looked like a sack of bones” (María de San José 48)). In addition to continual hunger, María de San José portrayed herself in her writing as living with a painful thirst which was only endurable if she were to “pegar la voca a la pared, i con el fresco que della resivía, tenía algún refrigerio i me consolava con ésto solo” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 114) (“press [her] mouth to the wall, and I [. . .] find some refreshment with the coolness [that she] felt from it and would console [her]self with nothing but that” (María de San José, Wild Country 23)). Madre María’s emphasis on her voluntary lack of nutritional intake stands as yet another indication that in the time in which she lived, “the theological identification of women with carnality meant that images and ritualized gestures of eating and not eating were especially prominent in women’s devotional acts and religious language” (Bornstein 9).

María de San José’s rejection of food and water was a very important part of her self-construction as a desert athlete or an early modern “Desert Mother.” Although religious studies have often ignored food, Bynum says that “when we look at what medieval people themselves wrote, we find that they often spoke of gluttony as the major form of lust, of fasting as the most painful renunciation, and of eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God” (Holy Feast 150). Sparing in her eating, Madre María de San José’s textually constructed self lived in perfect abstinence and in the process mortified her own body. María de San José was sure to emphasize this total abstinence from food in her autobiography because in the early modern era the ability to live without the benefit of nutrition was “a unique gift, one that truly surpassed the ordinary limits of human nature” (Bynum, Fragmentation 48). As such it was considered
to be a sign of her sanctity and proof that she was in a sense superhuman and thus an
“athlete of God” rather than a “weak woman.” All these were things related to the flesh
of the feminine body that she was trying to disassociate herself from by refusing to eat.
The Eucharist stood for Christ’s humanness and therefore ours. By eating it and, in that
eating, fusing with Christ’s physical suffering, the Christian not so much escaped as
became the human. María de San José wanted to demonstrate that by not eating she had
become superhuman in a sense. Thus she avoided even the one food-related act that
would have united her with the human side of Christ but at the cost of exposing her
fleshiness, her humanity, her “femaleness.”

Lack of food causes a woman to stop menstruating. Therefore by refusing herself
adequate nutrition, María de San José further enabled her transition from an embodied
female to that of a disembodied saint. She demonstrates one of the many ways in which
throughout time “some women manipulated the dominant tradition to free themselves
from the burdens of fertility as powerful symbol” (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 18). At the
same time she shows evidence of the “historical connectedness or the “axis of continuity”
between the modern day anorexic syndrome and earlier examples of extreme
manipulation of the female body as well as other long standing traditions of mortification
of the female flesh in Western culture” (Bordo 229). Like today’s anorexic who uses the
control of nutritional intake as a way to exert some form of power, so too did María de
San José and many other nuns. Like these modern women who starve themselves, she
felt empowered by her hunger and when she did feel hunger pangs she saw them as a
“form of weakness, as a lack of control, a kind of giving in to a biological urge that must
be repressed at all costs.” Ironically María de San José’s willingness to pursue a bodily
standard set by men was indicative of her subjection to their power over her self and her materiality. Her subjugation is proof that “the body, far from being some fundamentally stable, cultural construct to which we must contrast all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly ‘in the grip’ as Foucault puts it, of cultural practices” and is often “made subject to them, turning their owners into subjects rather than individuals” (Bordo 229). This is why “paradoxically—and often tragically—pathologies of female protests (hysteria, agoraphobia, anorexia) actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them” (Bordo 241).

Starvation also demonstrated Madre María de San José’s agency. Thinness represented a triumph over the will of the body and impurity because according to the thinking of the day (as well as today) the thin body (that is to say non-body) is associated with “absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh” (Bordo 241). Charlie O’Neil, an anorexic living today, makes this clear in the following comparison between her thin body and those of the emaciated early Christians living within the desert: “My soul seemed to grow as my body waned; I felt like one of those Early Christian Saints who starved themselves in the desert sun. I felt invulnerable, clean and hard as the bones etched in my salute” (qtd. in Bordo 233). Fat, (that is to say becoming all body) was on the other hand associated with “the taint and matter of the flesh, wantonness, mental stupor and mental decay” (Bordo 233). These were things that would not have been characteristic of the spiritual athlete and thus things that María de San José was most definitely trying to avoid at all costs. By rejecting fat, María de San
José essentially embraced the Tertullian, Jerome and other male religious’s idea of a close connection between gluttony and exaggerated feminine sexuality (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 139). Apparently she shared the anorectic’s experience of her female, bodily self “as voracious, wanton, needful of forceful control by her male will” (Bordo 243).

In Volume I María de San José used perpetual fasting as a rhetorical strategy aimed at convincing her superiors as well as the rest of her community of her inherent spiritual capacity. Thus, her narrating “I’s” abstention from food can be seen as a sign of power. Through her control of the body she demonstrates “the manifold ways in which eating, feeding, and not eating enabled them to control their bodies and their world” (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 189). Through this positioning of her subjectivity we see how:

> Food related behavior was central to women socially and religiously not only because food was a resource women controlled but also because by means of food women controlled themselves and their world. Bodily functions, sensations, fertility and sexuality, husbands, mothers, fathers and children; religious superiors and confessors; God in his majesty and the boundaries of one’s own “self” all could be manipulated by abstaining from and bestowing food (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 193).

Through her control of her nourishment, along with her control of her day-to-day bodily living, in this first volume of her life-writing María de San José managed to transform herself from yet another impoverished young creole woman with no hope of being able to enter a convent into a saint-like figure. She not only succeeded in entering a convent but eventually went on to become a “model nun” who was throughout the rest of her spiritual life chosen for important roles such as the founder and director of novices for the new convent in Oaxaca, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad. From her transformation process we
see that “at their deepest level fasting and extreme asceticism in religious women was not an example of masochism or dualism but rather an effort to gain power and to give meaning. It was clearly a means by which they [the female mystics] manipulated physicality” (Bynum, *Holy Feast* 208).

María de San José’s agency found through the “remembering” of her suffering and torment did not stop at the description of her dining habits (or lack thereof), but also extended to her sleeping habits (or once again lack thereof) as well. Her narrating “I” states that she was not allowed to sleep outside and alone within her hut as was her want so she made due with turning the comfort of her bed into the discomfort of the cold floor of a desert cave. She would make sure to arrive at her bedroom last of all her sisters in order to insure that she was always the one left without a mattress. Once on the floor she says that she would wrap herself so tightly in her clothes that she would be unable to move for the entire night and according to the passage that follows, this caused her endless bodily torment:

Benía a quedar toda encogida, echa un obillo, las rrodillas pegadas a los pechos sin poderme mober ni haser acsion niguna. Deste modo, con estas ataduras tan oprimida como se deja entender, dormí siete años continu(n)os sin aver dejado noche ninguna, ni aun aflojado el rigor i fuerse con que me echava estas ligaduras O Señor i Dios de mi alma, no alló términos ni palabras para desir i declarar lo mucho que padesí en el espacio destos siete años, según era las ansias, congojas i fatigas, i penalidades (María de San José *Word from New Spain* 112).⁸⁸

⁸⁸ “There I was, all wrapped up like a ball of yarn, with my knees pressing into my chest and unable to stir or make any movement at all. In this way, with these bonds pressing tight as might be imagined, I slept for seven years every night without ever skipping a single night or slackening the severity and force I used to tie these fastenings [. . .]. O Lord and God of my soul, I can find no words or terms to tell and declare how greatly I suffered in the space of those seven years, such were the anguish and pangs and weariness and hardships!” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 22).
In this passage María de San José’s “embodied mysticism” is more direct then before. Here she directly compared the cross to bear that was her life of suffering to the cross that Christ was nailed to and eventually died on. Yet, according to the sentiments expressed in the passage, María de San José carried her heavy burden with a light heart because all her suffering was inspired by her love for her Lord.

María de San José’s made her suffering in her text so explicit within her first volume of text that it surpassed that of St. Clare and even rose to the same level of severe mortification as St. Peter of Alcántara. Her narrating “I” says that she first heard about the penances of St. Peter of Alcántara, when she listened to her brother read his Tratado de la oración y meditación (1562). St. Peter was a follower of St. Francis whose dedication to the Rule of the Hermit, and especially its emphasis on the importance of suffering had earned him a tremendous amount of fame both in Spain and throughout Christendom. He had lived as a hermit for much of his life, all the while engaging in the most extreme forms of fasting and physical mortifications. María de San José’s insistence that she followed his harsh asceticism clearly indicated to her readers that she had chosen a much harsher spiritual path than the majority of women religious of her time. On the other hand, her narrator’s confession that she did not have access to a confessor who might have been able to warn her against the potential danger lurking in her chosen spiritual path mitigated any censure that this admission might have provoked.

No tenía confessor, como e dicho, con quien comunicarlos, ni otra ninguna persona. Determinéme a seguirme por las vidas de los santos que más me quadravan. I una dellas fue la del glorioso San Pedro de Alcántara. Que como dige al prinsipio, que mi hermano me leió aquel primer estitutió a sus monjas de Santa Clara. Me incline mucho a seguir deste mismo modo de vida, mas como no tube forma i aiuda ninguna, seguí lo que aquí boi disiendo; que aviendo leído el Libro de la vida de San Pedro de Alcántara, me quadró mucho la vida tan áspera i rrigorosa como queda dicho, que los
más días me los pasava casi sin comer, i otros con solo ierbas del campo i tortillas. I me allava cada día con más fuersas i rruvustés, que paresía que al paso que iva adelante lo áspero de la penitensia, iva también en aumento el vigor i fuersas, que paresía me las doblava el Señor. I con la imprudencia de mis pocos años, commence a tomar de la vida de San Pedro de Alcántara lo más que io pude. Que, según paresía, llegué casi a imitarle en la penitensia que hizo glorioso santo, sin que se me echasse de ver mucho [ . . .]. I aunque con la edá no asertava a perficionar mis deseos, el Señor los encaminava con Su providencia, i assí me los dava de imitar a este glorioso santo en la santidad i virtudes que exersitava en su vida (María de San José, _Word from New Spain_ 125).89

As she embarked on this very harsh road María de San José was returned to, and re-signified, the spiritual desert of ancient Christendom, a world characterized by harsh, unforgiving terrain and even harsher and more unforgiving penitential practices by the hermits that lived there in virtual isolation. She dedicated herself so intensely to this path that it eventually garnered her significant spiritual authority. Moreover, because it placed her in direct contrast to her more moderate fellow women religious, her adoption of the severe desert path eventually came to be seen as proof of her spiritual exemplarity. People began to recognize her as a hermit and even call her one. In similar manner to the much-revered Desert Fathers and Mothers of yesteryear, they began to admire her for her ability to sustain her strict penitential practices in a superhuman fashion:

89 “I did not have a confessor, or anyone else, to communicate with. I decided to follow the lives of the saints that I most admired. And one of them was Saint Peter of Alcántara. As I said in the beginning, my brother read to me the first instructions to the nuns of Saint Clare. I was very inclined to follow this same way of life, because I didn’t have any guidance or help, I followed what I am saying here; that having read the _Book of the life of Saint Peter of Alcántara_, I very much admired the very harsh and rigorous life that was described, that I spent most days almost without eating, and some with just a few herbs from the garden and tortillas. I found myself each day stronger and more robust; it seemed that the harshness of the penances that I was following were increasing my strength and vigor; it seemed like the Lord doubled them. And with the imprudence of youth, I began to take from the life of Saint Peter of Alcántara as much as I could. I began to imitate all the penitences that this glorious saint did, without missing very much [ . . .] and although as I got older I did not try to perfect my desires, the Lord guided them with his providence, and thus I came to imitate this glorious saint in the sanctity and virtues that he exercised in his life” (María de San José, _Word from New Spain_). (my translation).
I como tenían ia notisias de mí, como avía tantos años que estava en soledad i retirro, hasiendo vida de ermitaña, que así me llamavan, la ermitaña (que ojalá lo uviera sido de veras, i no sólo de nombre, porque mis deseos siempre fueron de ser berdadera ermitaña en el todo mientras no estava en la religión), les paresia a las personas que tenían esta notisia de mí que era lo que paresía, que estaba sirviendo a Dios, i así me eviavan a encargar sus necesidades i trabajos: que pidiese a Su Magestad por ellos (María de San José, *Word from New Spain* 187).90

María de San José’s life-long adoption of the lifestyle of the ancient Desert Hermits gave her the power to suppress her feminine body. In the process she was able to demonstrate that like the ancient Desert Mothers she too had managed to move from a gendered being to a genderless one by living in seclusion, starving her body and controlling her speech. By surviving alone in the metaphorical and physical desert, refusing to talk and training her body severely and continuously, Madre María became an athlete; and her body became genderless. Later she came to be greatly admired for her ability to transcend her weak feminine nature. Madre María sent a signal to her readers by highlighting this transformation, as well as the high level of admiration that it inspired within the community. She reported that by living alone in her sealed desert hide-away she had transcended the need for a more formal bodily enclosure such as that of the convent. Her body was never defiled within the potentially polluted environment of the hacienda because it was carefully shut away and because even when it was exposed to contaminating elements, through the purgation of its mistress, it had become immune to spiritual corruption.

90 “And as they had already heard of me, since I had passed so many years in solitude and retreat, leading the life of a hermit—for that is what they called me, the hermit (if only I had been one in truth, and not only in name, because my desires always were to be a true hermit in all ways if I could not be in the convent)—it seemed to the people who had heard this about me that it must be so, that I did serve God; and so they would send to entrust me with their needs and trials, so that I might pray to His Majesty for them” (Maria de San José, *Wild Country* 57).
Reading the Feminine Body Made Visible in the Later Volumes

The adoption of the desert path to spirituality and the fame that it led to became so important to Madre María de San José that even when she was finally able to enter an Augustinian convent she never gave up on her desire to follow the path “with all its severity and harshness” instituted so long ago by St. Francis of Assisi for himself and his nuns. This she did even though this path caused her to be treated with the utmost suspicion and censor by both her sisters and her male superiors. She could not give on the path that she had been led to by God. After all, she was St. Francis’s spiritual daughter; she had been so ever since he said to her: “Shall I not favor you? For you know that you have always been my daughter [. . .] you are my heart’s own daughter” (María de San José, Wild Country 89). The message that she was his daughter inspired her to follow St. Francis’s adaptation of the harsh ascetic “desert” model and to desire to “imitate him in the virtue of humility in which he shone so brightly” (María de San José, Wild Country 90). Thus following his path was something that she could not stop, even when she entered into a religious order that deviated from it in its mitigation of its severity.

María de San José’s narrator insists that, despite the fact that after twenty-one years she had finally successfully ensconced herself within the convent, she never mitigated her asceticism but rather continued to desire to suffer even more. Interestingly, however, in these later Volumes describing her experience as a nun, this narrator couches her desire to pursue a harsh lifetime of strict penitential practices in terms borrowed from St. Teresa de Jesús as well as St. Francis and his followers. She takes the famous line
“padecer o morir” (suffer or die) from the Spanish saint’s Vida in order to give expression to this heartfelt wish: “Lord, either death or suffering; I want no relief or rest in this life, not for one instant” (María de San José, Wild Country 108). Moreover, throughout the later volumes of her Vida she says that did not want any relief for her exceptional suffering: “Lord, let no creature think of me to give me any relief; let them think of me only to insult and abuse me as I deserve, and so that I imitate You in a little of all that you have suffered for me” (María de San José, Wild Country 108).

In addition to using the lines of her feminine foremothers, in these later volumes María de San José allowed her narrator to make references to the female women religious, such as her namesake—the María de San José whose death had freed up a space in the convent—that served as her role models. These women never make the kind of appearances in the first two volumes that they make in the later ones. María de San José’s autobiographical self does not even see visions of St. Clare despite the fact that in Volume I she says that St. Francis had modeled his new charge of María de San José after his original one. As we see in the following passage, in the story of María de San José’s life in the convent, sisterly companionship is allowed rather than eschewed: “Here I saw with interior vision, close to me, the soul of Sister María de San José in glory, the one who died before I entered the convent, in whose place I entered, as has been told in the first part. As soon as I saw her so beautiful and surrounded by brilliant rays, I felt great joy and courage to bear this very heavy weight that had fallen upon me” (María de San José, Wild Country 67). In addition, significantly, in this citation the narrator associates women with the supposedly feminine attribute of beauty. She never makes this same association in the previous volumes of text.
Besides borrowing St. Teresa’s terminology to describe her life of suffering, as soon as her autobiographical self joined the Convent of Saint Mónica for the first time she began to couch her statements in feminine imagery. For example, she claims that God told her that people who suffered for Him would become His flowers, his chosen people, in exchange for their sacrifices. In the following passage, María de San José’s narrator says that God made her one of his flowers when He placed her on such a harsh ascetic place. God says to her: “Behold these flowers you see that are so lovely; they are made by the people who suffer for My love alone, and who suffer and endure to give Me pleasure” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 85). God goes on to tell María de San José’s autobiographical self that, because she has suffered so much for Him, she will find herself “surrounded by flowers and roses” at the time of her death (María de San José, *Wild Country* 85). The floral offerings would make her death more gentle for her while those that did not choose to practice extreme asceticism would not be so graciously rewarded in the afterlife. Rather, they would be cursed with loneliness at the hour of death, “without this consolation and with all their work lost” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 85). In a subsequent passage María de San José’s narrator combines floral imagery with the supposedly feminine art of sewing in order to describe how she used to inscribe flowers into cloth in order to symbolize her desire to become one of God’s flowers: “And the next day, in the morning, I entered my cell and took up my sewing, and as I was there with the needle in my hand ready to sew, I felt our Lord sit down at my side, right on the boards of my bed” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 77). The combination of flowers with the “feminine” art of sewing makes the narrator seem
inherently womanly to the reading audience. It also makes her appear more spiritual as in the early modern period sewing was further associated with Holy women.

Madre María de San José’s autobiographical “I” wanted nothing more than to be one of God’s flowers. Thus she determined that she would forever “feel great bitterness and torment in every single thing [. . . including] eating and drinking, sleeping, walking, seeing and hearing” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 87). To insure that she followed this command, Madre María’s narrator says that she would flagellate herself daily until she had “sores and wounds on her feet as well as her face,” and eventually had to be “bled [. . .] eighteen times at her doctor’s request” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 73).

This narrator says, however, that her wounded body did not bother her because her greatest joy would be to be crucified and die while suffering intensely just as Jesus did so many centuries ago:

> And since that day, when Our Lord made this pact with me—that if I wished to give Him pleasure in all things, then I must take pleasure in none, nor have any rest whatsoever for so long as I live—I agreed to the pact, and did so with singular joy in my soul, because I at last attained what I had long so desired, to be crucified and tormented so that I might reach a close union with my soul’s Beloved; for that is the only way I can attain it. Ever since that day, all my senses are tormented (María de San José, *Wild Country* 87).

At first glance this passage related to María’s suffering might seem to be very similar to those found in the first two volumes of her *Vida*. However, it is actuality quite different because it is characterized by pervasive erotic imagery. Here Madre María’s autobiographical alter ego claims that she suffered because she wanted to give “pleasure” to her “Beloved” Christ. Thus, the passage is a direct allusion to the type of sensuous Bridal imagery found in the Song of Songs. Thus, in the later Volumes of Madre María
de San José’s *Vida* suffering takes on a sexual element, as it becomes a way to unite the protagonist’s body with that of her divine Lover.

The reader cannot find flowers, sewing and/or divine betrothals in the first volume of María de San José’s *Vida*. The absence of these feminine images is highly significant. When she wrote Volume I María de San José purposely did not make references to things related to the feminine because she wrote to transform her female body into a de-sexed one capable of living outside of enclosed spaces. Therefore, the body that becomes visible in the first two volumes of her spiritual writing is not associated with femaleness. María de San José’s disassociation with the feminine in her first two volumes of text, and the genderless body that it helped to invoke, were an important part of the author’s rhetorical purpose. Principally, because her ability to use discourse to convince her superiors of the holiness of her life lived outside of the convent directly depended upon the demonstration that she had been able to overcome the “inherent corruptibility” of her “pervious” feminine body.

Interestingly, María de San José’s own reflections of her writing process are evidence of the fact that rather than a strict re-telling of these twenty-one years spent outside the convent, what we really have in the first volumes of the *Vida* is a re-invention of them. For example, when the more chronological *Vida* of the first volume gives way to the series of *cuentas de conciencia*, María comments on the difference between the “order” of the former and the *salteado* [scattered] nature of the latter. (Myers, “Studies” 315). In addition, from the passage below we can see that during the reconstruction effort of the more “ordered” story of her secular existence, María de San José’s memory often failed her and things were not always written down exactly as they occurred:
Oi, día onse del mes de enero, año del mil setesientos i cuatro, me allé sumamente apretada por el gran trasiego i conbate que estaba pasiendo aserca de algunas dudas que tengo en esto mismo que boi escriviendo; que como a tantos años que fue todo esto i lo tenía ia escrito, i haora me lo buelvan a haser escrevir de nuebo, algunas cosas no se me acuerdan fijamente—no porque me falta la memoria la sustancia de las cosas, que ésta fija la tengo. Lo que no se me acuerda bien son algunas sircunstancias [. . .] María de San José Word from New Spain 91

More importantly, from the continuation of her discussion of the process involved in writing her Vida, we see that the author called forth these memories only to omit them from the final narrative. She deleted them because they would have conflicted with the presentation of the identity that María de San José was diligently constructing for herself within her autobiographical portrait. The fact that she kept some remembered experiences from entering the first volumes of her Vida while she allowed others to become a part of her discursive life story produced a discrepancy between what is remembered and put under erasure and what was written. The following quote from the Mexican nun’s autobiography clearly demonstrates that María de San José was fully cognizant of the existence of this discrepancy: “Todas suelo pensar i traer a la memoria lo que e de escrevir; i quando tomo la pluma para escrivir lo que tengo ia pensado, i sin saver cómo ni de qué manera, se me vora de la memoria, i pongo otra cosa mui diferente, que io no avía pensando, i que tenía olvidado” (María de San José, Word from New Spain 151). (“It is always my custom to think and bring to my memory what I must write down; and when I pick up my pen to write what I have just thought, I don’t know how or

91 “Today, the eleventh of January in the year 1704, I found myself extremely distressed by the great upset and conflict I was suffering because of certain doubts I have concerning these very matters I am writing about here. All of this happened so many years ago, and I had already written it all down. And now that they make me write it all again, I cannot remember some things exactly—not because the substance of these things slip from my memory, for that is very exact in my mind. What I don’t remember well are some of the circumstances [. . .]” (María de San José, Wild Country 26).
why, it is erased from my mind, and I set down something else quite different that I had not thought of, and which I had forgotten” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 37)). From this citation we see that in María de San José’s *Vida*, narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can be consciously manipulated by the one doing the remembering.

Later the narrator insists that she is telling everything just as it occurred, but her insistence only serves as an attempt to cover the fact that as regards memory and its role in the reconstruction of experience, some things are brought in and some are left out. Those brought in are the ones that add to the picture that the narrator is trying to paint of herself. Those that do not are banished from the written product. What was left out of María de San José’s reconstruction of her early life story was anything that would lead to doubt about the saintly nature of the desert mother persona that she had very carefully constructed within her text. In other words what is left out is anything that might have contradicted the presentation of her being de-sexed. Therefore, unlike Isabel de Jesús’s spiritual *Vida*, there is no mention within her first volume of the maternal side of Jesus. Nor are there any images of motherhood to be found anywhere. Female body parts such as breasts and female functions such as breast-feeding are also not found in her initial volume of text. In part, this is because María de San José did not physically experience these things as Isabel de Jesús did. But neither did St, Catherine of Siena or the many other women who chose to highlight the female aspects of God. Excessive humility, passivity and continual weeping and emotional displays are also blocked from entering into her reconstruction of her years lived outside of the convent, even though they too had been a part of the female religious tradition. However, all of the above are allowed to enter into María de San José’s later volumes that discuss her life inside the convent rather
than her years outside of it. This makes for quite an interesting contrast between the first two volumes and the later volumes that make up María de San José’s life writing. Whereas the body made visible in the first volume dealing with a secular existence is de-sexed, the one that appears in the story of María de San José’s convent life as told in the later volumes is closely aligned with what the members of her early modern society would have considered to be imminently feminine.

For example, although María de San José relates her conversion experience in the first volume, she leaves things out of this narrative that are later elaborated on in the later ones. In these later works the Holy Virgin not only gives María de San José a wedding ring that unites her with the Lord; she also gives her heart, saying “Behold this is your heart; I have received it so that my Son may be born in it” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 79). With this heart María de San José becomes closely entwined with the woman whose heart was closest to Jesus’s through giving birth to him. Thus, by receiving the heart of Mary, her unification with the Lord is completely assured.

The narrator later goes on to describe her heart as being outside of her own body and with a chorus of his angels. “While I was in this state, I felt and saw how my heart, was in the midst of countless angels who were praising and blessing His Divine Majesty. I cannot possibly say what state I was in; it was as if my heart had left; I was stupefied and enraptured, seeing this” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 79). Most certainly, the kind of bodily union that this passage implies would have undercut María de San José’s construction of herself as dissac. Thus, while it was allowed to creep into her later volumes, it is absent in her first two. In addition, the kind of connection between the human Mother of Jesus and María de San José implied above would also have detracted
from the autobiographer’s attempt to transcend the feminine. Therefore María de San José’s autobiographical persona makes every conceivable effort to align herself with the body of the Holy Mother in her later volumes. In contrast, in her volume the Virgin Mary’s feminine corporeality remains hidden.

Nowhere in the first two volumes of María’s text is the story of the Incarnation ever broached. Yet in the later works María de San José is careful to relate textually how she witnessed the Incarnation:

I was at her feet and I saw her in the middle of a great light with many brilliant rays, and I saw how a very little baby boy took shape in her most pure womb. The instant I saw it, it was made known to me just what His Divine Majesty wrought for the human race, and all He did and suffered from the instant of His Incarnation until the moment He took His last breath (María de San José, *Wild Country* 81).

In this vision María de San José’s autobiographical self celebrates the formation of Jesus within a very human, very maternal, very feminine body. It is so intensely evocative of the female body and motherhood that at first glance it would seem to have been pulled from Isabel de Jesus’s *Vida* rather than that of María de San José. Tellingly, no such glorifications of the maternal body and its role in the formation of the Christ Child can be found in the story of María de San José’s secular life.

The crucifixion is also a subject of great importance in the later volumes as well. For example, in the following passage she represents her version of the crucifixion in great length:

I approached the staircase and got down on my knees on the first step in front of this image of Our Lord, and as I was kneeling I saw myself lifted from the ground, and I rose higher and higher until I reached the place where this image of Our Lord upon the cross was. And holding myself in the shape of a cross, with my arms straight out, I approached the Lord and put my lips and my mouth on the wound in His side, and holding myself in
this way I stayed in the shape of a cross, hanging from the wound in His Majesty’s side. I was seeing this with interior vision and with great light and clarity, and while I was in this, I heard our Lord speak to me in that matter of locution that I have already described, when the words make a sound and I hear them pronounced. And He said: “Behold, this is what you have greatly desired and have asked me for all your life, to be united and crucified with me, (f. 29v) taking part in my Passion (María de San José, *Wild Country* 77).

While it is true that the Crucifixion, if not the Incarnation, is mentioned in the first two volumes of this Mexican religious’ writings, it is discussed solely in terms of serving as a model for penitential practice. Here, however, the emphasis is placed on the crucifixion as a site of bodily union between María de San José and a suffering Christ. Significantly, in a move highly symbolic of the unification between the body of the Lord and that of a mortal woman, here the subject portrays herself as kissing the wound of Christ. This type of self-depiction is very common in the writings of medieval and early modern female mystics. It figures so predominantly in their texts because it highlights the power of orifices in the body to unite the human with the divine. This rhetorical strategy revalorized women and women’s bodies as it placed the much-maligned porosity of the female body in a different light. It showed that women were connected to the divine because they were full of orifices. It was these orifices that then connected them with Christ and infused them with his power. Of course perviousness was not something María de San José would have wanted to admit to having in her early life. For this reason when reconstructing this earlier part of her life, scenes involving the kissing of wounds and the unification of the human and the divine through the touching of bodily orifices are nowhere to be found.
The presence of the vision of the Crucifixion, along with the one of the Incarnation within her later volumes, signals that the later texts have a focus that is distinct from that of the first two. In these texts María de San José constructed a mystical persona along the lines of St. Teresa de Jesús and Catherine of Siena. Herein she focuses on the human aspects of God as symbolized by an incarnate and crucified Christ in much the same way as not only the two great mystical writers mentioned above but also a very long line of her female spiritual predecessors. In doing so, like both Isabel de Jesús and Madre Magdalena, the subject brings the body not only into her text but also into her mystical theology. As a wounded and bleeding body that represented the more material and thus more female aspects of God, María de San José, like her spiritual foremothers, also elevates the position of the female body within these later volumes of her writing. However, it is significant that this mystical theology does not characterize the volumes of her life story that depicted her life lived outside the convent. In these, the focus was on returning to the spiritual desert and not creating a mystical world. The reason for this very important difference in authorial focus is spatial. The later volumes tell of an enclosed life and a protected body; the earlier ones tell of a life lived out on a multiracial hacienda with a body subjected to spiritual and physical corruption on a daily basis. In the protected narrative space of the convent María de San José could be free to construct herself as a more mystical, more emotional, more “female” saint.

In the unprotected narrative space of the hacienda María de San José could do none of the above, as women are only allowed to glory in their femaleness if they are safely locked away from the rest of the world. Thus her writing about her secular life had to follow another hagiographic model. While her later volumes reflect the same kinship
of femininity found in the writings of numerous women religious, Madre María de San José’s first volume represent an intended (if not always completely successful) separation from femininity, the female body and nearly everything associated with it. Instead she chose a close association with St. Francis, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Clare and their spiritual Desert Fathers and the androgynous Desert Mothers whose lives had been the source of their religious inspiration.

Since in the later volumes María de San José is no longer concerned with the construction of a Desert Mother, in this part of the narrative the body made visible for rhetorical purposes is allowed to eat rather than starve. In fact, in the passage that follows we see that María de San José allowed this body to even eat chocolate; something that the starving and emaciated body invoked in the story of her secular life would most certainly not have been able to do:

I felt very confused and awkward when I found myself with a plate of refreshments and a cup of chocolate in my hands, because for twenty-one years nothing of this kind had reached my lips; but I had great resolve and firm determination to adapt and follow everything that the other nuns did and followed, and not to stand out in any way, not even in the most trifling thing. I did not fail to take a bit of the refreshment and the chocolate, with great joy and happiness in my soul, for I thought I was in heaven” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 66).

Significantly, when she allowed her body to enjoy the somatic experience of eating, María de San José’s autobiographic self feels so much guilt and confusion that she feels an internal battle within her soul. This battle is symbolized by the three “demons” that she continually “tormented” her while she was in the convent (María de San José, *Wild Country* 70). These devils never torment her in the first volumes of text. Why would they? Desert Mothers are immune to their machinations.
The autobiographical self that the reader finds in the later chapters of the *Vida* is allowed to do other corporeal things that the previous one could not. First of all, the author allows her to act as if she inhabited a maternal body. She does so when, in a vision, she sees a newborn baby lying on a board. Like any doting mother she watches him tenderly while he sleeps. The baby lets out a shout of joy when he sees his mother. He then presses her close and throws his arms around her neck; as he does so he fills María de San José, “the mother,” “with joy and happiness” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 79). As we read about the scene described above, we cannot help but think of Isabel de Jesús. On the other hand, María de San José’s first volume never brings the Spanish Augustinian back to mind.

Along with the reappearance of the mother figure in these later volumes come the maternal body parts that are made absent in the first two volume of text. On one occasion, the narrator of the later volumes describes to the readers how one night after choir her heart “left her breast” rather than her chest and “placed itself before the ciborium, “in the midst of countless angels who were praising and blessing His Divine Majesty. Upon its departure, the narrator describes herself as being left “stupefied and enraptured”(María de San José, *Wild Country* 79). She never ascribes to these erotic feelings primarily associated with the *vidas* of female women religious that she never ascribes to in the first volumes of text. Tellingly, the figure of the angel, another religious symbol associated with the feminine makes an appearance in this textual encounter with divinity. The angel is allowed into these later volumes because in this part of the text, femininity and the things associated with it, are embraced rather than denied.
Conclusions

María de San José was so successful in repositioning her memory and experience to construct her identity, that as a direct result of her autobiographical writing--the textual reconstruction of her self and her body--she would later go on to become a leading holy woman in seventeenth century Mexico. She was greatly admired for her visionary abilities and looked to by many for spiritual guidance. This was indeed a move up for a woman without a dowry who had come from a rural ranch. According to María de San José this move up was ordained by God himself when he told her that “María, having Me, you can do great things” (María de San José, *Wild Country* 83). Although she managed to make others believe that her body was somehow genderless, she needed to bring it into her text in order to do so. Rather than banishing her body from her writing, she gives it a central role. Whether it is portrayed as suffering, starving or wasting away, María de San José’s body is never out of sight within the initial volume of her spiritual *Vida*. The suffering body plays such a prominent role in María de San José’ early reconstruction of her life because it was through the physical transformation of her body that she managed to present herself as a genderless being capable of living in a dangerous secular world without the benefits of structural enclosure. Thus, the paradox is, although she wrote to free herself from her female body, she needed to write about her body in order to do so. Ironically, the empowerment that María de San José finds through her writing is dependent upon the very materiality that she was trying to transcend by way of the written word. Like Isabel de Jesus and Madre Magdalena, hers is an embodied form of empowerment.
On the other hand, the suffering body does not have such an extensive role in the subsequent volumes. In these later texts we more readily encounter a feminine body that longs for unification with a Divine Lover. However, in these later volumes the body made visible is still a source of agency for this early modern religious. The difference between how the body is inscribed in the first two texts vs. the later ones is that it is based upon an embrasure rather than a rejection of feminine materiality. Either way, the power and authority that María de San José’s writing enabled was in both cases grounded upon the prominent positioning of her corporeality within the textual reconstruction of her self as well as the discursive re-scripting of her life. For this reason, in common with both Isabel de Jesús and María Magdalena, for this Mexican woman religious, the Vida is a space of imminently empowering embodiment.
CHAPTER 5
WRITING THE ABUSED BODY, DECONSTRUCTING THE HAGIOGRAPHIC
“I” IN LUISA DE CARVAJAL Y MENDOZA’S VIDA ESPiritual

Introduction

As a member of the wealthy and powerful Mendoza family, the Spanish noblewoman Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566-1641) could have entered any convent that she wanted to, whenever she wanted to (Nader 5). She was born in Jaraicejo (a small town in the province of Cáceres, in the western region of Extremadura) on the January 2, 1566 to affluent parents. Two years later, first her aunt, Maria Chacón, and then later her very prominent ambassador uncle, Fransisco de Hurtado de Mendoza, Marqués de Almazinher made her their ward in the wake of her parents age parents untimely death. Her aunt, (the governess of King Phillip’s own children), and her uncle, (a prominent figure in Spanish politics who served as Philip II’s ambassador in Germany from January
1570 to September 1570), allowed the young Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza to continue to enjoy all that wealth and privilege had to offer. The wealth and status of these two guardians gave the young girl choices that other young women of a lower social status did not have. This young member of the illustrious Mendoza family was in fact so exceedingly wealthy that she also had more choices than the majority of other young Spanish noblewomen. Importantly, her money and high social station allowed her to petition the Jesuit Order for a type of spiritual expedition generally reserved for men: an evangelical mission to a country that persecuted Catholics, in this case England. While she traveled to the English Isles in search of glorious martyrdom, her female peers had to stay home and seek enclosure either within an arranged marriage or a prestigious convent. At first Carvajal y Mendoza’s trip to England was thought to be controversial since it involved a female missionary. The questionable activities, such as overseeing the transport of the cadavers of Catholic martyrs and instructing Catholic prisoners and other social misfits, that Carvajal y Mendoza either conducted or supervised while in her

---

92 Luisa had so many more options because like the majority of aristocratic early modern Spanish women, she had money, a position of privilege, and she was highly educated. She had been encouraged to learn from an early age because “even though patriarchal, and especially clerical, ideologies of female modesty discouraged educating the young women of the period, society’s expectations of women’s legal and economic responsibilities required that they be learned in a variety of subjects including the practical aspects of finance, law and politics” Nader 6). The differing expectations of society and the church often created tensions within these women however (Nader 6). We see an example of this in Luisa’s text when she at first states that she was fluent in Latin and then later in an effort to claim the same intimacy with Jesus shared by other women religious, states that she was taught Latin by God acting through her uncle.

93 Luisa’s mission took place alongside the movement to establish the Catholicism of King James’s wife, Anne of Denmark (1574-1619), (Rhodes, “Introduction” 16).

94 King Henry’s desire to divorce Katherine of Aragon resulted in legislation that by 1535 had dismantled the religious ties between England and Rome. Thus it was the catalyst for the Anglo-Spanish enterprise, called the “Spanish treason” by the Anglicans, which involved ongoing attempts by Philip II and Philip III to support Catholic interests in England and to eventually even overthrow the Anglican monarchy (Gregory 255). For example, after Philip III’s accession in 1598, Joseph Creswell, a prominent English Catholic leader, “urged the young king to end the war with England by means of what he termed a ‘heroic feat,’ such as an invasion in collusion with England Catholics” (Cruz, “Willing Desire” 186).
foreign destination exacerbated the controversy provoked by her initial departure. Eventually, however, Carvajal y Mendoza’s Jesuit superiors endorsed for political reasons the same mission that they had at first offered to a female petitioner out of a need for money (Cruz, “Willing Desire” 178).95 Although Carvajal y Mendoza received approval for her willing participation in this dangerous apostolasizing mission, once she was there, martyrdom proved to be elusive. An “evil” Protestant king did not order the death of the unrepentant Spanish Catholic missionary. Instead, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza died of cholic at the age of forty-eight. The only consolation for the would-be martyr for the “One True Church” was that her final imprisonment brought on first her illness, and then subsequently, her death (Rhodes, “Introduction 29).

There is no doubt that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s experiences abroad were unusual for an early modern Hispanic noblewoman. In that day and age women simply did not travel to foreign lands as missionaries. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s life has been the subject of a series of hagiographic studies, all of which are based at least in part on her personal writings (including the spiritual Vida that she wrote for her confessor as part of her petition to go to England as a missionary; her “cuentas de consciencia,” the records of the important spiritual events that took place in her life; her poetry; 178 letters of her now extant letters; her vows, and

---

95 The following statement by Padre Miguel Valpolo, (a prominent Jesuit leader) establishes that Jesuit church leaders clearly saw Luisa’s participation as an advantageous to the Jesuit cause in England: “Moralmente hablando (por parte de Luisa) no había ni rastro de peligro, y su estada en Inglaterra [. . .] podría ser muy provechosa, así con el ejemplo de su vida, como también por sus buenos consejos y pios ejercicios, con los cuales era cierto (que acudiría a consolar a los afligidos y socorrer a los necesitados)” (Morally speaking, (on behalf of Luisa) there has not been even a hint of danger, and her presence in England [. . .] could be very useful, with the example of her life, as well as her good advice and pious exercises, with which it would certainly (console those who are in pain and give succor to those that need it) (in Abad, Misionera 40).
The first of these studies of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s life was an early biography composed by Walpole. Later, a renowned Jesuit biographer, Luis Muñoz, used Walpole’s biography as the basis for his *Vida y virtudes de la venerable virgin doña Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza* (1631). These publications were followed by Lady Georgiana Fullerton’s English rendition of the Spanish woman’s life, *The Life of Luisa de Carvajal* (1904). After the publication of Lady Fullerton’s text, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza was virtually forgotten about until Manuel Serrano y Sanz decided to include her in his *Apuntes para una biblioteca de escritores españoles desde el año 1401 al 1833*. However, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza was once again left in virtual obscurity until 1966 when Camilo María Abad wrote a biography of the notorious Spanish noblewoman, *Una misionera española en la Inglaterra del siglo XVII: Doña Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566-1614)*. This biography was predated by a 1965 edition of the Spanish noblewoman’s poetry, *Epistolario y poesías*; it was followed by Abad’s publication of her *Escritos autobiográficos* in 1966.

---

96 The same prioress that accepted Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s corpse and writings also tried to start the beatification process for the 17th century noblewoman. She put together *Las Informaciones*, with copies of letters and other writings in a volume of 697 pages, to support this endeavor (Abad 123). This prioress even had compiled the proof of miraculous behavior needed for Carvajal y Mendoza’s proposed canonization. She cited two miracles as the proof of Luisa’s exemplarity. The first of these had to do with Luisa’s observed power to protect against infection. Someone staying in her convent was spared from developing the plague for 3 days, but upon leaving the convent they were found dead within two days. The second miracle involved a servant of the Conde de la Revilla who had wounded a companion in a brawl and left him for dead. Luisa said he would not die and she was proved to be right (Rees 83). Other women religious attested to Luisa’s abilities to stop their pain. Madre Antonia de San José for example took a “mosqueta,” a wild rose, from her grave, and when she placed it on her arm the pain went away (Muñoz 202-204).
All of the texts listed above are characterized by an unproblematic assertion of Luisa de Carvajal as a hagiographic subject. That is to say, they did not distinguish between the author and her idealized representation of herself. Until recently, the distinction between these two different entities has not been the subject of critical analysis. The critic who has offered the most insight into Luisa de Carvajal’s hagiographic construction of herself within her spiritual *Vida* is Elizabeth Rhodes. In the introduction to her bilingual (Spanish and English) edition of Luisa’s *Vida Espiritual*, *This Tight Embrace* (2000) Rhodes analyses the textual process of identity construction within Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida* in order to highlight the constructed nature of Carvajal y Mendoza’s hagiographical presentation of herself. In this dissertation we work from Rhodes’s bilingual edition; thus the majority of translations of Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida* are hers and will be followed by their appropriate page number. There are a few parts of the Spanish *Vida* that Rhodes does not translate however. Subsequently, whenever these parts are cited they will be followed by the words “my translation.” On the other hand, Rhodes generally only gives the English translation for the notes that she found in the margins of the original text. Consequently, citations of these marginal notes are in English.

Within her introduction to Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida* Rhodes claims that the Spanish noblewoman used her spiritual life story as a platform for constructing an empowering identity that was based upon female hagiographic models such as St. Catherine of Siena and especially St. Elizabeth of Hungary. This autobiographer especially looked to the latter as a model because she shared the saint’s same wealthy social position (Rhodes, “Prologue” ix). According to Rhodes, Carvajal y Mendoza was
so successful in modeling herself after saints that in her “spiritual life story, it is hard to know where the subject is Raymond of Capua’s St. Catherine of Siena, or Martin de Lilio’s St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and where it is Luisa de Carvajal” (Rhodes, “Prologue” x). The inability to clearly distinguish between Luisa as subject and her hagiographic models would have been acceptable to her readers because “it is clear that, during Carvajal’s lifetime, the distinction was less important than the similarity” (Rhodes, “Prologue” x).

In Rhodes’ analysis, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s emphasis on constructing a hagiographic self within her *Vida espiritual* makes the text “not an autobiography” (“Introduction” 31). While we are in agreement with the idea that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s presentation of herself is carefully created hagiographical construction, we find Rhode’s assertion that the Vida is not an example of autobiography to be problematic for two related principle reasons. First, it is a limiting categorization that does not consider Luisa’s role as an active autobiographical agent who negotiates between discursive scripts in order to construct a discursive self that while modeled on hagiographic conventions, is also a reflection of its author’s lived bodily experiences. Secondly, because it prioritizes the hagiographic models used over the personal experiences drawn upon, Rhodes’ reading does not take into account the traumatic bodily experience of childhood abuse whose inclusion causes the Vida to deviate not only from conventional hagiography but also traditional autobiography as well. This analysis departs from Rhodes’s study of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s Vida by postulating that the text is not a traditional hagiography with a typical spiritual first-person protagonist, but rather a hybrid text that blurs the boundaries between narratives of trauma and
spiritual autobiography and features a complex and splintered autobiographical “I” that has no exact counterpart within a long list of saints lives.

Like many other autobiographers, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza pulled from the discourses that surrounded her in order to discursively construct an idealized self. Since religious models were the models of choice in her day, they were the ones that she used. Specifically, she called upon the age-old puer senex topos, the trope of the “old” saintly child (Bell and Weinstein 18), to autobiographically construct her Luisa as a child saint that was preternaturally wise and good. She chose this presentation of herself because a saint who had always been gifted with the wisdom to know right from wrong and good from bad would have been especially suited for an unenclosed apostolic life. Because she was primarily concerned with constructing a hagiographic presentation of herself that would enable her to live free of bodily and spiritual enclosure, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza is careful to ensure that her presentation of herself as a holy child is one that will not be seen as overly feminine. It is for this reason that her hagiographic representation does not incorporate many of the themes that were so common in the majority of the hagiographies of female child saints, such as the expression of guilty feelings in regard to a “sinful” childhood disposition and the description of early and often eroticized visionary experiences.

Despite the care with which she constructed it, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s idealized and “holy” self is not a static representation. It is found only in the first part of Luisa de Carvajal’s text. In the later part, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza begins to deconstruct her idealized self. The deconstruction process begins when Carvajal y Mendoza, (in an attempt to explain away her noted strange relationship with her uncle
while at the same time authorize her spirituality through *imitatio Christi*), tries to combine an explanation for the physical abuse in the form of strict “penitential” practices that she suffered under her uncle’s supervision with a textual re-enactment of Christ’s Passion. The autobiographical self that emerges from all of this textual deconstruction is a traumatized and fragmented “I” that does not find a parallel within traditional hagiography. Thus, its emergence causes Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida espiritual* to deviate from conventional hagiography and veer toward a trauma narrative.97

To my knowledge this term has never been used to describe the life writing of an early modern subject. Nevertheless, we should consider its use to be not only justified, but also essential, in the case of Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida espiritual*. According to Leigh Gilmore, the traditionally defined genre of autobiography is too limited to encompass trauma narratives because, “although those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words, the path to this achievement is strewn with obstacles. To navigate it, some writers move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions” (Gilmore, *Limits* 7). Although Gilmore describes trauma as shattering the author’s goal of writing as therapy, in the case of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, the “shattering” nature of trauma also throws up “obstacles” in the path of the hagiographic project.

As a “self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm” (Gilmore, *Limits* 6) within Luisa’s *Vida espiritual*, trauma is a force that “breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, possesses you, takes you over, becoming a dominating feature of your

---

97 For more on the study of trauma narrative as a genre see Herman and Caruth, Dori Laub, Shoshana
interior landscape, and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty” (Erikson 228). In the case of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, trauma provoked the shattering of the construction of the self that she was trying to form and sustain and ultimately cast her “into a state of existential crisis” (Herman, *Trauma* 51). The Spanish noblewoman’s “existential crisis” provoked by the inclusion of the battered body within the text caused the static and conventional hagiographic “I” constructed by the Spanish noblewoman (henceforth referred to as “Luisa”) to splinter into a fragmented autobiographical self that is more a conflicting conglomeration of painful memories than a coherent “holy” subjectivity. This transformation of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s autobiographical “I” leaves the readers of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s spiritual narrative with little doubt that “trauma precipitates a violent fragmentation of the (perhaps fragmented) image of the integrated subject” (Gilmore, *Limits* 143).

This change in Carvajal y Mendoza’s autobiographical “I” transformed her spiritual autobiographical writing from a tightly controlled hagiography that is virtually indistinguishable from others within its tradition to a highly personal and emotional memoir of trauma to both the body and the soul that strays far beyond the “limits of” hagiography. As it deviates from these genres it moves towards a trauma narrative that is characterized primarily by narrative gaps and fissures that both symbolize and speak to its author’s traumatized and splintered state. The transformation of the *Vida’s* hagiographical “I” and genre provoked by the insertion of bodily abuse within Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s spiritual *Vida* is the subject of this chapter.

---

Felman, Dominick LaCapra, Jennifer Freyd, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and G. Thomas Couser.
The *Vida as Hagiography*

Martyrdom, the “religious conviction and controversy embodied and dramatically displayed” and the “willing perseverance in whatever adversities one faced” (Gregory 5), was, in the early modern period, one of the only areas that women could earn praise for manifesting the “masculine” values of courage and conviction (Gregory 5). This explains why it attracted Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza. Seventeenth century Protestant England offered an especially promising path to fame through martyrdom, which explains why Luisa so desperately wanted to be sent there on a mission. In the years since King Henry VIII’s separated from the Papacy and subsequently, on February 1, 1535, ordered all English heads of households to either pledge an oath of fealty to the Anglican Church or be publicly hung, drawn and quartered, spreading word of the Catholic faith had become a dangerous endeavor (Gregory 7). Consequently, the Catholic vs. Protestant wars in seventeenth century England offered to Spanish Catholics such as Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza a clear path to martyrdom in the form of an early modern era reprisal of what early Christians had endured in the Roman Empire (Kieckhefer 4). Becoming a martyr did not guarantee Carvajal y Mendoza a renowned spiritual reputation and/or sainthood. However, it certainly made the process of becoming one easier for her. The reason being that according to Catholic Church doctrine, a person only needs to have died a martyr’s death to be beatified or canonized. The “holiness” of their life lived on earth does not have to be established in the same way that it does for those who were not put to death for their refusal to renounce their faith (Tylenda xvi). Afterall, as it is so clearly stated in
Mathew: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matthew 5:11).

However, as early modern Hispanic women were supposed to remain enclosed, for Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, the path to a form of martyrdom found through missionary work was fraught with many obstacles. The Spanish noblewoman not only had to write a petition to her Jesuit fathers asking for the mission; she had to textually re-create herself within it. She had to write herself in such a way as to appear worthy of being a “wandering woman” in a society that frowned upon women living outside of the confines of an appropriate form of enclosure. She had to construct herself as a holy figure who, despite being a woman, would be perfectly suited for missionary life. She tried to accomplish this goal by textually constructing herself in her Vida as a saint. Since the hagiographic part of Carvajal y Mendoza’s Vida never moves beyond Luisa’s childhood, the saint that we see constructed within her text is a youthful saint: specifically an “old child” who demonstrates saintly characteristics from birth.

Furthermore, in a move to even further prove her spiritual worthiness for a Jesuit mission, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza eschewed all elements that would have categorized her as “overly female” and thus needful of spiritual enclosure. At the same time that she rejected these more “feminine” attributes, she also embraced the less emotional and more spiritual “male” saintly qualities described by the Jesuit leader, Ignatius de Loyola in his very influential, Spiritual Exercises. Thus, although her Vida may superficially read like the platform for the construction of the meek and humble
young woman religious that Elizabeth Rhodes has declared it to be, by reading against
the grain for the “unwritten” or “un-included” elements within it we see that Luisa
simultaneously presented herself as a “typical” young female saint who, paradoxically,
was atypical.

We see the evidence of Carvajal y Mendoza’s highly constructed saintly persona
from the minute we begin to read her *Vida*. In fact, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s
description of her “saintly childhood” closely conformed to the parameters set by the
hagiographies of the child saints that had come before her, and is a very early indication
of Carvajal y Mendoza’s desire to portray herself though a hagiographic lens. Following
the roadmap of the life of the child saints within her “official” life story, Luisa de
Carvajal y Mendoza portrayed her early childhood as a time in which an inherently “holy
child” dreamed of nothing but dedicating her life to God. She had these dreams because
she believed that God himself had chosen her to be a martyr for His cause. According to
the narrator it was He who cast Luisa into the world after hearing the prayers of her
mother who, “que con instancia le pedía una hija” (“beseeched of Him a daughter)
because she thus far only given birth to five sons, only one of which was still alive
(Carvajal y Mendoza 38-39). The narrator states that Luisa, because she was daughter,
was greeted with the great and communal rejoicing of her family. Luisa de Carvajal y
Mendoza included this reference to herself as a “child of prayers” because she knew that
if she were ever a candidate for beatification or canonization, it would have to be proved
that she had been prayed into existence and thus had in fact been born as a result of
divine favor (Rhodes, *Tight Embrace* 39).
By opening her *Vida espiritual* with the announcement that she was a “child of prayer,” Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza established from the outset that Luisa was anything but a typical young Spanish girl. She was a holy child chosen by God to help do His work on earth. Carvajal y Mendoza’s claim to these auspicious beginnings placed her firmly within hagiographic tradition given that, “biblical precedent and the need to establish the divine election of the saint combine to explain why many accounts of saint’s lives begin with the story of how God answered the prayers of a childless couple by sending them a son or daughter” (Bell and Weinstein 20). Stories of holy beginnings such as the one employed by Carvajal y Mendoza in her *Vida* can be traced clear back to the biblical account of how God granted Sarah and Abraham many sons after He heard their prayers. The story of Sarah and Abraham inspired may medieval hagiographers to compose similar tales. One of the most famous of these told the story of how the fourteenth century St. Nicholas of Tolentino’s father prayed him into existence because he feared entering into old age without a son to take care of him (Bell and Weinstein 20).

That Luisa’s parents were not childless prior to her birth did nothing to stop this autobiographer from inserting herself within the tradition of wished-for children. In her case, her parents had only one son and very much wanted a daughter. God granted them their wish in the same way that he had granted that of the noble Matilda of Calafato, who was also blessed with a longed for daughter, the Blessed Eustochio of Messina, in response to her prayers (Bell and Weinstein 20). The fact that Luisa’s parents, like these parents, were granted their wish further backed up Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s claim to saintly origins because
with endless variations, the saint’s lives present this powerful dialectic: upon the outcome of prayer hangs a moral and spiritual judgment; the successful supplicant is one who has found favor with God, while the others are denied because of some defect, a defect that carries the further peril of being made public” (Bell and Weinstein 23).

Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s narrator followed the claim to being a prayed for child with the declaration that she was also a divinely marked child. According to this autobiographer, when she falls and hits her head on a rock, God is sure to intervene and save her from “aquel peligro, quedándome una señal blanca en la frente, de modo que no causa nota” (Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza 38) (“that danger by his means, leaving me with a white scar on my forehead that is not noticeable” (Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza 39)). After this intervention, God then goes on to both watch over her and defend her from all forms of spiritual and/or bodily harm. The story of how God marked the young Luisa in this way was taken right out of hagiographic tradition in which “stories of supernatural signs before birth or in early infancy are not uncommon” (Bell and Weinstein 18).

Marked as “holy” from birth, the narrator says that Luisa then went on to be blessed with good health, grace, notable restraint, and also beauty: “Dábame Dios salud y con entrambos tanta gracia, que cada día crecía su amor para conmigo. Y notábase mucho en mí extraordinaria mesura, y dicen que tenía la más proporcionada disposición del cuerpo y linda cara que se podía en una niña desear” (Carvajal y Mendoza 38). (“God gave me health and with both of my parents such grace that their love for me grew every day. And much restraint was noted in me, and they say that I had the most well-proportioned body and lovely face that could be desired in a little girl” (Carvajal y Mendoza 39)). Since all of these characteristics were common in saintly children,
Luisa’s use of them to describe her childhood self represents a strategic placement of herself within this part of hagiographic tradition. In regard to beauty for example, many hagiographic authors described “preternaturally beautiful babies whose parents gave them names reflective of their divine gift of beauty,” (Bell and Weinstein 27) such as those of Eustochio of Messina who chose to call their daughter Smaragda (Emerald) in recognition of her loveliness and those of Rose of Lima, who although her parents at first might have refused to acknowledge her “special beauty” changed her name from Elizabeth to Rose, symbol of the Blessed Virgin, when she was three months old (Bell and Weinstein 27). It is interesting to note that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza does not expound further on her supposed loveliness in the same way that she does with the other “holy” qualities that she insists that she had. Perhaps this is because while she wanted to set herself apart from others by highlighting her beauty, she did not want to draw too much attention to her appearance because she did not wish to portray herself in a way that would make her seem needful of encloser. Her motivation for writing her own Vida was to petition Jesuit leaders for a mission to England. Thus, being seen as overly beautiful could have been detrimental to her ultimate plans given that “in hagiography, as in popular piety, beauty had, so to speak, two faces. A sign of supernatural endowment, it was also a worldly temptation, to her who possessed it as well as those who beheld it” (Bell and Weinstein 27).

The narrator later describes how as a child Luisa returned God’s favor by never lying and at least never intentionally doing any harm to others. When someone tells her mother “porque siendo tan niña, era fácil [para ella de] mentir,” (Carvajal y Mendoza 42) her mother responds “Oh, no, la niña nunca miente!” (Carvajal y Mendoza 42) (“Oh no,
the child never lies”! (Carvajal y Mendoza 43)). The narrating “I” reinforces her mother’s declaration by saying “y así me dicen que mentía poquísimo, o casi no acertaba a mentir” (Carvajal y Mendoza 42) (“and so they tell me that I lied very little, or never managed to lie at all” (Carvajal y Mendoza 43)). Despite this unblemished record, the young Luisa was still not able to escape censure. It certainly was not deserved but was due to something that she was continually subjected to because of her insistence on taking the blame and punishment for things that she did not do. Like Christ, she protects other persons by refusing to speak of their actions, even if not doing so will cause her to accept the blame for what they have done: “[. . .] me dejaba cargar de culpas que no tenía; Y de esto se aprovechaban las de casa, cuando perdían o quebraban algo de gusta de mi madre. Y si les parecía cosa imposible, preguntábame si era así, y gran simplicidad le respondía: ‘Mi madre, yo no me puedo acordar de hablarlo hecho así” (Carvajal y Mendoza 42) (“I would easily accept blame for things I did not do. And those of the household used to take advantage of this when they would lose or break something of which my mother was fond, and if it seemed impossible to her that it had been I who had lost or broken it, she would ask me if it was true, and with great candor I would reply to her, ‘Mother mine, I can’t recollect having done such a thing’ ” (Carvajal y Mendoza 43)). In addition to being the epitome of a good saint, the narrator asserts that Luisa always forgave those who caused her pain. For example, when the people of the town condemned her nanny for hitting her body, she pardons her and her violent actions: “Si se murmaban de su rigor, me entristecía, y la defendía siempre” (Carvajal y Mendoza 54). (“If anyone gossiped about her strictness, it afflicted me, and I always defended her” (Carvajal y Mendoza 55)).
Moreover, the narrator tells us that Luisa even lamented the fate of the servants who, because of their “wily natures,” were punished for their insubordinate actions. Luisa entreats the Lord to have mercy on all who have transgressed because she “[. . .] no podía tolerar aflicciones de otros, ni aun un tanto como ver castigar [a] las muchachas de casa. Y si veía pasar los azotados por justicia, cuando no estaba en palacio, luego alzaba los ojos y manos al cielo con muchas lágrimas y preguntaba cómo los podía ayudar” (Carvajal y Mendoza 52). (“[. . .] I could not tolerate others’ afflictions, not even such a thing as seeing the serving girls of the household disciplined. And if I happened to see those who were being whipped for criminal offenses pass by, when I was outside the palace, I would straight away raise my eyes and hands to heaven with many tears, and asked how I could help them” (Carvajal y Mendoza 53)). Not all of the servants in the household were possessed of a sinful disposition. Some, like her nanny, were also devout figures and thus served as allies in the young Luisa’s battles against youthful sin. They never let her curse or read novels of chivalry, and forced her to read from spiritual books if she did so, thus serving as very important role models in this young woman’s very tightly controlled tale of childhood sanctity. These servants helped the young Luisa remain a “child without sin, too perfect for this world” (Bell and Weinstein 26).

Luisa tells the reader that she preferred to give to poor street urchins instead of playing: “Todo mi contento era que me trujesen muchos pobrecillos desarrapados de los de las calles, de mi misma edad, y sentarme en medio de ellos, y repartirles algunas cosillas dulces y otras de comer que yo allegaba para aquello” (Carvajal y Mendoza 46). (“My greatest delight was when many poor little urchins of my own age were brought to me from the streets, and I sat amidst them and gave them sweets and other things to eat
that I had collected for the occasion” (Carvajal y Mendoza 47). Luisa shares this charitable disposition with a long line of hagiographic subjects who also displayed the utmost concern for the poor from a very young age. Like the many subjects of hagiography that spent their lives working tirelessly on behalf of the poor and who constantly fretted about the sad state of their existence, as a child the young and saintly Luisa lamented the situation of poor children who unlike her were “sin cama y casa, temblando de frío” (Carvajal y Mendoza 50) (“without bed and home, trembling from the cold” (Carvajal y Mendoza 51)). Because she felt so bad for these children she would take the money out of a chest her mother had given her in order to provide them with all that they needed (Carvajal y Mendoza 47).

In common with other holy figures, the narrator asserts that Luisa inherited her charitable nature from her mother, who according to the glowing description of her that she gives us, always gave aid to the poor, even if it meant going out into the harsh winter night (Carvajal y Mendoza 48). Luisa’s mother is in fact portrayed as being so dedicated to helping out the less fortunate that she died at the very young age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight from a bad case of typhoid fever, which she supposedly had contracted from “un pobre a quien ella fue a hacer enterrar personalmente, como lo acostumbraba, y de tener los enfermos en su mismo estrado y en sus almohadas de terciopelo y lados de su chimenea” (Carvajal y Mendoza 48) (“a poor man that she had been taking care of and whom she went to bury personally as was her custom, and from having the sick in her receiving room and on her velvet pillows and on her hearth” (Carvajal y Mendoza 49)). Elizabeth Rhodes suggests that this description of her mother’s “saintly” death is a figment of the imagination of a young girl wracked with guilt over the fact that her
mother died tending to her when she was sick. The fact that her father died from the same illness that his daughter had given to his wife only reinforced Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s guilt as well as her need to re-write the story of her parents’ deaths.

It is within the passages describing Luisa’s desire to help the poor that we seem to see some hints of an emotional connection between Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, the young girl, and the mother that she lost at only seven years of age. This has led Golden Age literary critic Anne Cruz to surmise that many of Luisa’s “most precious memories have to do with the relationship between her and her mother” (Cruz, “Mujer y su representación” 43). Luisa certainly seems to talk more about her mother than her father, whom she says nothing about except that he was “de modestísimo exterior y notablemente ahidalgado de talle. Dejóme en su testamento una buena cantidad de dinero” (Carvajal y Mendoza 50) (“of a modest appearance and cut quite a gentlemanly figure. In his will he left me a good sum of money” (Carvajal y Mendoza 51)).

However, by consistently invoking the image of her mother within her Vida Carvajal y Mendoza does so much more than ruminate over treasured childhood memories. She inscribes herself firmly within a tradition that consistently highlighted the role of the mother in the upbringing of “holy children” over that of the father who often disappeared almost completely from the story (Bell and Weinstein 23). For example, in the biographies of major saints such as Clare of Assisi, Rose of Viterbo, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, Hugh of Cluny, and Gilbert of Sempringham among others,
the mother plays the principle role. The story of these mothers are “paler reflections of Mary’s story; the father’s contribution is not—as it was in the case of Joseph—denied, but for all other purposes he is absent, and the maternal role is powerfully emphasized” (Bell and Weinstein 23).

Within the *Vida espiritual* the narrator describes Luisa’s mother as being the perfect highborn Christian lady. She highlights what early modern society would have considered her most devout qualities. The result of an act of fiction pulled from both memories and the imagination, the passages related to a discussion of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s mother firmly inscribe her within the masculine ideal of what a woman should be rather than what she really was. Within her text, the narrator emphasizes Luisa’s mother’s beauty, her generosity, and her modesty instead of the power and authority that she, as a parent, had over:

> Era en extremo hermosa, y decían que sus cabellos parecían finísimas hebras de oro, y así era cierto, que yo los vi, muchos años después. Fue siempre grande su virtud y rara su modestia desde que era niña, y ni en aquella edad no podía sufrir cosa contraria a ella, ni le podían hacer que se pusiese corpiño, o saya con cuerpo bajo, como se usaba entonces (Carvajal y Mendoza 48).98

The autobiographer presents her mother as a figure that, just like Mary, is admired as a symbol of beneficence, purity and modesty for she represents all that men of the early modern period would have wanted a woman to be. Consistently evoking her

---

98 “She was extremely beautiful, and they said that her hair was like the finest strands of gold, and so it was, for I saw them, many years later. Her virtue was ever great and her modesty remarkable since childhood, and not even at that age could she bear anything that violated that modesty, neither could they make her wear a sleeveless bodice or a garment with a low neckline, as was the fashion then” (Carvajal y Mendoza 49).
mother as a "mujer de rarísimo ejemplo en modestia y honestidad" (Carvajal y Mendoza 48) ("a rare example of modesty and honesty" (Carvajal y Mendoza 49)) within her autobiography Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza is careful to place the greatest emphasis on those characteristics in a young woman, wife, and mother that would have met with masculine approval. In this way, Carvajal y Mendoza’s description of her mother is really very much in the tradition of other parental representations of the early modern period in which “the ‘recovered’ parental image is no longer that of the parent known in life, but the glorified parent of an early childhood who is now perpetuated in fantasy, most often unconscious fantasy” (Miller 36).

In the Vida constructed by this subject the mother is very often portrayed as “patient, long-suffering, deeply religious and faithful, and the paragon of feminine virtues” (Meissner 23). Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s narrator does not stop with a mere description of her mother’s laudable qualities; she goes on to state that these characteristics represented all that she admired most about her mother. In her mind, modesty and humility were such defining characteristics of her mother that sometimes the Vida even chastises Luisa’s mother for forgetting them. This is why Luisa criticized her mother for allowing so many people to come and visit her at home. She forcefully declares “‘Qué llana es mi madre, pues deja que tantos la visiten! Cuando yo sea grande, no tengo de dejar que me visiten tantos’ Juzgábalo con llaneza y por falta de recato, y con todo, no lo aprobaba” (Carvajal y Mendoza 42). (‘How informal my mother is, for
she lets so many people visit her! When I grow up, I will not let so many call on me.’ I
judged her behavior straightforwardly and not as lack of modesty and even so, I didn’t
approve of it. Thus, so they say, I went on about many things, which greatly pleased
those who heard me’” (Carvajal y Mendoza 43)).

In Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s Vida, as is generally the case in hagiographic
tradition, it is the mother who is the most devout parent. Moreover, it is the mother who
recognizes her daughter’s “special” spiritual calling and then hopes to bring her spiritual
life to its proper fruition by encouraging her to join a convent (Bell and Weinstein 23).
Luisa’s mother communicated this wish to her daughter quite often, saying that “[. . .]
cuando yo fuese de diez años, si vivía, me había poner totalmente como monjita y
enderezar mi ánimo a que quisiese ser monja descalza; que, a su parecer, era la mejor
suerte que me podía caber; y ella sin duda la escogiera para sí, si no hubiera casada tan
niña como la casaron” (Carvajal y Mendoza 44) (“[. . .] when I turned ten, if I lived, she
would dress me up like a little nun, which, in her opinion, was the best lot that could
befall me, and she doubtless would have chosen it for herself had they not married her off
as young as they did” (Carvajal y Mendoza 45)).

Interestingly, this is one of the only parts of her Vida where Luisa strays from the
pattern of “holy” behavior displayed by many supposed child saints. According to this
pattern, “parents, usually mothers, encouraged by a sign or some clue in the child’s
behavior to believe that this was a child intended for a religious life, took the decisive
first step: boys were sent to school to learn to read and write Latin, and girls were
enrolled in a convent. The future saint obeyed, demonstrating steady and untroubled
growth in his spiritual life” (Bell and Weinstein 27). Deviating from this established
pattern, the young Luisa turns her back on her mother’s plans for her by emphatically stating that joining a convent would go against her nature. This deviation on the part of Luisa is most interesting in that it speaks to her desire to portray herself as a child saint, who, in contrast to most young Hispanic girls with a religious vocation, wanted to live and express her spirituality outside of the convent walls. No matter how much she might have wanted to obey her mother’s wishes, the narrator stresses that Luisa could not do so because the Supreme Being had created within her an "espíritu natural" (“natural spirit”) that was not at all inclined to being locked behind convent walls (Carvajal y Mendoza 135).

The fact that the young Luisa did not wish to fulfill her mother’s dream for her by becoming a nun does not mean that she was not close to her mother or that she did not care about what she thought. Within Luisa’s Vida there are references to the close relationship that the mother and daughter shared. For example, in the following passage Luisa de Carvajal looks back fondly on the times that she would be invited into the private and intimate spaces shared between her mother and her maids:

Retirábase mi madre con aquella doncella que ella quería bien, a solas a su aposento, para tratar de las cosas de su casa y lo demás que le parecía. Y como para mí no había puerta cerrada, ni quien me pudiese apartar de mi madre casi todo el día, aunque ella me rogaba muchas veces que me fuese a jugar con los otros niños, entraba luego allá y metíame en sus mismas pláticas, como si fuera de mucha edad. Y solía decir mi madre, ‘Ya viene Luisina a darnos también su parecer y poner su cucharadita’ (Carvajal y Mendoza 44)99

---

99 “My mother used to retire to her quarters, with the maid she was fond of, to attend to the business of the house and other things she deemed appropriate. And since no door was closed to me, nor could anyone separate me from my mother in almost the whole day, even though she entreated me many times to go play with other children, I used to go in there and join in their
Within this passage Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s memory recalls a time of female bonding and togetherness separate from the masculine structural order that is reminiscent of early modern convent life. At the same time, however, this passage also serves the purpose of further establishing Luisa’s claim to being a “holy” child, who, because she was old beyond her years, could be called upon to offer up adult observations (Rhodes, *Tight Embrace* 41). This type of self presentation is in keeping with hagiographic tradition. According to Bell and Weinstein, hagiographers employed a variety of traditions when describing a particular saint’s childhood. One of these was the trope of the “old child” which had been widespread since the eleventh century hagiographic tales described saints such as Gautier de l’Estep, Adelaide of Bellich, Benno of Osnabruck, and William of Montevergine, as youths who were old beyond their years (Bell and Weinstein 29). Thus, along with a fond memory of a treasured lost mother, the previous passage illustrates yet another example of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s highly constructed hagiographic childhood self. This portrayal of herself is later reinforced by the use of statements such as: “he oído que, aun sienda tan niña, escuchaba con extraordinaria atención a las personas de alguna importancia que hablaban delante de mí en cualquier grave material, o cosas de ingenio, cualquier largo tiempo, sin mostrar cansancio” (Carvajal y Mendoza 52). (“I have heard that, even being as young as I was, I listened with extraordinary attention to people of any importance who spoke before me about any serious matter or witty things, for no matter how long, without showing fatigue” (Carvajal y Mendoza 53)). The narrator also states, “me tenía por por niña de conversations as if I were quite [grown up]. And my mother used to say, ‘Here comes little Luisa to tell us what she thinks and throw in her two cents’ worth’” (Carvajal y Mendoza 45).
buen entendimiento” (Carvajal y Mendoza 52). (“I was known to be a child of keen understanding” (Carvajal y Mendoza 53)). By constructing herself as a subject who even as a child was blessed with such a “keen” understanding that she could interact with adults from an early age, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza hoped that she would convincingly present herself autobiographically as mature enough and wise enough to handle missionary work.

Later, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza reinforces her autobiographical construction of herself as an “old child” by portraying her Luisa as a serious young girl who would rather read holy books than play childhood games. In so doing, constructs her textual self in accordance with the many saints’ lives that describe childhoods characterized by an extremely serious manner, a grave countenance, and an exceedingly devout character (Bell and Weinstein 29). In addition, in much the same way as other “old children,” this autobographer constructs the young Luisa as a grave youth who generally avoids the company of other children, preferring to be alone.

After both her father and mother pass away, the newly orphaned Luisa goes to live with an aunt who happened to be the governess of the King’s children. Although she now lived at court, the young Luisa did not desist from her holy activities. Rather, she continued to prefer to read the lives of the saints and go to confession rather than play with the royal children who were always clamoring for her presence. As she gets older, Luisa’s abhorrence for childhood games is transformed into a desire to avoid any and all of the frivolous activities that young people usually engage in. Court life does not interest her, nor do the bullfights that, in her mind are nothing more than an “intolerable fiesta” (Carvajal y Mendoza 54) (“intolerable event” (Carvajal y Mendoza 55)).
According to Elizabeth Rhodes, the youthful *persona* that this autobiographer constructed within her text has much in common with the feminine subject of C. F. Lilio’s 1558 life of St. Elizabeth of Hungary who, “raised in royal pleasures, she disdained all things of youth [. . .]” (459).

From all the textual examples given above it is clear that within the first part of her *Vida*, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza borrowed much from hagiographic tradition in creating her idealized “holy” self. It is interesting to note, however, that there are parts of this same tradition that she chose not to pull from. In addition to not describing herself as strikingly beautiful, this autobiographer does not describe her spiritual experiences as being characterized by the same “girlish rapture and ecstasy” that was so prominent within the hagiographies of young female saints (Bell and Weinstein 27). Nor does her *Vida* read like that of St. Augustine. It is not concerned with the struggles of the “penitent child” that is “preoccupied by temptations, sinful conscious, and the need for expiation” (Bell and Weinstein 31). Even though within hagiographic tradition “the theme of guilt-ridden childhood is more frequently associated with girls than boys” (Bell and Weinstein 35), Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza constructed her autobiographic self as being perfect since the day she had been born. She does so because she does not wish to closely associate herself with women—even saintly women—who would be considered needful of enclosure.

In fact, in a move that distinguishes her auto-hagiographic presentation from the hagiographies of female saints—the vast majority of which were written by men—within her narrative Carvajal y Mendoza distanced herself as far as she could from the female body and the characteristics of femininity, such as passivity and extreme emotionality,
that were commonly associated with it. She did so because she wanted to paint a picture of herself as a *mujer varonil* (a manly woman) inherently more suited for an evangelical lifestyle than the average woman. Thanks to her very effective distancing act Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s textual life story certainly appears to have been influenced by many of the famous female mystical texts of her era, such as that of the Raymond of Capua’s *La vida de la bien aventurada santa Caterina de Sena* (1511), Martin de Lilio’s *Life of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* (1558) and the *Life of St. Teresa of Ávila*, (1577) (Rhodes, “Introduction” 34). However, the autobiographer never makes any reference to the influence that these works had over the construction of her life story. Nor does she ever speak of or demonstrate any desire to imitate these women or other famous female spiritual authorities like them. On the other hand, she does have her narrator mention how she used to greatly admire Franciscan monks (Carvajal y Mendoza 40). The narrator states that whenever they would come to her house, she would sit: "[. . .] a sus pies y se los besaba [. . .] [porque] los pies de los descalzos eran de oro, y los suyos no" (40) ("[. . .] at, and kiss, their feet […] [because] the feet of the Discalced Fathers were golden, while those of the Augustinians were not” (Carvajal y Mendoza 41). Moreover, she says that Luisa would even imitate the Franciscan fathers by putting on their clothes and walking around barefoot: “Pasearme a solas en algún aposento, y en tiempo muy frío, con grande contentamiento de ver mis pies por el suelo desnudos. Y si alguien acertaba a pasar, abjáme de manera, que cubriese mi vestido los pies, y yéndose, tornaba a pasearme” (Carvajal y Mendoza 40) (“I used to walk around some room alone, and in very cold weather, delighted to see my bare feet on the floor. And if anyone happened to pass by, I would stoop down so that my dress covered my feet, and once that person left,
I would start walking about again” (Carvajal y Mendoza 41)). The self constructed by Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza within her *Vida* dressed up as a Franciscan missionary rather than a Carmelite or an Augustinian nun. She did so because her creator wanted her to travel around evangelizing in the same way that the Franciscans did, even if she had to dress up in their habits to do so.

Because she was not interested in “finding” a feminine identity within feminine space, in contrast to many *vidas* of her time, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s foray into autobiographical writing—or at least the one that she intended others to read—is not centered on women’s issues, things generally associated with the feminine, and a so-called feminine voice or feminine style of writing. The *Vidas* of Isabel de Jesús and Madre Magdalena Muñoz, and the second part of Maria de San Jose’s *Vida*, are filled with highly emotional language, erotic imagery of divine union, references to Christ’s humanity as seen in the Incarnation and references to Jesus as mother or references to Christ as an innocent child and feminine images of fluids (water, tears and flowing blood). However, in Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida* all of these images are conspicuously absent. Also noticeably missing is the usual medieval and early modern female religious writer’s seemingly obsessive need to present the Eucharist as a way in which to unite the female body with God’s humanity. In fact—with the exception of extreme penances like self-flagellation, charity for the poor, and chastity—almost none of the characteristics that are generally considered to be intrinsic qualities of the writing of both medieval and early modern women religious are to be found in Carvajal y Mendoza’s completed text. This chapter postulates that she leaves these out because, unlike these other female women religious, she does not want to be associated with the feminine or materiality.
Although Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza might have written about her devotion to the Lord and her overwhelming desire to become a saint, she is conspicuously silent about love, relationships, or suitors. Unlike her female mystic contemporaries, she never speaks of divine love, raptures or ecstasies. Nor does she ever discuss her relationship with the Lord with any kind of eroticism or sexual imagery whatsoever. For this reason, her *Vida espiritual* exemplifies the fact that within autobiographical writing, the recitation of identity involves “the inclusion of certain identity components and the exclusion of others, the incorporation of some narrative itineraries and the quieting of others, the adoption of certain voices and the muting of others” (S. Smith, “Performativity” 110).

As she distanced herself from these types of “female” characteristics, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza more closely aligned herself with those of the Jesuits that she so desperately desired to emulate. Her textual self’s lack of emotionality placed her more in line with St. Ignatius de Loyola (1491-1556) than with St. Teresa de Jesús. Like this great saint, the holy figure that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza constructed through autobiographical writing is humble, obedient and,—above all,—not a slave to material things, worldly feelings and emotional connections. Like that of St. Ignatius, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s spirituality as it is constructed in her *Vida* was grounded upon the renunciation of everything connected to the material world in favor of the spiritual one. Thus, within the first part of her *Vida espiritual* Carvajal ego is under control. Its staunch

---

100 Ignatius de Loyola writes in his first annotation to the *Spiritual Exercises* that the steps outlined in the text were to be considered to be “[. . .] todo modo de preparar y disponer el ánima para quitar de sí todas las afecciones desordenadas, y, después de quitadas, para buscar y hallar la voluntad divina en la disposición de su vida, para la salud del alma [. . .].” (“[. . .] all methods of preparing and disposing the soul to remove from herself all disorderly attachments, and after their removal, to seek and find the divine will in the laying out of one’s life to the salvation of one’s soul [. . .].” (3).
self-control is a reflection of the Ignation ideal of “indifference:” the state that one reaches when they finally arrive at a state where reason prevails over emotion and the mind does not capitulate to instinctual demands (Meissner 72).

By creating this type of a “non-feminine” autobiographic figure within her Vida, Luisa de Carvajal managed to distinguish herself from the countless medieval and early modern women (and some men) who chose to textually write themselves as brides, mothers, and sisters of Christ. Her distinction from these women problematizes Caroline Walker Bynum’s notion that “while medieval and early modern men underwent acts of role reversal, all women’s central images turn out to be continuities” (Fragmentation and Redemption 48). That is to say, that all women of the medieval and early modern period chose to construct themselves in their spiritual writings solely through the use of what were widely perceived to be feminine tropes and images.

The Vida as a Trauma Narrative

In the first half of her Vida, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza did an excellent job of constructing herself as a saintly figure that would not be too closely associated with the female sex in the first part of her Vida, the one that treats her life before her uncle arrived on the scene. Like the male hagiographers who controlled their narrations, and thus the bodies and identities of the women that they described, in this part of her text Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza exhibited complete control over her writing and the autobiographical figure that she created with it. In contrast to the first half, the haphazard writing style and loss of subject control that define the second half of the Vida espiritual comes as quite a shock to its readers. Rather than an atmosphere of extreme authorial control, this part of
her text is characterized by a lack thereof. It is unedited, unfinished, and often hard to follow. The narrator of this second section rambles, doubles back, and many times seems to forget what she is trying to narrate. Consequently the autobiographical “I” of the second half of the \textit{Vida} does not exhibit the same control over the story of Luisa as the previous one did.

The stark contrast between the two parts of the text has led Elizabeth Rhodes to observe that the control so prominent in the “clean copy,” that is to say, the edited and pruned first half, of the \textit{Vida espiritual} ends precisely with the arrival of Luisa’s uncle. (Rhodes, “Introduction” 3). The last sentence of the first half of the \textit{Vida} is the last one edited in the text, and it is also the last example of controlled narrative. It reads as follows: “En este tiempo, que fueron siete meses u ocho después de estar en Almazán, vino el Marqués” (Carvajal y Mendoza 64) (“At this time, which was seven or eight months after I had been in Almazán, the Marqués arrived” (Carvajal y Mendoza 65)). This chapter concurs with Rhodes’s observation. However, it does not stop with the assertion that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza afflicted state of mind affected her writing style and inhibited her ability to properly edit the second half of her narrative. It also postulates that the arrival of the author’s uncle signals the end of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s attempts to strictly follow hagiographic tradition in the construction of her autobiographic self. This observation makes this chapter’s analysis of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s \textit{Vida espiritual} deviate significantly from Rhodes’s. Rhodes contends that Luisa de Carvajal’s formulaic construction of her hagiographic self extends throughout the \textit{Vida}. This chapter asserts that the strictly hagiographic construction and presentation of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s autobiographical alter ego ends precisely where her
life with her uncle begins. The farther it moves away from this tradition, the closer it comes to representing the “auto” half of the auto-hagiographic. As a result, from this point on the story begins to sound less like a typical young saint’s life and more like the highly personal story of a young woman experiencing an unheard of amount of trauma. Consequently, the second half of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s Vida readers more like a trauma narrative than a conventional hagiography.

Given that when Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza wrote about her relationship with her uncle she deviated dramatically from hagiographic tradition, and veered toward the production of a trauma narrative, it is imperative that we read the second half of her Vida with an understanding of trauma’s affect on the writing subject. That is to say, it is essential that we approach the text with an understanding of how trauma, by splintering the autobiographer, subsequently disorients the narrating “I.” This in turn causes the story that this “I” narrates to seem disjointed, disjunctured and almost chaotic. Since the inclusion of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s experience of bodily abuse provokes this deconstruction of the narrative process, to study the Vida’s transformation from a formulaic autohagiography to an extremely intimate portrait of reconstructed, we must read for how the abused body is made visible within the text, and how its visibility provokes chaos in its wake.

Considering that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza worked so hard to avoid appearing “feminine” in the first part of her Vida, it may seem strange that she would give her feminine body such a prominent place in the second half. In fact, it may seem even stranger that she chose to describe her abuse at all, given that doing so highlighted all the emotions, feelings, and “feminine” experiences that she had worked so hard to keep out
of the first part. Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza chose to tell this highly personal account of her early life because it had the potential of closely aligning her with not only Jesus Christ, but also with all of the other Christian martyrs who had withstood abuse in order to prove their dedication to Christianity. A way to get her readers to make this connection was to highlight the abuse that she suffered at her uncle’s hands. Having made this connection they would hopefully then see that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza truly was worthy of a spiritual mission.

This autobiographer could have just invented her suffering and avoided including her abuse within the telling of her life. However, this would not have done anything to offer a justification for the strange and seemingly indecent relationship that she had with her uncle, who kept her as his ward for most of her early teenage and adult years. Thus, in the same way that Isabel de Jesús and María de San José inserted their “real world” experiences into their writing in order to re-write them in a way that would make them seem “holy,” Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza brought the story of her abuse to her writing in order to re-tell it. She did so by having her narrator relate the numerous occasions that she had been forced to endure her abusive “penitential” practices that her uncle ordered his ward’s nanny, Isabel de Ayllón, to subject his niece to in the interest of “saving “her vulnerable young soul. However, since experiences are always reconstructed as they are remembered by autobiographers, the story of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s abuse is as much fictional as it is biographical. It is a conglomerate of re-remembered experiences pieced together by the autobiographer in the attempt to connect her bodily suffering carried out by her nanny at her uncle’s request with that of Jesus’s suffering on the Cross as carried out by the Roman guards ordered to do so by Pontius Pilate.
The trauma that so deeply affected Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza stemmed from the abuse that her *Vida* claims that she suffered under her uncle’s direction. According to the narrator of the Spanish noblewoman’s spiritual autobiography, the Marqués supposedly concerned himself primarily with the state of his young charge’s soul. He considered her will to be dangerous and in need of controlling by his firm, guiding hand. Thus, Luisa’s uncle tested his ward’s will and even broke it on many occasions by ordering his niece to undergo the most severe form of penances. Luisa’s uncle designed for his ward these "penances" that were carried out by the nanny, and included her being disrobed and beaten until she fainted. Curiously, her uncle almost always insisted upon witnessing the spectacle, which is what Elizabeth Rhodes calls “imitatio Christi at its worst, an unfortunate convergence of what had been a reformist Catholic ideal and misguided male dominion over a powerless ward” (“Introduction” 50).

Luisa felt the effects of this “unfortunate convergence.” We know this because although the portrait Carvajal y Mendoza first paints of her relative is one of an honorable man devoted to the Lord and well versed in scripture, the more she begins to describe the abusive practices she claims that he subjected her too, the more it becomes obvious that alongside her laudable description of him emerges a subtle suggestion of his “other” less chaste and respectable nature. Biographers still struggle with this contradictory presentation of Luisa de Carvajal’s uncle’s character and his unseemly behavior. Strangely, many critics have even gone out of their way to excuse Carvajal y
Mendoza’s uncle’s textually depicted behavior towards his underage ward. Abad apologizes for the actions of the uncle by saying: “it was quite natural that the Marqués should take care to demand an accounting from Luisa of what she had done during the day” (“Introduction,” Epistolario y poesía 24).

That Carvajal y Mendoza would have allowed her body to be subjected to the most extreme form of physical penances is certainly not surprising. During the early modern era, it was quite common for religious parents to force their children to participate in activities that by today’s standards would be considered to be highly cruel and unusual. Strict ascetic practices were considered to offer the most direct access to God. Thus, it would have been surprising if they were not expected of children as well as adults. With the separation from the mother that early modern children were forced to endure, the flagellation, starvation and other types of extreme behaviors that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza was expected to adhere to were not mitigated by the presence of a nurturing mother. According to the then-prevalent Augustinian view, the child was a savage who must be tamed, and mothers were urged to abstain from showing too much fondness for their children. However, the fact that Carvajal y Mendoza felt the need to textually justify her uncle and nanny’s behavior towards her speaks to the extreme nature of the bodily abuse in the form of strict “penitential” practices that she was continually subjected to. In addition, according to Rhodes, in the hearings related to Carvajal y Mendoza’s potential beatification, many witnesses—among them a series of house

---

101 In the early modern period schools also greatly emphasized discipline, and many believed in the saying that “the letter, without blood, cannot enter” (El Saffar 75). Students were at times even required to sign an agreement that they would submit to corporal punishment as part of their learning process because in those days “the imposition of distance between parents and their children, and the use of power to enforce the will of the teacher or parent, were considered to be in the best interest of the child to succeed in that culture” (El Saffar 75).
servants employed by the Marqués—testified, sometimes disapprovingly, to the exaggerated nature of the spiritual exercises that they had inadvertently, and unnoticeably, witnessed (Rhodes, “Introduction 24).

According to the autobiography, the “penances” that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza was forced to endure in order to “purify” her spirit went way beyond her nanny’s refusal to let the young Luisa lie on her left side so that “no corriese fácilmente algún humor dañoso al corazón” (Carvajal y Mendoza 60) (“no harmful humor would run easily to [her] heart,” (Carvajal y Mendoza 61)), or forcing her to cross her arms over her chest in the form of a crucifix. The “penances” also went even beyond her uncle’s insistence that she kneel before him daily for several hours in his private apartments while he lectured and read to her from religious books, and beyond him sometimes locking her in his oratory and forgetting that she was there (Carvajal y Mendoza 70-71).

In the first passage cited below the narrator describes how her nanny would strip her down and whip her in a secret room. She was flagellated so hard that she would squeeze her fists in order to ward off the pain. Afterwards, she was left with the kind of shame and embarrassment that only another victim of this kind of severe treatment could fully understand.

Había en casa una persona muy sierva de Dios y de suficiente espíritu, secreto y cordura, a la cual ordenó, bajo de obligación de gran secreto, que tomase a su carga humillarme con mortificaciones y disciplinas. Y a mí me mandó la obedience en esas cosas, recibéndolas como saludable purga, para aumento y fortificación de la salud de mi alma y imitación de los trabajos de Christo Nuestro señor. Había un oratorio muy conveniente y secreto, y fuera de él otras partes que lo eran harto, donde ella me ordenaba diversas veces que la esperase. Y entrando, cerradas las puertas con llave, con severo rostro, o grave por lo menos, me mandaba descubrir
This passage shows how Carvajal y Mendoza tried to connect her experiences of abuse with *imitatio Christi*. Like Christ, she portrays Luisa as whipped while naked and vulnerable, and is forced to endure pain inflicted on her by an outside force. In this way, her suffering is portrayed as being even more like that of Christ than those penitents who choose to flagellate themselves. This added to the holy portrait of herself that she was attempting to paint. At the same time, however, the feelings of pain, fear and humiliation that are expressed here are not just hagiographic constructions. Their intensity and detail suggest that they represent tortured memories.

The next passage illustrates how Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza tried to both justify and excuse her nanny’s abusive behavior. That she felt the need to do so is a further...
indication that the abuse described in the text was based upon actual events rather than purely fictional. If these events had not occurred, if they had not been observed by other people, why would Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza have been so concerned with using her writing as a medium for explaining away the governess’s actions?

Although Luisa does try to excuse the behavior of her nanny by subtly insinuating that this kind of ritualistic abuse was common practice, and that she deserved it because of her sinful ways, the fact that she felt the need to hide these bruises from those she came into contact with speaks to the fact that even at a very young age she was very well aware that the servant’s treatment of her and her uncle’s approval of it were far from socially acceptable. The fact that these beatings met with the disapproval of not only the Marquesa but also Luisa’s friends would have reinforced her intuitive understanding that her servant and her uncle’s behavior toward her would not have been sanctioned.

Because she says that she loved her uncle it might seem odd that Luisa de Carvajal would
purposely include within her autobiography passages that paint him in such a bad light. It seems to me that she did so because it made her seem heroic, humble and obedient all at the same time. In sum, these passages made her look saintly and that was why she chose to highlight them. However, the fact that she re-wrote these parts before finally giving up and never finishing them could very well indicate some conflicted feelings on her part. She wanted to make herself look saintly, but didn’t want to implicate her uncle. Or did she? Perhaps consciously she didn’t but sub-consciously she may well have; hence the inability to ever come to a resolution successful enough to produce a coherent text.

In the next passage Carvajal y Mendoza directly implicates her uncle by having her narrator confide to the reader that he personally oversaw the abuse of his niece. This could have been left out; yet this writing subject chose to include it. Her emphasis on his involvement further reinforces the idea that she wrote these passages to explain a strange situation and give vent to traumatic experiences rather than just write a hagiographic story.

Y no se puede fácilmente creer el cuidado de mi buen tío en que yo fuese humillada y quebrantada con este género de penitencia. Y así, ordenaba algunas veces que me llevaran desnuda y descalza, con los pies por la tierra fría, con una cofilla en la cabeza que recogía el cabello solamente, y una toalla atada por la cintura; una soga a la garganta, que algunas veces era hecha de cerdas de silicio y otras del cáñamo, y atadas las manos con ella, de unos aposentos a otros, como a malhechora, hasta un último oratorio pequeño que estaba al cabo de ellos. Era habitación cerrada y fuera del concurso de casa y parte muy secreta. Y delante de mí, tirando blandamente de la soga, iba una de las personas siervas de Nuestro Señor que he dicho, y a veces me decía palabras de humillación y abatimiento (Carvajal y Mendoza 102).
In a confessional tone, the narrator begins the above description of her uncle’s behavior with the assertion that it was so severe as to not be believable. She does so because she knew that his behavior went way beyond even the accepted penitential practices of the era. The image that she then goes on to invoke shows Luisa walking in the footsteps of Christ on the way to the Crucifixion. Her skin bared, and with nothing more than the same kind of towel around her waist that Christ had around His, she is led by a rope to her punishment. On the way there she is taunted and humiliated. She is made a spectacle of torture and she endures this because she has to—just as Christ did. The image of Luisa being led around by a rope is also evocative of the many martyrs that were led to their prisons in chains. Thus, in one passage Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza manages to forge a connection between her experiences of abuse with not only Jesus Christ but also many of those who martyred themselves for Him.

In contrast to the first part of the spiritual autobiography, the second half shows evidence of continued attempts at writing and re-writing. In addition, in the notebook containing the *Vida* which the priores of the convent that received Carvajal y Mendoza’s body and belongings found on the event of the Spanish noble woman’s death, there were a series of loose pages containing three different descriptions of Carvajal y Mendoza’s childhood penitential activities that never made it into her text, but which were nevertheless attached to it. These renditions of these painful events which were kept attached, yet at the same time separate from the rest of Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida*,
constitute the only part of her life writing of which we have several versions. Evidently, Carvajal y Mendoza tested various drafts but was unable to finally decide what events to include in the completed the “official story.” Today these different versions offer the proof of her inability to completely bring together her public hagiographic construction of herself and her private memories of trauma.

Among these many passages that were not included in her finished copy (but that were not destroyed), one finds much unusual and quite disturbing information about this subject’s forced “penitential” activities. Many of these descriptions seem so evocative of Christ that they too might appear to be purely symbolic representations of His life. Yet once again the extreme attention to detail that characterizes them speaks to their basis in reality.

Y acabada la disciplina, muchas veces me mandaba con mucho señorió que le besase los pies; y yo, postrada en el suelo, se los besaba. Pero en este no hacía yo nada, ni en sufrir golpes de una disciplina de cuerdas de vihuela, nada blanda, tan bien dados que apenas podía sufrirlos. Y para no mostrarlo exteriormente, me era necesaria hacer gran fuerza en las manos, apretando los puños, cuando no estaban atadas, no de modo que se impidiese el cerrarlas o hacer fuerza una sobra otra, si la soga las tenía juntas [. . .] Y muchas veces me pareció que no pudiera sentir más la misma muerte, y más cuando se resolvía en que la disciplina fuese de los pies a la cabeza, con una toalla puesta por la cinta de la manera que se pinta un crucifijo, y atada a una columna que para eso había hecha a propósito, y los pies en la tierra fría y una soga de cáñamo a la garganta, con cuyos cabos se ataban las muñecas y manos a la columna (Carvajal y Mendoza 100).105

\[\text{105 "The discipline being finished, many times she ordered me very haughtily to kiss her feet, and I, prostrate on the ground, kissed them. But in this I did nothing, nor in enduring the blows of a scrouge made of guitar strings, not at all soft, so well delivered that I could hardly stand it. And so as not to show it outwardly, I had to exercise a great effort in my hands, squeezing my fists, when they were tied in such a way that I could not close them, or push one down over the other, if the rope was holding them together [. . .] And many times it seemed to me that I wouldn’t feel death itself any more, and more so, when she decided that the discipline would be from my feet to my head, with a towle around my waist such as one sees on the crucifix, and tied to the column that was constructed specifically for this purpose, and my feet on the cold ground, and a hemp rope at my throat, with whose ends my hands and wrists were tied to the column" (Carvajal y Mendoza 101).} \]
Algunas veces pude saber cuántos eran los golpes de la disciplina, porque los contaba la misma persona de modo que yo lo oía. Y acuérdate de que eran a veces ciento y a veces cincuenta o más, y nunca a mi parecer eran menos. Y pienso que de ciento pasaban hartas veces pero no lo puedo certificar, por falta de memoria que de eso tengo. El dolor, como dije, no era poco, ni el frío que se metía en los huesos en los días muy fríos del invierno, por serlo la tierra mucho. Y a todo vencía la confusión y vergonzoso empacho que sentía, con una alma muy rendida y un corazón muy deshecho y humillado en la presencia de Nuestro Señor. Y acordándome de Cristo cuando se vio así por mí y tanto más maltratado y con tan diferente ánimo de los que lo hacían y tan públicamente avergonzado, parecíame que me fuera consuelo muy extraordinario verme así atada delante un juez infiel y delante un pueblo incrédulo e ingrato, esperando sentencia de muerte, e imaginábame como si estuviera en tal ocasión. Y con ser tan seca y dura en materia de lágrimas naturalmente, en viéndome así desnuda, poco o mucho, y humillada cuanto me era posible, me daba Nuestro Señor tan abundantes lágrimas, que parecían arroyos mis ojos. Y sí me los mandaba levantar en alto, como lo hacía muchas veces, no casi podía mirar, de cierga de lágrimas. Y ordinariamente estaría por lo menos media hora desnuda, y muchas veces una, y creo que más. Y cuando era tiempo muy frío venía a sentir el cuerpo como insensible por un poco de tiempo, y en las manos quedaba aquello por largo rato, que con dificultad podía vestirme, acabada la disciplina. Y me era forzoso muchas veces poner el corchete del cuello de la ropa para tapar el jubón desabrochado, porque no tenía en los dedos fuerza para poner los botones, hasta que sobre la lumber, poco a poco, se iba cobrando, sin osar llegar a mucho fuego, por no tullirme con los extremos de calor y frío. Salía del oratorio con el mismo corazón que dije, deshechísimo, y deseando poder seguir las pisadas de Cristo (Carvajal y Mendoza 100, 102)\(^\text{106}\)

\(^{106}\)“Sometimes I could tell how many blows there were in a session because the very person [delivering them] counted them in such a way that I heard it. And I recall that sometimes there were one hundred and at times fifty or more, and it seems to me that they were never less. And I think they exceeded a hundred many times, but I can’t be sure of it, due to the lack of memory that I have heard about. The pain, as I said, was not little, nor the chill that entered my bones on the very cold days of winter, because the floor was very cold. And the confusion and shamed embarrassment that I felt outdid it all, with a soul quite overcome and a heart quite undone and humiliated in the presence of Our Lord. And recalling Christ when he saw Himself thus for me and so much mistreated and with such a different soul than those who were doing it to Him and so publicly shamed, it seemed to me that it was a quite extraordinary consolation to see myself tied up thus before an infidel judge and before an incredulous and ungrateful people, awaiting the death sentence, and I imagined that I was in such a situation. And since I was so dry and hard in what provokes me to tears, upon seeing myself thus, unclothed, a little or a lot, and as humiliated as I could be, Our Lord gave me such abundant tears that my eyes seemed like streams. And if she ordered me to raise them up [eyes], as she did many times, I could hardly see, being so blinded by tears. And I would usually
In the first of these passages, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza returns to her reenactment of Christ’s long journey to the cross. Her emphasis is on the whippings that she receives while being tied around a post; the whippings not mentioned in her initial description of events. Perhaps they were too egregious to initially address. The second passage includes the most direct comparison between this subject’s experiences and those of Jesus Christ. She states that she “recalls” Christ’s journey to the Crucifixion, subtly giving the impression that she had witnessed it herself. Given that she makes a direct reference to her *imitatio Christi* here, one would think that she would have wanted to include this passage in her final version. Perhaps, the omission is because she was still attempting to establish the connection before stating it so explicitly; or maybe she was simply troubled at connecting such illicit events with Christ’s sacrifice. On the other hand, it could be that the more details she gave, the more she became disturbed and unable to finish.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza wrote these unfinished passages for the purpose of connecting herself with Christ in the minds of her readers. She was quite successful with at least with some of her readers—even her more modern ones. Why else would an esteemed Jesuit critic and writer such as Abad associate Carvajal y Mendoza’s treatment with God’s will by implying that it must have be disrobed for at least half an hour, and many times an hour, and I think more. And when it was very cold I eventually felt that my body was numb for a little while, and in my hands that [sensation] remained for a long time, for I could dress with difficulty once the flagellation was finished. And many times I had to fasten the hook on the neck of my dress to hide the unbuttoned undergarment, because my fingers didn’t have the strength to do the buttons, until by the fire, little by little, I would leave the oratory with the same heart that I described, completely undone, and desirous to follow in the footsteps of Christ” (Carvajal y Mendoza 101,103).
been “an act of divine providence to presuppose her to her harsh mission to come” (Abad, *Missionera Española* 39)?

Alongside the gripping accounts cited above, the autobiographer added notes in the margins attesting to the painful treatment that she was forced to endure. In these asides she alludes to how on the day of the conversion of St. Paul she often used to feel her nanny’s hard slaps. Another textual aside explains how Isabel used to place her foot on her chest in order to aid her in her abuse: “Me hizo echar en el suelo, donde me disciplino de los pies hasta los hombros [. . .] me puso uno de sus pies sobre el pecho, en medio de el…senti grande pena dentro del pecho en todo lo interior de él, tanto, que si no acertara a levantarle presto, me pareció podía recibir mi salud notable daño” (104)107

According to Elizabeth Rhodes “these notes in the margins clearly show that there was more ritual violence involved in these ‘exercises’ than Carvajal’s final draft reveals” (Rhodes 103). Significantly, the passage following the descriptions cited above, as well as the additional comments accompanying them are left unfinished—saying only “La otra de estas dos” (Carvajal y Mendoza 104) (“The other of these two [. . .].” And then leaving us to forever speculate over just what her other tormentors supposedly did. The account thereafter seems to take on an ever grimmer atmosphere. The abuse described in the above citations is hard to read, to hear, and to witness. This is primarily because

---

107 “She made me lie down on the floor, where she whipped me from my feet to my shoulders [. . .]. She placed her foot on top of her chest while uttering disdainful words [. . .]. I felt a great pain in my chest and in all of its interior, so great that had she not raised it quickly, I thought my health would be seriously damaged” (105).
“trauma seems to be much more than a pathology or a simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 14).

Because it comes across as the disclosures of a wounded self, to the modern reader, the approval, even glorification of it expressed by the narrator in the following passage is no doubt difficult for the modern reader to comprehend:

> Y Nuestro Señor, de su mano, liberalísimamente me acudía con una profunda humillación en que se hallaba deshecha mi alma, y mi corazón como quebrantado en pedazos en afectuosísimo devoción, de donde manaban copiosas lágrimas suavemente, y como cosa dada de mano de Nuestro Señor, aunque yo no podía bien distinguir si nacían o no de aquella gran fuerza que me hacía para desnudarme y confusión que sentía en estarlo. Pero de cualquiera principio que naciese, sé yo que eran unas lágrimas envueltas en un ternísimo afecto de amor de Dios y excelente modo de humildad, de que me dejaba enriquecida y muy aumentado el desengaño del mundo (Carvajal y Mendoza 82-84).

However, Carvajal y Mendoza’s acceptance of her harsh treatment is better understood if we view it as the rhetorical strategy that it was. In this passage the autobiographer portrayed Luisa as bursting into tears of gratitude because she was so thankful for the abuse that allowed her to suffer for God. She did so in a move to connect the abuse of her body with her love for God and her supposed willingness to endure great physical hardship for his sake. Doing so infused her textual self with authority that Carvajal y Mendoza hoped would extend to its creator.

---

108 “And Our Lord, for His part, attended me most liberally with a profound humiliation in which my soul found itself undone and my heart as if it were broken into pieces over most affectionate devotion, from which copious tears gently flowed and like that [devotion] which is given by the hand of the Our Lord [. . .] but whatever source it originated, I know that they were tears encased in a most tender affection of the love of God and an excellent means of humility, which left me enriched and with a much greater understanding of the world’s deceits” (Carvajal y Mendoza 83).
Later, rather than defend herself against abuse of both her body and her being, Carvajal y Mendoza spoke through her narrating “I” in order to demonstrate how she had internalized it to such a degree that she even started doing it herself. The narrator says that she used to always flagellate herself so intensely that her blood soaked garments stuck to her when she tried to take them off. Her statements echoed the passion literature typical of the day which featured Christ’s bloodied garments being ripped from His body with such force that they took His skin with them. As she made this connection between her suffering, bloody and that of Jesus Christ’s, she used the re-construction of bodily experiences to authorize her textual self for the rhetorical purpose of empowering her historical one.

The physical abuse described in all the passages described above connected Carvajal y Mendoza with Jesus and the martyrs that withstood untold physical suffering in the name of spiritual perfection. This explains why the author gives it such a prominent role within her autobiographical self-construction. However, the forging of this connection in such a way that would not jeopardize the subject’s careful concealment of the very feminine attributes that would keep her out of public missionary work proves to be an impossible task. Once it enters into her text, the autobiographer’s previously concealed feminine body and female identity bring with it all the painful emotions and feelings of abjection that she was trying to keep at bay. Thus, however necessary its presence may have been for proving Luisa’s spiritual worthiness for her mission, the focus on her body brings chaos and disorder in its wake. Its nudity underlies her
femininity. Its pain highlights her emotional side. Its subjection to surveillance, enclosure and abuse by masculine authority (as symbolized by her uncle) reinforces its femininity in the minds of her male readers who would have been accustomed to thinking of the female body as a weak vessel needful of male domination and control.

In all the descriptions of abuse cited in the above discussion, much attention is paid to the material body. It has to be because the body is one of the most privileged sites for the production of reality claims due to the presumption that one is one’s body; that identity is expressed through the body. “Thus definitions of experience and authenticity frequently presume a coherence between subjectivity and the material body. This is most apparent at moments of crisis, for pain occurs not in the abstract, but on or in particular bodies” (Hesford and Kozul 7). Thus, when Carvajal y Mendoza made her abused body visible within her text, she re-connected her identity with her embodiment. The fusion of her materiality with that of Christ was for her a source of empowerment. At the same time however, it was a source of pain as its inclusion within the text brought forth pained memories. These memories provoke a sense of chaos and confusion that characterizes the entire second part of the Vida and causes it to deviate from the typical presentation of a hagiographic self.

The first evidence of this rhetorical deviation can be found in the manner in which Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s narrator consistently defends both her uncle and her nanny. In doing so, she deviates from hagiographic tradition because in the typical child and adolescent saints’ lives, abusive treatment is condemned. In both the medieval and early modern periods there was a relatively small, but certainly not insignificant, number of saints’ lives that revolved around the abuse and/or neglect that a young saint was
subjected to by a member or members of his or her family. In these stories, which were generally told by contemporaries, the saint was usually the source of the most shocking details of parental abuse. The saints never demonstrated the least bit of Christian forgiveness for having been subjected to such cruel treatment. In addition, the abusive parents are always the subjects of the narrator’s reproach (Bell and Weinstein 60). At times, however, Carvajal y Mendoza’s narrator seems to be confused rather than strictly approving when it comes to the harsh treatment that she is describing. The narrating “I” seemingly confused state results from the autobiographer’s own conflicted feelings about her uncle and the “spiritual exercises” that he not only forced upon her, but also, in a sadistic kind of voyeurism, almost always made sure to watch.

Her uncle’s sadistic behavior causes tone of the second part of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida espiritual* to be very different from that of the first. It becomes dark, almost brooding with an emphasis on pain and suffering rather than charity and the desire to do good works. This change corresponds with the narrator’s presentation of Luisa’s introduction to her uncle’s kind of spirituality symbolized by the new book given to her

---

109 In the story of the Blessed Alpais, a late-twelfth century French girl who cared for her father’s cows and was careful to maintain her virtue, the censured figures are the girl’s mothers and brothers who refused to care for her when she was sick. She overcame the incomprehension and cruelty of her family with supernatural help and eventually went on to become a visionary who worked miracles. Nicholas the Pilgrim was an eleventh century Greek spiritual Pied Piper who was regarded as crazy in his lifetime. His mother chained him up and beat him because he wouldn’t stop chanting the *Kyrie Eleison* (Bell and Weinstein 60). The mother is depicted in a very unfavorable light because of her actions. The late fourteenth century Pancea from Lombardy lost her mother at the age of three and henceforth had to live under a stepmother who treated her to a form of domestic persecution worthy of Cinderella’s evil stepmother. She patiently bore her mother’s beatings until her stepmother killed her after she forgot to close the stable doors and caused the animals to escape. Content to tend her flocks, gather wood, and share her crust of bread with the poor (Bell and Weinstein 60). All of these abused saints became venerated martyrs. In fact, even after death Pancea’s “martyrdom” could not be concealed. “Her body became as heavy as lead, a sign that brought crows to her funeral. Miraculous cures took place at her tomb, and a cult grew up that continued for six centuries, culminating in Panacea’s beatification in 1867” (Bell and Weinstein 62).
by the Marqués that she has begun not only to read, but also carry around with her wherever she went. The name of this book devoted to Christ’s Passion is not given but Abad has suggested that it most probably was the *Tractado de deuotissimas y muy lastimosas contemplaciones de la passion sacratissima del hijo de Dios y compassion de la Virgin su madre: Por esta razon llamado Passio Duorum* (1538) by Francisco Díaz Romano (*Escritos autobiográficos* 143 n. 15).

The narrator states that Luisa was introduced to the book featuring the Passion during the numerous occasions during which he would read to her. As the following passage makes clear, her uncle’s presentation of a different form of spirituality takes the form of an intimate shared reading experience between himself and his ward:

Mi más ordinaria compañía era la presencia de mi tío, y sentada junto a él pasaba grande parte del día: él en su silla, escribiendo a solas o con sus secretarios o escribientes, y yo en el suelo raramente queriendo admitir almohada, ni más que las esteras en invierno, con mi libro muy espiritual siempre en la mano u debajo del brazo, por casi perpetuo compañero. Los más llenos de grano me deleitaban mucho, sin cansarme de leerlos cien veces, *para atesorarlo en mi memoria*, de modo que ella me sirviese en las ocasiones (70 emphasis added).110

In this textual scene Luisa sits on the floor beneath her uncle. Her subordinate position symbolizes the Marques’s domination of her body, and since the books they are reading together are those related to spiritual construction, her spirit as well.

---

110 “My usual company was my uncle’s and, seated next to him, I would spend a large part of the day: he in his chair writing, alone or with his secretaries or amanuenses, and I on the floor, rarely nothing more than the mats in wintertime, with a very spiritual book as an almost perpetual companion always in my hands or under my arm. The most substantial mystical texts pleased me a lot, and I did not tire of reading them a hundred times so I could store them up in my memory such as it would serve me as a book whenever the need arose” (71).
The image of a subject, especially a young person, surrounded by books, is not something unique to Carvajal y Mendoza, but it is a trope that we find in virtually all autobiographies written by authors who were attempting to strictly follow textual models to create a new form of subjectivity (Molloy 33). Reading the words of others is to exist through their words—to appropriate them. Thus, in the *Vida espiritual* of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza we see the process in which the autobiographer constructs her “I” in relation to others.

However, this scene represents much more than it does in other autobiographical accounts. Luisa’s subordinate position and the intimacy of the scene described above demonstrate that the young Luisa became more than just the ward of her uncle. Thus, they show that the trauma that provokes the internal crisis of the autobiographer and through it the disentigration of the structured hagiographic text stems from more than just Carvajal y Mendoza’s physical abuse supervised by her uncle. It also is a by-product of the intimate relationship that she shared with him.

Treating her like the “hija muy del alma” (“daughter of his soul”) (Carvajal y Mendoza 70), the uncle to whom she referred as the “padre muy de la mía” (“father of mine” (Carvajal y Mendoza 71)) took her on as his “special” spiritual project rather than an object of simple parental responsibility. Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza the autobiographer, seems to become the child “Luisa” within these pages, and the past seems to become present. Yet, she no longer is primarily concerned with constructing herself as a “saintly” child. Rather her concern seems to be with telling the story of her relationship with her uncle; with making the private become public.
The narrator speaks of Luisa’s niece love and devotion and intense admiration for her uncle, who was also her guardian and tutor. She proudly proclaims that her uncle used to call Luisa his Esther because, “as her uncle Mardoc raised her close to him in the fear of our Lord, so he raised me” (Carvajal y Mendoza 72). If her representations of her uncle within this part of her autohagiography are to be believed, it would appear that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s uncle was so “holy” that he was incapable of doing anything wrong. He was a fountain of spiritual knowledge that never ran dry. The narrator then goes on to relate how the young Luisa used to listen to him pour out his theological wisdom every day without fail; with such consistency that people would call her his “listener.” “Y llamábame a mí su ‘escuchadora’ por ser la que más continua y gustosamente le oía de rodillas, con los brazos sobre el bufete que él tenía delante de sí. Muy ordinariamente leía la Sagrada Escritura y Santos Doctores de la Iglesia, lectura que él mucho amaba” (Carvajal y Mendoza 72). (“And people used to call me his ‘listener’ since I was the one who most often and with greatest pleasure listened to him on my knees, with my arms on the writing desk in front of him. Usually he read Holy Scripture that he greatly loved (Carvajal y Mendoza 73)).

In this section, the uncle is transformed into a saint; and even approaches Jesus in holiness. Common tropes in women’s spiritual autobiography are that Jesus, God, or the saints teach female spiritual autobiographers to read and that a sudden ability to read is due to divine intervention. The narrator, however, states that Luisa learned Latin hearing
her uncle read. Never mind the fact that this contradicts what she had written earlier about learning to read Latin as a child. It was considered more extraordinary to learn it from God than from lessons (Rhodes, “Introduction” 73), but in this case it is not God that teaches Luisa to read Latin but her uncle.

The Bible verses that Luisa’s uncle would sing to her, “Come ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord” (Ps 34:11) reveal that he has the power of the Father within the autobiography. Throughout the spiritual autobiography it is apparent that Luisa looked to her uncle as her supreme masculine authority. This man, not God, is the one who puts order into her life. He is the person that she obeys, and actually it is her uncle that the narrator talks about within her text, not God. According to the Vida, Luisa put the Marquez’s orders first because his direction was “permanente” (‘permanent’) (Carvajal y Mendoza 78, 79) and more “de asiento” (‘weighty’) (Carvajal y Mendoza 78, 79). He was the highest male authority in the family household, and thus had to be obeyed in every way, even to the point of allowing herself and her body to be abused—much the same way that female penitents allowed themselves to be subjected to the physical abuse of their superiors in the name of God.

Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s portrayal of Luisa as completely subordinate to her uncle contrasts markedly with the majority of other sixteenth and seventeenth century hagiographic texts that relate the life of a youthful “holy” protagonist. In these depictions of a young saint’s family interactions, fathers and mothers generally accommodated the wishes of their children, especially in matters relating to their spirituality (Bell and Weinstein 66). She also deviated from the medieval hagiographic convention of portraying the relationship between the young saint’s and her parents as a battle of which
in which the child or adolescent was always ultimately the victor. Carvajal y Mendoza’s departure from both the medieval and early modern hagiographic presentation of the saint’s internal family dynamics speaks to the second half of the *Vida’s* substantial deviation from the formulaic conventions that the genre of hagiography demanded.

Within Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s text, the Marqués becomes the symbol of the structural order; a role that is generally played by either God or his subordinates on earth— the ecclesiastical authorities. Just as the the figure of the Mother is absent in the authority of God and his followers on earth, so too is she absent from Luisa’s relationship between herself and her masculine figure of authority in the form of her uncle. This is why the following passage relates how the Marques, rather than a maternal figure such as her aunt, becomes pleased by Luisa’s desire to go without food so that those less fortunate could be fed:

> Aplicábame muchísimo a todo género de obras de piedad, en cuanto me era posible, y así, procuraba dar buenos consejos a las de casa e interceder con mi tío a favor de otros cuidadosamente, en los casos que creía del servicio de Nuestro Señor. Lastimábame mucho de las necesidades y hacía lo que podía, que era poco, en cuando a dar dineros. Y eso suplía, cargando la falta de ellos sobre mi comida, de la cual empecé a sustentar cada día [a] un pobre de los que me parecían más necesitados, de que mi tío gustaba mucho. Y con el tiempo, topando otros que hacían fuerza a mi devoción, fui aumentado el número y no pequeña incomodidad mía. Porque, para darles a ellos bien de comer, muy ordinario me quedaba yo con poquísimo mantenimiento, y para disimularlo, fingía que quería comer caldo, que no se usa en semejantes mesas ni se sirve, en ellas sin que se pida. Mi tío gustaba de comerle, y decían que, aun hasta en aquello le parecía, ignorando la causa, que a mí me estaba muy bien. Y de la misma suerte procedía en otras muchísimas cosas de virtud que forzosamente como ésta, habían de ser en público. Y yo veía claramente que, por la mayor parte, a todos persuadía diestrísimamente lo que quería, con que me conservaba en una notable pureza de intención y aumentando el candor y lustre en las obras que hacía (84).111

---

111 “I devoted myself very much to all types of pious works, to the extent that I could, and so I managed to give good advice to those of the household and to carefully intercede with my uncle in favor of others in
In this passage the uncle becomes pleased when he witnesses Luisa going without food so that others could eat. The Marqués’s occupation of the position of proud observer of his spiritual protégé is another one of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s departures from traditional hagiographic conventions. In the first part of her *Vida*, as is customary in hagiographic tradition, it is Luisa’s mother who beams with pride when her daughter emulates her charitable activities. This is also the case with another *Vida* under study in this dissertation—the *Vida* of Isabel de Jesús. In Isabel’s *Vida* it is the mother who encourages her daughter to try to help others in the same way that she does. In contrast, in this second half of the *Vida*, the Marquesa, Luisa’s assumptive mother figure does not oversee her niece’s ventures into charitable giving. In fact, she does not seem to supervise any of the young girl’s activities. This is strange as Carvajal y Mendoza does depict her aunt, rather than her uncle, as being the most involved in the lives of the pair’s biological children. When it comes to the supervision of Luisa’s activities the aunt is conspicuously absent. Her absence constrasts sharply with the benevolent precense of Luisa’s mother that practically dominates Carvajal y Mendoza’s re-construction of the part of her childhood that preceeded the death of her parents.

the cases that I believed were in the service of Our Lord. The neediness and miseries that I saw the poor suffer pained me greatly. I wished to remedy them and I did what I could, which was little, as far as giving money. And that I supplemented, charging the lack of money to my food, from which I began to sustain a poor individual every day from among those who seemed to me most needy, which pleased my uncle a great deal. And with time, running across others who put pressure on my devotion, I increased the number and my discomfort not a little, because in order to give them food as was necessary, I was left with very little sustenance quite regularly and, to hide that fact, I pretended that I wanted to have broth, which was not done at meals like theirs nor is it served unless one asks for it. My uncle enjoyed having it and they used to say that even in that, it seemed to him, without knowing what I was doing, that I was doing a good thing. And in the same fashion I proceeded in many more matters of virtue which necessarily, like this one, had to be accomplished in public. And I saw clearly that, for the most part, I persuaded everyone most dexterously to do what I wanted, by which means I was able to preserve a very notable purity of intention and increase in the candor and brilliance in the good works that did” (85).
Significantly, in contrast to the first part of the *Vida’s* clear and concise narration of the scenes involving the charitable activities undertaken by a loving mother and her daughter, the passage cited above involving the young Luisa’s charitable life is hard to read and even harder to decipher. Its run-on sentences that contain many thoughts at once make it difficult for the reader to grasp the thoughts that the autobiographer is trying to convey by way of her first-person narrator. The precise meaning of the phrase “cargando la falta de ellos [dinero] sobre mi comida” (Carvajal y Mendoza 84) (“charging the lack of money to my food”) (Carvajal y Mendoza 85), for example, seems awkward and not very well stated. The fact that this phrase represents one of many thoughts that are separated by a series of commas casually thrown in between them, makes the entire passage seem haphazard, thrown together rapidly without the benefit of careful editing.

While it is true that other *vidas* of women religious often contain these types of grammatical errors, the fact that the jumbled syntax of the second part of Luisa’s text contrasts with the clear and straightforward writing found in the first part of the *Vida*, suggests that the second half is a narrative written within an atmosphere of authorial confliction and distress. Thus by reading the *Vida espiritual* de Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza we see that “the impact of trauma makes the process of remembering and forgetting more complex than in other situations, and survivors are therefore particularly likely to express themselves in stories containing elements which are imaginary, fragmented or disjointed and loaded with symbolism” (Ashplant 1). This in turn means that the understanding and analysis of stories like the second half of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s *Vida* are inevitably complicated and challenging.
The duress provoked by the writing of the *Vida* was no doubt exacerbated by the autobiographer’s need to account for her seemingly indecent, and much gossiped about, relationship with her uncle. As Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza described her uncle in terms of a guiding father figure, she attempted to elide any potential criticism related to their curious relationship. However, as Rhodes has pointed out, it is obvious from her defensive explanation of this relationship that her encounters with her uncle were not always completely chaste (“Introduction” 71). Carvajal y Mendoza had to defend the relationship in her *Vida* because “holy women were expected to be aloof from all interpersonal relationships which might afford them support, while giving endlessly to others” (Rhodes, “Introduction” 71). Moreover, the seemingly indecent relationship between the Marques and his ward had been the subject of much public speculation. We know that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s relationship had been considered to be suspect because in the Spanish noblewoman’s beatification hearings, her nanny was called upon to testify to its innocent rather than decadent nature in an effort to bolster the Spanish noblewoman’s chances for sainthood (Rhodes, “Introduction” 24).

Luisa’s narrator insists that her uncle was a circumspect man and a great lover of chastity and that, subsequently, there was never an opportunity for any unseemly behavior between Luisa and her uncle. In case this is not enough to convince the reader, she goes on to describe how Luisa never looked upon men, and especially not her uncle, in an immoral way because she viewed him not as a man but as a holy body.

Y como mi tío era hombre tan grave y amador de honestidad, no había ocasión contra ella, y crecía y fortificábase mi sinceridad. Y yo le miraba siempre con notable respeto y reverencia, como si estuviera delante un cuerpo santo; y a los demás, con aquella sincera vista que se suelen mirar los inanimados. Y parecíanme groseros y fríos y feos, aun los tenidos por más hermosos hombres. Y lo mismo de mi tío. Gustaba sólo su compañía.
y de las visitas de nuestros confesores y personas muy espirituales; y los demás, aunque fuesen primos, parientes y amigos, me cansaban, y sentía un natural disgusto y dificultad con su conversación y trato, por más modesto que fuese (Vida 70). 112

Yet, this passage reveals an internal contradiction in Carvajal y Mendoza’s thoughts. The fact that she felt the need to have her narrator comment on her uncle’s body and as a result make his masculine corporeality visible within the text, subtly demonstrates that she did see him as a man.

Therefore, despite the author’s protests to the contrary, this chapter postulates that evidence that their relationship could have been otherwise can be found within the narrator’s Luisa’s descriptions of the guilt and fear that Luisa felt in her uncle’s presence. The narrating “I” subtly insinuates that her relationship with her uncle involved a “camino de aquella torcida senda que lleva por contento y satisfacción de criaturas, a veces blanda y encubiertamente, a veces a grandes ofensas a Dios” (Carvajal y Mendoza 74) (“twisted path that leads through contentment and satisfaction in worldliness, at times gently and secretly, at times in great offense to God” (Carvajal y Mendoza 75)). She also describes Luisa as having been “plagada de la sucísima lepra de la hipocresía, para lo

112 “And I grew and my integrity grew stronger. And I always looked at him with considerable respect and reverence, as if I were before a holy body, and upon all others, I cast that look with which inanimate beings regard each other. And they seemed gross and cold and ugly to me, even those believed to be the most beautiful men. And the same for my uncle. I enjoyed only his company and the visits by our confessors and very spiritual people. And the others, even though they were cousins, relatives and friends, tired me and I felt a natural disgust and difficulty in their conversation and dealings with them, regardless of how decorous it was” (71).
In this passage it is clear that the perfect figure constructed in the first half of the *Vida* has been completely abandoned. Rather than a child who never sins and who never even tells a small lie, this passage features a young girl terrified of mortal sin. In fact, an examination of its last sentence reveals that it contains a contradiction of what Carvajal y Mendoza’s narrator said in the opening pages of the *Vida spiritual*—that Luisa never did

---

113 “And a strong fear of anything that could be a mortal sin took root in my heart, because my uncle spoke often of what a detestable thing that was, describing that misfortune extremely well [. . .]. It was easier and a thousand times better to stop committing mortal sins than to put oneself in such a serious and difficult obligation of sorrow and regret. And I became so apprehensive of what it meant to sin thus, that nothing in my being could force me to make any move against the power of this saintly fear that I found in my soul. And I was afraid of committing such a sin as of having a most horrible serpent swallow me alive, body and soul, and thus I came to a total disdain of what loss of mere temporal life would be in this case. This fear which, in a happy hour, took such control of my heart has freed me from thousands of sins which without a doubt, I think I would have committed quite deliberately, due to the great misery and fragility that I have always known to exist in myself. Glory be to God!” (81).
anything wrong because she had such a holy demeanor. Here, the narrator admits to always having had a “fragility” and “misery” existing within her. Thus, whereas earlier in the *Vida* the young protagonist is portrayed by the autobiographer as always having been disinclined to sin; in these later sections she is portrayed as always being inclined to it. This contradiction is an indication of the conflicted state of mind underwhich Carvajal y Mendoza wrote the memoir of her forced “penitential” activities.

The sin that Carvajal y Mendoza feared was heavily implicated in her relationship with her uncle is the subject of the following narration of a “shadow” that both Luisa and her uncle saw one day while they were out in the countryside. The shadowy presence witnessed by the two of them alone in such an intimate situation is symbolic of the “sinful” behavior that they had been undergoing together.

Una noche, mi tío y sus hijos estaban al fresco en este corridor, y él paseándose, rezaba sus Horas o Rosario, bien desviado de todos. Y yo lo estaba, haciendo mi examen, de pecho sobre, las baradas, con un alto almendro delante. Y de repente, me pareció que había visto una sombra grandísima, tan alta como el almendro o mayor, blanca como la nieve y algo lucido, delante de mis ojos, con que fue muy alterada y movida mi sangre, y quitame de allí para ir a acostomarme. Y llegando a pedir la mano a mi tío para besarsela y tomar su bendición (como las hijas de personas tales como lo usan en España, en noche y mañana, y las sobrinas tan cercanas como yo, criadas en casa, se tratan y tienen por hijas, y el padre y la madre, dándoles la mano, les echa su bendición), no se que se vio en mi semblante, que me preguntó que tenía. Yo excusaba el decirlo pero, mandándolo, supo que me había turbado tan extrañamente que no podía aun librarme de la turbación. Y que así temía que tornaría a representarme la misma sombra, y podría dañar demasiado mi corazón [. . .]. Perdí totalmente la color, y cayéronseme los brazos sin fuerza, y apenas me parece que podía estar en pie. Mi tío empezó recio y con prisa a decir, ‘No temas, hija, que yo vi lo mismo que tú’ (Carvajal y Mendoza 88, 91).

114 “One night, my uncle and his daughters were out in the fresh air of this corridor and he, strolling along, was praying his hours or rosary, well removed from the others. And I likewise removed, doing my examination [of conscious], my chest against the railing, with a tall almond tree before me. And suddenly I thought I had seen a huge shadow, as tall as the almond tree or taller, and somewhat clear, white as snow.
The scene outlined above is an intimate and highly personalized encounter between Luisa and her uncle. It is not a reproduction of hagiographic legend. It is a strange inclusion in that it does nothing to prove the “holy” character of its author, which is of course the purpose of the Vida espiritual. By this point in the Vida her purpose for writing has changed, and Carvajal y Mendoza is in confessional mode rather than a hagiographic construction mode. What she is to confessing is that the relationship that she shared with her uncle was inherently “evil.” The dark shadow that they both see while together in the intimate atmosphere of nightfall symbolizes this evil.

Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s transcript of her uncle’s words about her—which are so heavy with implication that one has to wonder why the autobiographer chose to place them in juxtaposition with the passages that insist upon the chaste nature of the relationship between the two—represents a continuation of the text’s confessional atmosphere. The following marginal note supports this: “Algunas veces le seguían hijos e hijas, mas poco a poco se iban y le dejaban solo. Y solía el, cuando lo advertía y me veía quedar allí, empezar a contra, ‘Vois estis qui permansistis mecum in tentationibus meis’” (Carvajal y Mendoza 86) (“At times, his sons and daughters followed him, but little by little, they departed and left him alone, and when he realized it and saw that I was and somewhat bright, in front of my eyes, which agitated and altered my blood, and I left that place to go to bed. And upon arriving to ask my uncle for his hand to kiss and receive his blessing (as the daughter of such people do in Spain, in the evening and in the morning, and the nieces as closely related as I, raised in their house and treated and held as daughters, and the father and mother, giving them their hand, bless them,) I don’t know what was evident in my appearance that led him to ask me what was the matter with me. I avoided saying it, but he ordered me to do so and found out that I had been upset by what I had imagined [. . .] And I was afraid that the same shadow would appear again to me, and could harm my heart in excess. ‘I completely lost my color and my arms fell helpless at my sides and I believe I could hardly stand up. My uncle began to to say loudly and in a hurry, ‘Do not fear, daughter, for I saw the same thing as you.’”(Carvajal y Mendoza 91).
still there, he used to begin to sing: ‘You were the one who remained with me during my temptations’ [. . .]” (Carvajal y Mendoza 87)). One also has to wonder why she chose to insert other scandalous insinuations such as the following which Elizabeth Rhodes asserts subtly indicate that she, rather than the Marquesa, was capable of satisfying her uncle’s desires:

[. . .] muchas veces me persuadía, o a quedar en el oratorio que allí él tenía, llevándose él la llave, o a que me fuese a mi propio aposento, sin quedarme en el camino con mis primas y criadas de casa, la cual, siendo en muchas cosas de ejemplar virtud, especialmente en recato y honestidad, no bastaba a satisfacer su deseo [. . .] (Carvajal y Mendoza 86).115

The syntax in the above passage is jumbled and incoherent, which is often the case when Carvajal y Mendoza wants, perhaps subconsciously, to subconsciously want to undermine Luisa’s glorification of her uncle. Carvajal y Mendoza’s syntax is also jumbled when she describes how her uncle used to hide her from anyone that would stop by.

Si venían visitas graves, o tales que se sufría que me viesen, me ponía en un hueco de ventana, cubierto de las colgaduras; o si era do [nd] alguno de sus oratorios o librería estaba a mano, entrábame allá. Y en yéndose, alzaba él mismo la voz y llamábame. Y si escribía, sentábame con mi libro junto a él y leía, como ya dije (Carvajal y Mendoza 86).116

115 “He persuaded me many times either to remain in the oratory that he had there, with him taking the key with him, or that I go to my own room, without stopping along the way to spend time with my cousins or the household servants, (who [the Marquesa], being of exemplary virtue in many things, especially in prudence and modesty, was insufficient to satisfy his desire)” (87).

116 “If important visitors arrived or of the type for which my being seen was inappropriate, he set me on the sill of a window, covered with the curtains or, if it was where one of his oratories or libraries was close by, he put me in there. And when the company left, he himself would raise his voice and call me. And if he
The fact that the narrator cannot even express herself in a coherent manner in the above passages is a clear indication that having to talk about and thus expose her strange relationship with her uncle was a source of great personal discomfort and emotional confusion and pain. It is also indicative of the fact that in some cases the personal and cultural codes that survivors develop to convey the unspeakable, and to name that which defies verbal and emotional expression, can be analyzed linguistically and as narrative forms, to reveal the impact of trauma within a life story. Variations and discontinuities in narrative structures may sometimes enable researchers to trace the terror’s shattering and life-changing impact (Caruth 14).

The unrestrained narrative that predominates after the inclusion of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s uncle into both her text and her memory is, in fact, very similar to what Sherry Benstock refers to as Virginia Woolf’s “tunneling method of finding her way back to the past” (Benstock 147). From a note in the margin that reads in translation, “from all this confusion and multitude of things let appropriate be said so as to put it all in order” (Carvajal y Mendoza 71) we know that the autobiographer wanted to control the memories—many of them painful—flooding from her unconscious into both her conscious mind and her self-writing. However, given the unedited, disordered and unfinished state of the rest of Luisa’s narrative, it is apparent that her wish was never brought to fruition. The appearance of Luisa’s uncle signals an unfinished text, a mass of edits, changes and re-thinkings that constitute more of a trauma narrative than a hagiography. Discrediting the notion of self-consciousness, she shows the thoughtless, the unrestrained, and the unconscious. She refrained from all efforts to shape, sort or subordinate her material to her will. “She cuts off herself from under the props that hold was writing, I would sit with my book next to him and read” (87).
up her authority as author, turning authority back to the matter that constitutes her ‘subject’—and the subject is not necessarily the ‘self’ of the traditional autobiography” (Benstock 153). We do not have a finished sacred vida that is polished, ordered, and controlled in the same way that the first part of the life story is. For this reason, we can think of Luisa’s autobiographic project as a “failed” one in the sense that she was unable to sustain her idealized picture of herself throughout the text no matter how much she might have wished.

Rather than a successfully constructed and necessarily fictional “hagiography,” Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s Vida can be best described as a clear example of what trauma critic Shoshana Felman would call “a life testimony [which] is not simply a testimony to her later private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life” (“Education” 14). Luisa’s testimony to her later private life was one of trauma, abuse and pain that featured an abusive uncle rather than a benevolent Christ as the principle character.

Therefore, like other trauma narratives, Luisa’s text testifies to the multiple difficulties that occur when autobiographers try to describe painful events that have been stored within their memory and/or unconscious for years. As a survivor of trauma Luisa must tell what cannot be spoken. Required to confess, to bear witness, to make public and shareable a private and intolerable pain, in order to make a case for her spiritual perfection. In the end Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza is unable to resolve the conflict that was created by her attempt to connect her abused and humiliated flesh with that of Jesus Christ. She cannot include it without losing the control that she has held so tightly over her self-presentation. The inclusion of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s traumatic bodily
experiences within her text shatters the autobiographer’s carefully constructed
presentation of herself as a saintly figure that is able to live and move freely in the
outside world. Ironically, although the author’s attempts to transform her feminine body
into that of a saint are thoroughly compromised by the presence of her abused body, and
all the feelings and emotions that it brings with it, the very fact that she would try to re-
write her subjectivity, her identity and her body in this way stands as evidence of agency
within her narrative. She writes herself as a saint in order to resist enclosure within pre-
defined confining and limiting female identity. The fact that she is unable to complete
her self-actualization project in no way detracts from the agency in which this act of
writing as resistance is grounded.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Censor the body and you can censor breath and speech at the same time.
Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.

Hélene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza all faced what Ruth El Saffar calls the “the foundational problem facing all women in patriarchal culture, the split between the demands of the self, and the demands of [. . .] the social unconscious” (14). They all wanted to obtain at least some form of religious authority; yet their unenclosed and/or un-intact bodies represented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. However, there was a way to overcome the barriers to spiritual exemplarity created by the fear and mistrust of the pervious, “wandering” female body—using the spiritual vida as a locus of the articulation of empowering new identities. It may seem strange that autobiographical writing would have served them in this function since they were positioned as material others and thus historically discouraged from attempting to write the self. However, as embodied subjects, the authors studied here brought the body with them into the text in order to transform it from
a sign of a disempowered subjectivity to a site of discursively constructed agency.  

Conceived as “body” by the society of which they were a part, within their writings, Isabel de la Cruz, Madre María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José, and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza brought to the text the corporeality that masculine writers had tried to repress. In so doing, they demonstrate that despite the fact that the sealed body was so important to early modern and medieval thinkers precisely because it represented “a taboo against that abjection which threatens the boundaries of the soul. If the female mystic chooses to occupy those borders, to confound them by transgressing them, she exploits the medieval association of flesh and feminine” (Ashton 39).

Female mystics who inscribe the body into the text empowers embodiment by making her materiality visible and her flesh a source of agency and a pathway to authority. As they do, so they show that while masculine and clerical approbation are hinged upon the entombing of the sealed, silent, hidden woman whose spiritual experience is mediated by the male and whose life is subject to theological rules or traditions, the enclosure of the female body and the repression of the feminine is never complete.

The body might well function “as one of the most basic of tropes by which ethical, political, and social concepts of power may be articulated” (Haidt 5). Yet, for Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José, and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza it also served as a site of resistance because it was their re-writing of the body that made constructing agency within the pages of the spiritual vida possible. All four
women fused material memories with hagiographic models in order to construct empowering forms of experience. They all had different memories and there were a number of different hagiographic models that they could have chosen from. Thus, the identities that they constructed were all different.

Unlike the idealized figure of the model nun which dominates the much read and emulated *vitae* of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa de Jesús and their legions of followers, Isabel de Jesus’s re-worked “*perfecta religiosa*” is a model of religious physicality enabled and empowered by the valorization of female sexuality and the uniquely female bodily experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and motherhood rather than humility, chastity and virginity. The hagiographic maternal imagery Isabel de Jesús incorporated into her text enabled her to construct her experience as that of a spiritual mother rather than a “virgin bride of Christ.” The experience that she constructed within her *Vida* justified her many “wandering” years outside of the convent. It provided her writing with authority by transforming her words from those of a powerless village “loca” to an powerful mother drawn from the maternal hagiographic models of a “Jesus as Mother” who mediates between the human and the divine, a Virgin Mother Mary who is the generator of life and nurturer of human kind, and the martyrdom of St. Perpetua who loved her child but was still willing to abandon him so she could die for God.
Early modern men both feared and revered the power of the mother that is symbolized in some form or another by all of these models of maternity. Thus, by writing herself as a symbol of revered holy maternity, Isabel de Jesús not only re-valORIZED her maternal body by making it visible within her Vida, she also succeeded in obtaining a form of embodied authority that was paradoxically both feared and revered by male religious secretly longing to return to the Mother.

María Magdalena Muñoz inhabited a body that also inspired conflicting feelings. Although she was incapacitated at an early age by a botched medical treatment, her wounded body was a double-edged sword. In the interest of maintaining the social order, colonial religious and political leaders were obsessed with maintaining the image of permanently fixed boundaries between the material and spiritual worlds, and thus between the decaying flesh and the timeless spirit. María Magdalena’s violently quivering and profusely bleeding body was an unwelcome reminder that the structures that they were trying to sustain were vulnerable at the margins. This nun’s discourse about her imperfect body reminded a society that wanted to forget that the body gets sick, the body gets injured, the body bleeds, and the body dies. Since these reminders were all associated more closely with the more material “female body,” even though her virginity would have let her transcend her femaleness in a way that Isabel de Jesús with her pregnant body was not able to, Madre Magdalena was also doubly confined within the feminine. In her case it was her bleeding wounds, rather than an extended stomach, that trapped her within the material and prevented her from reaching the spiritual realm and through this obtaining spiritual authority in the way that other famous and greatly esteemed female women had been able to do.
At the same time, María Magdalena’s bleeding wounds were a site on which a convincing form of *imitatio Christi* was built upon the symbolic representation and re-enactment of Christ’s suffering during the Crucifixion as seen through this autobiographer’s “ojos corporales.” In this way, María Magdalena’s body brought attention to the prevailing conflicting tendencies about bodies and flesh in the early modern period in that it highlighted the countertendency that saw margins as sites through which God could enter to take possession of the soul and through which fragility of the body could be seen in its sickness as an occasion for identification with Christ’s suffering body and with possession of His pain.

By insisting upon a form of fully embodied mystical union that would connect her bleeding, wounded and thus transgressive materiality with that of a crucified Jesus, Madre Magdalena Muñoz came to be revered within both the Mexican church and the rest of her New World community. Her writing found power by re-working her wounded and sickly body instead of attempting to somehow transcend her failed materiality. Therefore, rather than an “avowed attempt to accept and transcend all suffering in the name of God” (Rivero 8), María Magdalena’s mysticism represented an attempt to find salvation through the suffering body. Her embodied mysticism caused her *Vida* to differ dramatically from that of many other women religious, even her spiritual foremother, St. Teresa de Jesús. Whereas the Spanish Carmelite claimed to have never seen her visions of an ethereal resurrected Christ with “los ojos corporales,” Madre Magalena’s *Vida* features an autobiographical “I” that continuously gazes with her “ojos corporales” upon the figure of a very bloody, wounded, and thoroughly human body of Christ. As she does so, she constructs a form of embodied authority that is as
paradoxically empowering as Isabel de Jesús’s maternity was. Her new found authority caused her male superior to fear her wounded body and at the same time envy its power to dramatize Christ’s Passion.

María de San José also constructed agency through the “remberance” and textual reconstruction of experiences of profound bodily suffering on the outskirts of colonial Mexico. Without a dowry, or even access to spiritual confessors, this Mexican nun lived outside of enclosure for a large portion of her life. Consequently, within her *Vida* she concentrated on proving that she had somehow managed to remain both physically and metaphysically enclosed even while outside of the convent. Her proof of her enclosure was her insistence on a life lived as a hermit, a Desert Mother, who became an “athlete of Christ,” an ancient martyr trope from the time of the early church, by drying up her femaleness through extreme fasting and severe physical penances. Once her autobiographical self finally entered the convent, however, it no longer had to reject the symbols of its femininity. At this point, María de San José allowed her female body visibility within her *Vida*. Its entrance into the text created an atmosphere of femininity based upon woman-centered symbols and imagery such as flowers, sewing, the heart, and sexualized divine union. Physical location within Mexico’s desert region enabled María de San José to construct herself as a Desert Mother. Her spatial orientation within the convent enabled her to achieve this subsequent transition from a Desert Mother to a Bride of Christ. The combination of these two identities propelled the Mexican nun up the ladder of power within the convent as body and space became mutually constitutive sources of her particular embodied authority.
Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza never spent any of the years of her life behind convent walls. On the contrary, she journeyed from Spain to England on a self-sought evangelization project. In framing her life story in hagiographic terms, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza not only drew from hagiographic tropes but also inscribed them within her own lived bodily experiences in much the same way that Isabel de Jesús, Madre María Magdalena and María de San José did. The difference is that rather than relate them to motherhood, infirmity, or the life of a Desert Mother, the experiences that Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza drew on in order to insert herself into hagiographic tradition involved the physical abuse that she had suffered under her uncle’s direction. The inclusion of these experiences introduced trauma into Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s life story and causes her telling of it to “exceed the limits” (Gilmore, Limits) of both hagiography and traditional autobiography. This trauma that is introduced into the story is to the body. Thus, by reading for the body within the text, we can see how this Spanish woman’s Vida is, perhaps unwittingly, simultaneously a hagiography, an autobiography and a trauma narrative. It starts out constructing the conventional story of a holy life for purposes of self-exaltation aimed at garnering support for its author’s missionary quest. However, once the body enters into the text, Luisa’s carefully constructed hagiographic auto-construction dissolves into a highly personal memoir of personal trauma to the body.

Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza excused the mutilation of her body, calling it something that was necessary for her spiritual perfection. This symbolizes her acceptance of the idea that the feminine body is something needful of rejection. This author’s internalization of the idea that the feminine body was somehow “evil” and thus in need of the most severe forms of punishment reflects that of other marginalized figures who had
also been trapped within their material bodies and who, within the space of their own entrapment, came to see themselves in the negative ways that their society most assuredly wanted (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 54). Although it involves a rejection of her feminine body, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s autobiography can be considered as an act of feminine resistance in that she intervened in the discourses and in the process found for herself a certain form of agency (P. Smith 136). This agency is found in the way in which the autobiographer situated herself and her own history in relation to the ideologies and cultural icons that made up her during her lifetime. Because her resistance in the form of her self-writing depends first upon a rejection of, and then a reconstruction of the feminine body, it is yet another example of embodied authority. As such, it is built upon a recreation of the body rather than its dismissal. Luisa de Carvajal’s use of her body as a way to re-script her identity can then be seen as an example of how, by expressing the “unspeakable,” autobiographers can intervene in the systems of meaning that have been imposed upon them. An unedited, unfinished document that is more incoherent than coherent—the part of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza’s life-writing that centers around the exposure of her abused body—is an example of how writing about trauma shatters the very frame of the autobiographical and hagiographical project as it reveals and tests its limits and ultimately provokes the deconstruction of supposedly stable genre boundaries and coherent subject positions.  

From these interlinked analyses we see that religious women of the early modern period were sexed, embodied, and collectively strived to textually re-configure the conditions of their embodiment in such a way as to move from disempowered to empowered bodies. Other components such as class, race, physical health, age, and
marital status either further reinforced or minimized the conditions of their embodiment. The way they went about fashioning their narratives, especially selecting the spiritual and hagiographic models that they would “perform” in their autobiographical texts, was distinct. These autobiographical writings indicate that the terms of the embodiment for all early modern women varied according to the individual autobiographer’s position in relation to the factors listed above.

Although the choices for models and life paths to follow were limited by the conditions of their materiality, they were not limited in the same way for each of those subjects. Able-bodied women such as Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza could choose to model themselves after missionaries, while invalids such as Madre Magdalena could not. María de San José could “become” a nun in the model of the virginal St. Clare while Isabel de Jesús, the once married and mother of three children, had a much more difficult time doing so. For these women, the lived bodily experience as related to social position worked to ensure that they resisted feminine embodiment in ways that, while sharing much in common, were also characterized by their difference. Pulled from the reigning religious and hagiographic discourses of the day, the models selected by each of these individual women reflected her unique experience as a multiply embodied subject. From their examples, we see that “hagiography, the body of literature inspired by and destined to promote the celebration of the saints produced an immense network of diverse forms of spiritual expression” (Bruno, “Written on the Body” 386).

Women such as Isabel de Jesús, María Magdalena, María de San José, and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza were trapped within their bodies not only because of their femininity but also because of other characteristics that connected them with the material,
such as their role as mothers, poor health, and age. By narrating their lives each woman worked toward creating an autobiographical “I” that would help her to configure an empowered existence. Each writer used a combination of models that would both conform to and convince her audience of her singularity. Rather than just following spiritual models, they actively chose between those which surrounded them in order to find ones that most vindicated the lives they lived out as individual women. In the process, they created new identities and new life scripts that, while sharing much in common, were in actuality quite different from each other. For this reason, they serve as examples of how “the female subject […] is constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another” (Braidotti 105).

This study of Isabel de Jesús, Madre Magdalena Muñoz, María de San José, and Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza can be described as a critique of existing definitions and representations of women as well as the creation of new images of subjectivity that has as its starting point real-life women in positions of discursive subjectivity rather than the disembodied subjects so often found in current critical theory.

**Contributions to the Field**

This dissertation proposes a number of original contributions to both Spanish and Latin American literary studies. First, it seeks to present a new type of critical thinking that differs from one that conceives of early modern Hispanic women as static subjects. It considers women as examples of a complex subjectivity made up of a variety of different identity components that are constantly in flux. Hispanic women of the early
modern period were not static figures who never changed throughout their life. Rather, they were subjects who, like women writers of today, grew and developed throughout the course of their lives. They went through puberty, married or remained single, experienced pregnancy and childbirth and unavoidably experienced the universal process of aging. Although they belonged to different social classes, they sometimes moved back and forth between different social positions. Their social positions were not fixed but were constantly changing and it is essential that scholars understand the nature of their subjectivities. Hopefully, this dissertation will contribute to this goal.

In the past, many working within the field have fallen into the trap of collapsing each individual woman’s experience in such a way that what has been studied is the signifier of WOMAN rather than the singular woman herself. In contrast, this study concludes that by analyzing the role that the lived experience of these writers played in the choice of the discursive models that they chose to implement in the re-scripting of their identities, we can unearth the individual women that make up the signifiers. There is no intention of destroying the signifier of WOMAN however. This would be counter-productive given the fact that Hispanic women of this period shared the common predicament of female embodiment. Rather, the foregoing chapters deconstruct this signifier in order to analyze the role that individualized bodily experience played in the early modern Hispanic autobiographer’s negotiation between the various authorizing subject positions that were available to them during their lifetimes. When we account for this type of individual experience we help to reconcile the feminist critiques of the priority traditionally granted to the variable of sexuality in the Western discourse about the subject with the feminist proposition of redefining the embodied subject in a network
of interrelated variables, of which sexuality is but one (Braidotti 199). Others include the other markers of identity that are situated on the axes of subjectification, some of which are race, culture, nationality, class, life-choice preferences, age and physical health.

This study of body, agency and authority represents a dual dimensional project that relies on genderized and sex-specific notions in order to redefine the female feminist subject and deconstruct it at the same time. A contribution to feminist, autobiographical and Hispanic literary studies, this study contextualizes the collective embodiment of early modern women by highlighting the experiences, embodiment, situated knowledge, and multiplicity of differences that allow for the construction of a variety of different autobiographical “I”s and a diverse cross-section of paths to authority.

Through its emphasis on the role of the body within the text, this dissertation also strives to usher in another type of critical thinking that can be called “embodied criticism.” In this type of criticism the critic brings his or her own body and bodily experiences into textual analysis in order to better understand the placement and functioning of the subject’s body within writing. In many ways, this is a new departure in the field of Hispanic studies. It is imperative that scholars consider the personalities that wrote colonial and golden age texts as more than just disembodied figures, or “subjects” that were completely divorced from the social milieu and the material world that produced them in order to better understand the desires and motivations that led them to write, and more especially, to write autobiography. Autobiography does not offer direct access to the lived life of the autobiographer. Nevertheless, if we can begin to think of early modern autobiographers as material beings who were born, wrote and feared death as they struggled to testify to a kind of eternal existence within their writing
that they could not find in their human body, we will be better able to grasp both the circumstances under which they wrote and the goals that they hoped to bring to fruition through autobiographical writing.

The facts related to their bodily experiences greatly influenced the autobiographical writings of early modern subjects. Although current cultural criticism may sometimes use words such as body and materiality, it frequently treats authors as bodiless textual identities. As a result, we as critics often lose sight of the somatic desires, concerns, fears and preoccupations that authors inevitably carry with them into their discourses. In order to recover a perspective that looks at the narrator as both a body and a subject, we need to first think of ourselves as critics who inhabit bodies and bring our bodies with us into our writings. This will enable us to fully understand the role that the body plays in writing and subsequently analyzing texts from an embodied perspective. It also develops the notion of corporeal materiality by emphasizing the somatically differentiated structure of the speaking subject.

Finally, this dissertation proposes to break traditional genre boundaries as it studies both Golden Age and colonial women writers in order to help foster an environment of “Transatlanticism” in which texts are chosen and analyzed because of their shared thematic, theological and cultural connections rather than just spatial and geographic ones. Far too often scholars working within the field of colonial and Golden Age literatures have felt limited by areas, genre or period requirements that dictated that we must limit ourselves to one side of the Atlantic or the other in choosing texts to be included in our studies. Actually, these requirements are anachronistic, given that both Golden Age and colonial texts were written within the Spanish empire and their authors
were all subject to the same Spanish Crown. This study has placed more emphasis on making connections between texts that center on thematic and theological issues, especially since the religious discourses that early modern women drew from emanated from the Iberian Peninsula where the motherhouses of their orders governed all their chapters in the Americas. This change in perspective is crucial because it permits the study of the religious models found in these texts in much greater depth and with more attention to critical theory and theology. Connecting texts for theoretical reasons requires us to reflect in depth upon not only the theories that we choose to apply, but also upon the reasons that we choose to use them. This enriches not only our own criticism but also the textual readings that we offer.

In addition to forging connections between colonial and Golden Age women religious, this dissertation also seeks to compare the writing on early modern Hispanic women religious and their European contemporaries in an attempt to fully situate them within a shared tradition of female spiritual autobiography. Most texts included within this canon focus solely on England, France and Italy, or some combination thereof, often to the exclusion of Spain and Colonial Spanish America. To date, if Spanish and Spanish American religious women writers appear in anthologies of early modern women, they are generally both ancillary and under-theorized. Indeed, Stephanie Merrim has noted “where general histories of the early modern period or of the baroque as a male literary artistic phenomenon would hardly neglect Spain, women’s studies had not yet fully embraced the Hispanic context” (7). Our study of the ways in which women’s narratives contributed to the shape of the early modern Hispanic feminine subject contends that new scholarship can change this bias and ultimately foster a better understanding of how
Hispanic women wrote from within and without convent walls. This dissertation makes connections and comparisons between their spiritual writings and those of other medieval and early modern European women religious. It does so in an attempt to establish that there really were Hispanic women of the early modern period other than St. Teresa and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz who wrote, and who even attempted to write autobiography. The recognition and study of these writers will permit their writings to emerge from international obscurity and receive the amount of comparative literary attention that they so richly deserve. This is long overdue within the “canon” of women’s literature of the age.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Muñoz Magdalena, Madre María de. *Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Muñoz Magdalena, monja profesa del Convento de Sr. S. Jeronimo de la Ciudad de Mexico hija de Domingo de Lorravaquito, y de Isabel Muñoz su legitima mujer*. 1650


Other Primary Sources


Lilio, Martín de. *Segunda parte del Flor sanctorum ahora nuevamente corregido y de muchos errors alimpiado,* [1558].


Nuñez de Miranda, Antonio. *Distribución de las obras ordinarias del día, para hazerlas perfectamente conforme al estado de las señoras religiosas; instruida con doze máximas substanciales, para la vida regular y espiritual que deben seguir.* Mexico, 1712.

Palafox y Mendoza, Juan de. *Año espiritual Dividido en mesas, y semanas.* Madrid, 1662.


Santander y Torres, Sebastián de. *Vida de la venerable madre Maria de S. Joseph, religiosa augustina recoleta, fundadora de los Conventos de Santa Mónica de la Ciudad de Puebla, y después en el de la Soledad de Oaxaca.* Mexico, 1723.


**Secondary Sources**


----. “Why All This Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective.” *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture.* Ed. Victoria E. Bonnel and Lynn Hunts.


Paz, Octavio. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe. 2nd ed. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983.


Salisbury, Joyce E. *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman.*


**Theoretical Framework**


De Lauretis, Teresa. Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction. Bloomington:


