A GLIMPSE OF FAMILY LIFE IN COLONIAL MEXICO:
A Nun's Account*

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As interest grows in examining women's lives and writings in colonial Latin America, the autobiographical accounts written by scores of nuns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been undergoing a reevaluation by historians and literary critics alike. Studies of the literary production and the circumstances surrounding the life of the most famous nun of the period, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), have long been in vogue, but writings by her contemporaries have only recently caught the attention of many scholars.[1] These colonial documents illustrate a well-established feminine literary tradition and reveal the female experience with religious institutions and spirituality: the appeal of the religious life for many women, the roles they played in the convent, and the relationships among nuns, confessors, and other members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.[2] Less frequently, autobiographical accounts include significant details about the author's life before taking the veil. Although rare, such manuscripts provide information on the makeup of upper-class creole households and the roles of women in the family that helps fill the gaps in knowledge about women's daily lives in Latin America.[3] The focus of this article is the first volume written by an Augustinian

*I am indebted to Muriel Nazzari and Carla Pestana for reading and commenting on an early draft of this article. All translations from Spanish were done by Amanda W. Powell.

1. Asunción Lavrin and Josefina Muriel have been studying this field for decades. Lavrin's work generally examines the sociohistorical context in which these nuns wrote (see Lavrin 1986, 1983). Josefina Muriel has studied the variety of colonial institutions for women and edited a collection of the writings by women (see Muriel 1946 and 1982 and Muriel, ed., 1974). More work in the field has been completed since the 1980s, including editions and studies of nuns' autobiographical writings. See, for example, Mario Ferreccio Podestá's edition of a Chilean nun's account (Suárez 1981) and the anthology and translation of Hispanic nuns' writings by Electa Arenal, Stacey Schlau, and Amanda Powell (1989).

2. See, for instance, Luis Martín's *Daughters of the Conquistadors,* which reconstructs the many tensions among nuns in the large convents of colonial Peru.

3. Social historians have frequently noted the need for new sources for information about women and life patterns in colonial Latin America (Lavrin, ed., 1978; Kicza 1988, 466) and daily life on the hacienda (Garavaglia and Grosso 1990, 291, n. 52; Mörner 1973, 214).

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Recollect nun describing her secular life on an agricultural farm (*hacienda de labor*) from 1656 to 1687.[4]

The spiritual autobiography (*Vida*) of Madre María de San José (1656–1719) provides glimpses into little-known aspects of family life in rural areas of seventeenth-century New Spain. María did not succeed in taking the veil until she was thirty-two and thus spent nearly half her life dealing with her strong religious vocation in the context of family life. Because she lived at least ten years longer outside the cloister than the average for religious women of the period, María's life story provides more information about her home life than most accounts written by her contemporaries—more than two hundred pages about her years living on her parents' hacienda.[5] This account is a rich source, complete with vignettes describing the routine and interactions between family members, male and female, and between family members and Indian servants. I will first reconstruct aspects of María de San José's family life from the information in her account and then suggest how, by uncovering the tension between the overt purpose of the spiritual autobiography and María's narrative, scholars can better understand the context and significance of the document.

The information about domestic life being gleaned from María de San José's story was originally recorded for a different purpose. In 1703 the nun's new confessor, Fray Plácido de Olmedo, demanded that she record in written form her difficult path from the secular to the religious world so that he might judge the nature of her spirit and provide her with better guidance. As María thought back over her secular life and the twenty-one-year struggle to enter the convent, her memory and the written account of these years were mediated by two facts. First, she had become an important nun in her order: after ten years at the Augustinian Recollect Convent of Santa Mónica in Puebla, she had been chosen to be one of the founders of the daughter convent, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, in Oaxaca (1697).[6] Second, she was writing under the surveillance of her confessor. Following the conventions of spiritual autobiography, María attempted to mold her life to fit the hagiographic model of the conversion narrative and

4. Suárez (1984) also provides glimpses of family life in colonial Chile.

5. The autograph manuscript by María de San José is housed at the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, R.I. (Spanish Codex 39-41). I have prepared a study and a critical edition of the first volume, which treats her secular life. See *Word from New Spain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656–1719)*, vol. 1, to be published by the University of Liverpool Press. Amanda Powell and I are currently preparing an English translation of selections from this and the other eleven volumes, which deal with convent life, tentatively entitled *A Wild Country Out in the Garden*.

6. In 1697 five nuns from the Convent of Santa Mónica set out for Oaxaca on the difficult assignment of starting a new convent. See my transcription and study of María de San José's account of this founding as a spiritual journey: "El discurso espiritual en la fundación del Convento de la Soledad: la crónica de Madre María de San José," *Crónicas femeninas*, edited by Josefina Muriel, to be published by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. See also Echeverría (1906).

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to follow cultural prescriptions for the ideal woman as obedient and virginal, *la perfecta religiosa*.[7] María therefore encoded her personal experience into spiritual language and shaped the unfolding of her life story as a spiritual conversion that led to a life dedicated to serving God and being a witness to the many favors God had granted her.[8] Thus the author's secular life is presented as evidence of her Christian upbringing, her practice of good works and virtue, and God's goodness.

Within these narrative parameters, however, María de San José depicted the inner workings of a creole family on a rural hacienda de labor. The genre of spiritual autobiography, considered an extension of the confessional, required her to examine fully her life at home, where she frequently had been unable to follow the prescriptions for the *camino de perfección* because her choice of vocation created tensions among family members. Conflicts with the family became the central theme of her writing, and their elaboration relied less on narrative formulas than on her own vernacular style. Indeed, María's departures from the genre's conventions are the passages that best illuminate the tensions operating in colonial domestic life.

Born Juana Palacios Berreucos of creole parents in 1656, the young girl who was eventually to be known by her religious name of María de San José, grew up on her family's hacienda de labor. Located half a league from the largely Indian town of Tepeaca in the fertile agricultural basin of Puebla-Tlaxcala, the grain-producing farm was one of perhaps three hundred haciendas and ranchos within the jurisdiction of the *alcaldía* of Tepeaca in 1650.[9] Living some six leagues from Puebla de los Angeles, the second-largest city and one of the most important creole centers in New Spain, María expressed in her account her awareness of the relative proximity of the city and her frustration at not being able to live in a religious center like Puebla.[10] Although Tepeaca was considered the "capital of all that valley, where all the most important persons gathered,"[11] it was nevertheless a rural area with few resident clergy and no convents.[12] Visiting clergy,

7. For more detail about this tradition, see Lavrin (1986) and (1983) as well as my introductory study to María's account in the forthcoming *Word from New Spain*.

8. Almost all of the *Vidas* written by religious women followed the elements found in Teresa de Avila's *Vida* (completed in 1565 and first published in 1588).

9. See Garavaglia and Grosso (1990, 257).

10. Michael Destephano's dissertation, "Miracles and Monasticism," studies the relation between Puebla's wealth and its role as a religious center. It also explains the connection between the Poblanas' sense of creole pride and the number of hagiographic biographies written about religious men and women of Puebla in the mid-colonial period (see Destephano 1977, 39–45).

11. Original Spanish quotes can be found in my forthcoming edition, *Word from New Spain* (no page numbers accompany the citations because the work is in press).

12. Garavaglia and Grosso confirm that "Tithe receipts show that in agricultural production Tepeaca was the most important *cabecera decimal* of the Puebla bishopric (always excluding the Veracruz region)" (1990, 259).

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17. Sor María de San José.

Illustration 1. Madre María de San José (1656–1719). (Photo courtesy of Josefina Muriel.)

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often new to the area, ministered most of the sacraments.[13] This lack of contact with regular clergy, which most young women of some social status living in Puebla would have enjoyed by having their own confessors, contributed to the aspiring nun's struggle against the relative isolation of her parents' home.[14] Because of infrequent contact with the world outside the working hacienda (in twenty-one years, the family made only two trips to Puebla), María described her life as circumscribed by the confines of the hacienda.[15]

Her family's hacienda de labor appears to have resembled others of the period.[16] These agricultural farms are generally considered to have been similar to the large haciendas in terms of their organization of labor, but the two differed in that the hacienda was generally a diversified estate that included grain production and livestock and was not necessarily contiguous. In contrast, the hacienda de labor was devoted primarily to grain production (usually wheat). But like the hacienda, it depended on a resident labor force and may have been run much like a large estate.[17] The hacienda de labor consisted of a compound of buildings and fields, although María's world did not extend beyond the areas that girls and women normally would have used—the house, chapel, garden, and orchard.

Generally, the houses on these haciendas were small, often only three rooms, because many owners lived there only seasonally if at all. Typically, a family resided on the hacienda during the planting and harvest seasons and spent the rest of the year in the city.[18] Disregarding this custom (possibly due to a lack of finances), the Palacios family lived on the hacienda year-round. María explains that although she had been a normal, mischievous child, after her conversion experience at age eleven (accompanied by a vision of the Virgin Mary), she attempted to follow the

13. "This same priest came through to say a second mass on Sundays in the Indian villages, and so I scarcely had the chance to say my confession with any time or ease; and this happened just as I have said already: in no time at all they would move him, and send some other newly ordained priest, so that he could be trained to minister to the Indians."

14. "My greatest affliction was not having a confessor, nor hope of any, unless God took me from where I lived, which was a hacienda in the country. For in such places there is no way to have a confessor, save only in passing and very infrequently."

15. Because of the lack of doctors in Tepeaca, Señora Palacios had to go to Puebla to seek medical treatment: "In the valley where we lived, there were no doctors who knew how to cure illnesses."

16. After completing this article, I discovered the name of the hacienda where the Palacios family lived—Santa Cruz—in a short biography about María's sister Leonor, who professed as a Carmelite nun. See Gómez de la Parra (1732, 455). Further information about the hacienda will be included in the forthcoming study and translation of Madre María's writings, *A Wild Country Out in the Garden.*

17. See William Taylor's (1972) study for a description of the difference between Oaxaca's haciendas (121-24) and *labores* (131-34, 137-38). Taylor mentions how the latter had to be farmed intensively to survive.

18. See Santander y Torres (1723, 38-39). Taylor comments that many of the Oaxaca haciendas also had modest houses (1972, 122).

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religious vows of obedience, poverty, chastity, and enclosure within the confines of her home. But the limited number of rooms complicated these efforts to retire from normal family life. Although "the hacienda had very good buildings and a beautifully adorned chapel," the size and layout of the house made things difficult for María:

My mother's house was very fine, but quite small, because it had only three rooms, a parlor and two bedrooms, and so I had no place where I might retire to be alone, save with great discomfort and effort, in the way I shall now tell. There was a very large garden where there were many trees and other cultivated plants. In order to enter this garden, one went through a shed that was set against the garden wall. The shed was thatched with straw or hay, as is customary in the countryside on agricultural haciendas. The shed was used to store old castoffs, and at other times it had served as a hen coop. Now one can understand how uncomfortable it was to stay there. Well, there I seated myself, filthy as it was, because I had no other more decent place to go.

Living in an era when houses were small and the concept of privacy almost alien, except regarding religious meditation and prayer, María struggled constantly to find solitude.[19] The house barely held the family of ten and their servants, and María commented that she had "no nook anywhere in the house where I might go to be alone and away from the noise and hubbub of all the family in the house."

Typical of other family-run haciendas, the Palacios' hacienda de labor resembled a village ("for just the people on the hacienda were like a very large village") and served a variety of economic, religious, and social functions in rural New Spain. As a basic economic unit, it employed permanent and transient laborers who may have lived in population clusters right on the estate or close to it (Mörner 1973, 207–8). Given the rural location of the hacienda, it became the local center for activities. One sign of its role as a "full-blown community" was the fact that a license had been granted to the hacienda for saying Mass in the chapel.[20] The Palacios family even obtained a more unusual license that permitted their children to be baptized in the chapel. In addition, the hacienda often served as a stopping point and lodging for Franciscan friars in their travels to minister to rural areas. María described how the hacienda was the gathering place for her playmates and their social activities. Young girls from local creole families and daughters of Indian servants congregated in the gar-

19. The concept of privacy was just beginning to emerge in the seventeenth century (see Rybczynski 1986, 42–48). He also asserts that the word *comfort*, at least in English, had an exclusively spiritual connotation (meaning *strength*) before the eighteenth century (1986, 20). Writing in 1703, María clearly employs its modern usage, referring to objects and degrees of contentment.

20. Mörner and Taylor both mention that a hacienda's having a license to say Mass reflected its role as a center for community (Mörner 1973, 208; Taylor 1972, 123).

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den, where they would play at grinding corn and wheat (using sand) for making tortillas and bread.[21]

Although a focal point for much activity, the hacienda de labor apparently was not flourishing economically. María's parents, Luis de Palacios Solórzano (1629?–1667) and Antonia Menéndez Berruecos (d. 1701?), were (like most estate owners in the Puebla basin) natives of Puebla who enjoyed good social standing as descendants of the conquistadors. María noted, "Although I was among the last of the daughters of the family, I do recall that my mother said that all four of my grandparents were *gachupines* from Spain, and that they took part in the settling of these lands, the kingdom of the Indies."[22] The entry for María in the Convent of Santa Mónica's *Libro de profesiones* states that her father was a *labrador,* a landowner of a medium-sized property. It was Antonia Berruecos who brought much of the wealth into the marriage. Born into an elite Poblana family, Antonia was the daughter of a Puebla *regidor* (town councilman) and received a considerable dowry: "And as her parents were very rich (for they possessed a great fortune, even more than my father, though he, too, was rich), the portion that fell to her was considerable." Between Antonia Berruecos and Luis Palacios, they owned two *haciendas de labor.* On marrying, the couple moved to one of them to manage it, live there full time, and raise what grew to be a family of eight daughters and one son. Economic difficulties with the hacienda arose, however. According to María, as time passed, family resources diminished: "Both were quite rich in worldly goods, though with the passage of time their fortunes decreased, as is the way with all earthly things in this life." The situation worsened after Luis Palacios's death in 1667. María describes her mother as "a poor widow, burdened with seven daughters who had no station in life [*estado*] nor hope of having any." Although María offered no reasons for the decline, studies of hacienda ownership have shown that it was unusual for estates to be kept in one family for more than two or three generations and that widows often inherited large debts along with control of the hacienda.[23]

21. "One afternoon I left my mother's chamber and went out to the patio, where I set about grinding sand. There I was joined by other girls my age, for it was our custom, most afternoons, to amuse ourselves by grinding sand. I was the one doing the grinding."

22. The four grandparents were Don Pedro de Palacios and Doña Augustina de Solórzano, and Don Alonso de Berruecos (Regidor of Puebla) and Doña Ana Menéndez de San Julián. Santander y Torres notes that both families were involved in the conquest of Mexico and Peru (Santander y Torres 1723, 5).

23. See Mörner (1973, 203–7) and Garavaglia and Grosso (1990, 262–68). Garavaglia and Grosso conclude that in many cases piety and honor depleted family resources: "That is, piety and honor—the ultimate goals of the rational business activities to which they had dedicated their lives—demanded expenses, which, after two to three generations, seriously affected the family patrimony. But piety and honor were the most valuable assets in the framework of this society, and these elite men and women consistently strove to attain them" (Garavaglia and Grosso 1990, 292). Sonya Lipsett-Rivera (1990) argues that access to water and water rights

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The lack of resources made Señora Palacios's life a hardship and also decreased her daughters' opportunities to obtain an *estado,* which for a woman of María's social class meant either marrying or taking religious vows. As the sixth daughter in line for a dowry, María de San José stood little chance of receiving the two to four thousand pesos normally required to enter the convent.[24] It is interesting to note that María's two eldest sisters (Agustina and Ana) neither married nor took the veil, and the next two (Leonor and Francisca) entered the convent. María did not say whether Leonor needed a dowry when she entered the Carmelite convent in Puebla. In Francisca's case, however, María recorded how an apparent misunderstanding resulted in an enormous financial strain on the family. It had been believed that the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, would pay the dowry for Francisca's entrance into the Convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla. When he did not do so, Francisca was not allowed to profess for five or six years and was kept on as a *niña* (a woman living in the convent without taking religious vows) and had to pay the convent for her keep.[25] It was only with this same bishop's reluctant charity that María finally gained entrance into the Convent of Santa Mónica, which he founded for "a few poor and virtuous girls; they had to be girls of gentle birth from good families, and they should also be fair of face, for the very first thing he asked was whether they were from good families and of pleasing appearance."[26] The novices did not have to provide dowries, but they had to be of Spanish or creole descent.

The three sisters closest in age to the author (María, Isabel, and Catarina) married. Several married into prominent Poblana families, indi-

had much to do with the decline. The reasons for the decline of an *hacienda de labor* may have varied from those of the hacienda. Taylor argues that "unless intensively farmed, a *labor* could not support its owner" (1972, 138).

24. See Lavrin (1983, 75) and Gonzalbo Aizpuru (1987, 242). See also Lavrin and Couturier (1979, 280–304).

25. "My mother had understood that the Lord Bishop was to give her [Francisca] the dowry to become a nun, because it was very high, and my mother had no place to get it. Yet it was not so; instead, he kept her in the convent some five or six years as a *niña* at the cost of unspeakable hardships [for my mother]."

26. "We decree that the women who are to enter in said Convent must be virtuous, poor, and entirely Spanish, with no trace of the *mulata* [African and European], *mestiza* [Native American and European], or any other racial mixture." See Fernández de Santa Cruz (1753, 7). This requirement was typical of most convents of the period; no Indian, mestizos, mulattos, or black women were allowed to take the veil. Later, a convent was established for daughters of elite Indian families (see Muriel 1982 and Gallagher 1978). The lack of available places for women wanting to take the veil is recorded in Miguel de Torres's seventeenth-century biography of Bishop Santa Cruz, in which the biographer comments on the number of women pleading at Santa Cruz's door for entrance into the *recogimientos* and convents that he built in his diocese: "Once the doors of his Palace were open, women in search of their Pastor began to enter them . . . , many women wanting to keep the Flower of their purity intact, women who had managed to do so up till then, . . . but, distrustful, were afraid of losing it, either because they were very poor or because they were pursued for their beauty." Cited in 1929 by Dorothy Schons, reprinted in Merrim (1991, 42).

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cating perhaps that the hacienda may have seen better times in later years or that their dowries were based on the promise of an inheritance when their mother died. In fact, Madre María de San José's sister María married into the Gorospe family (her husband was Lorenzo de Gorospe y Irala) and became part of the family line that created one of the four most powerful elite families of the Tepeaca area in the eighteenth century (see Garavaglia and Grosso 1990, 275–78). It was through the influence of this family in the Puebla church hierarchy (Lorenzo's grandfather, Diego Romano, had been Bishop of Puebla) that María de San José finally achieved entrance into the convent. Another sister, Catarina, married Don Honofre de Arteaga, a Puebla town councilman, and Isabel married Don Juan de Garate.[27]

Taken together, the eight Palacios sisters' choices illustrate the range of options open to women of their class in colonial Mexico. The two who stayed on the hacienda helped run it, and one of them (Agustina) assumed the role of surrogate mother to her numerous younger siblings. The three who became nuns achieved positions of recognition within the cloister (María de San José and Leonor both became founders and mistresses of novices in their respective convents, and Leonor also became abbess of hers). The three sisters who married entered prominent families and moved either to other haciendas or to Puebla. One became a partner in establishing a powerful family, although she later died in childbirth. Thus it can be seen that María de San Jose's personal circumstances—living on an hacienda de labor with financial problems and having so many sisters—created difficulties for her pursuit of the religious life.

In beginning the narrative of her vocation for the religious life and the twenty-one years spent practicing it at home while waiting to enter the convent, María depicted the daily routine, especially that of female family members. The ideal portrait of women as industrious within the household unit—producing clothing, household items and some food items—is evident. During the day, while the men managed the laborers and hacienda, the Palacios women, dressed in "linen or silk,"[28] spent much of the morning (beginning around nine) doing needlework together in the drawing room (*estrado*) and working in virtuous silence. After the midday meal (which always included bread *and* tortillas),[29] each female family member

27. Research done since this article was completed revealed that Don Honofre de Arteaga inherited the hacienda Santa Cruz (Biblioteca Nacional de México, *Archivo de la Tenencia de la Tierra en la Provincia de Puebla,* 42/1164) and that as a widow, Isabel was active in initiating several legal proceedings dealing with her inheritance (Archivo General de la Nación, *Tierras,* vol. 2899, exp. 28, f. 359; and Biblioteca Nacional de México, *Archivo de Tenencia de la Tierra en la Provincia de Puebla,* 42/1159). This material will be developed further in my work in progress, *A Wild Country Out in the Garden.*

28. María describes her own dress as more humble, being made of rough wool.

29. "They made [tortillas] to put on the table, for it is the custom, in the country on the haciendas, to serve both bread and tortillas together. . . . It was I who saw to feeding the dogs on the hacienda, which are so necessary in the countryside. And from the tortillas that they fed to the dogs, I would take my portion to eat."

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carried out routine chores such as feeding the dogs or chickens before retiring for the siesta. During the mid-afternoon hours (until five), the women gathered again to continue their needlework projects in the estrado, which was decorated with religious paintings of the Virgin and saints. After a few hours' break, the family, including male and female members, reconvened at eight to say the rosary and share the evening meal, during which time the two youngest children and María, as part of her vow of seclusion, sat at a separate table. The day ended with another hour of needlework, while one of the men read aloud to the family: "Whenever my brother was in the house, my father would have him read, and my mother and all of us girls would be in the drawing room, some of us sewing, some spinning [fiber from the century plant], and others weaving, all without making a sound or speaking a word, so that we could all listen to what he read." Upon retiring, the women slept in one chamber (*aposento*) and the brother in another (María does not mention the family's sleeping arrangements when her father was alive). As these family scenes illustrate, daily life focused on work and meals.

It can also be seen that popular culture was eminently religious. The Palacios family read only devotional books, usually the lives of the saints,[30] and devotional artwork decorated the house. María mentioned that some of the books that she and her family read were the life stories of Saints Anthony of Padua and Pedro de Alcántara as well as numerous books that provided instruction on how to follow a religious life, including the rules that Francis of Assisi handed down to Clare and the spiritual exercise books by Bishop Juan de Palafox and Pedro de Alcántara.[31] This popular religious culture reflects the religious fervor of the period, which surely influenced some children's choice of vocation. For example, after several failed attempts to enter the convent, María planned to run away to a nearby cave to become a hermit like Anthony of Padua. Her brother thwarted this plan, however, by telling her a tale about a hermit already living in the cave.

Her portrait of daily life also reveals the gender differences in the Palacios children's upbringing. While María's only brother received a formal education in Puebla, the girls stayed at home and were instructed in needlework, womanly virtues, and religious devotion (including rudimentary reading) by their mother:[32] "God had endowed my mother with great

30. The religiosity of popular culture is reflected in the publication records of the period. Of the surviving records on books published between 1682 and 1698 in Mexico, less than one-quarter were secular works. See Schon's survey of José Medina, *La imprenta en México*, reprinted in Merrim (1991, 58, n. 25).

31. The *Tratado de la oración* (1533?) has been attributed to sixteenth-century Spanish saint Pedro de Alcántara. Bishop Juan Palafox y Mendoza wrote many devotional books, among them, *Semanas espirituales*, the one María mentioned having read.

32. Gonzalbo Aizpuru notes in *Las mujeres de Nueva España* that women were the transmitters of culture in colonial Mexico.

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skill in working clever and curious things and with ability in all that a mother should know in order to teach her children. She taught us all to read, and in short, no schoolmaster or mistress was needed to teach us anything, save for my brother Tomás, who, when he came of age, was sent by my father to the city of Puebla, to the home of one of my father's relatives, so that the boy might study. My father kept Tomás at his studies until he was a grown man. Upon seeing that Tomás had no inclination to enter religion or any other profession, my father brought his son home to help him with the hacienda."

Because few limits were set on young girls' devotion and there were not many other options for self-expression, they often developed a deep religious sensibility and struggled to lead saintly lives within the family unit.[33] Although María may have been more extreme than some young women, her daily fasts, penances, and periods of solitude and prayer were not uncommon. In addition to retiring to one of the family's thatched-roof storage sheds, María built a hut in her family's garden or orchard so that she could retreat there to pray at dawn and dusk. She also fasted on herbs and tortillas, and she often wore hair shirts, even when they became infested with lice. Adhering to the belief in *imitatio Christi* (to share in Christ's salvation, one needed to share in His suffering), María even practiced mortification of the gift of speech. She spoke only when required to do so and soon lost the ability to speak well. When she needed this skill to enter the convent, María's two youngest sisters helped her recover her ability to speak.

Although María labored to create an idealized harmonious portrait of her upbringing, she nonetheless revealed tensions within her family in explaining why twenty-one years elapsed between her mystical marriage to Christ at age eleven and the actual taking of the veil as an Augustinian Recollect at age thirty-two.[34] When María sought to institute a life of retreat in the context of household routine, family members with greater authority often prevented her from carrying out her plans. As one of the middle daughters, María had to bow not only to the wishes of her parents and her older brother but also to those of her older sisters. The two younger sisters and family servants (all of whom appear to have been Indian) were the only household members who did not dictate the manner in which María conducted her life. Relationships were hierarchical but interconnecting: María's mother and father, followed by her brother, exercised the most authority over family decisions; the sisters' authority depended on

33. See Bell and Weinstein (1982) for a fuller discussion of the patterns of spiritual life among saints during the period. They note in particular how men and women were often educated differently and thus followed different paths to achieve sainthood.

34. María gives a detailed account of how the Virgin Mary appeared to her and told her how to become a Bride of Christ.

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birth order. Household Indian servants made no decisions because in living with the family but being of a different caste, they were both part of and separate from the household. Thus each household member or group exercised varying degrees of power that were contingent on gender, birth order, and race. In revealing her own perspective on the family, María characterized almost all household members as either helping or hindering her religious vocation.

The most powerful figures in María's preconvent life were inevitably her parents, whom she tried to portray as model and ideal Christian parents who had few individual traits but great influence on the development of her own spirituality. Luis Palacios contributed to María's spiritual growth by reading devotional books to her and, when he died, leaving behind his hair shirts, which she learned to use. Because he died when the author was eleven years old, she provides only this conventional portrait of him. The first portrait of Señora Palacios is also formulaic. In fact, María borrows whole sentences verbatim from the autobiography written by the founder of her order to describe her mother as possessing the ideal qualities of a woman of this period: she was beautiful, young, and obedient; patient and long-suffering in life's difficulties; and capable of deep devotion and spirituality, which she passed on to her daughters.[35]

Despite this initial image of Antonia Palacios as a woman of saintly virtue, other comments in the narrative provide a more realistic view of the position of women in rural seventeenth-century New Spain and their efforts to assert their own will without overstepping the boundaries of their gender role. Overtly, family structure was patriarchal. But as recent studies confirm, women of this class not only helped maintain family status and honor but controlled domestic affairs as *amas de casa,* assumed positions as heads of households when men were absent, and in certain circumstances, held independent legal statuses.[36] Antonia Palacios was a native of Puebla, where women often had more social, educational, and religious opportunities than those in rural areas. But she had to settle for a life more secluded from people outside the hacienda community on marrying Luis Palacios, and she had to obey a husband who did not allow her to leave the hacienda even to visit her native town: "From the day my father brought her to the hacienda, when as I said she was just nineteen years old, he never again took her from the house." Antonia nonetheless managed to assert her own choice in such matters as birth control. She had already given birth to nine children (two of whom died in infancy) by the time María was born. In an attempt to avoid further pregnancies,

35. The founder of the Augustinian Recollects was Spaniard Mariana de San Joseph. Her autobiography was edited by Luis Muñoz (see Mariana de San Joseph 1634).

36. For studies of Spanish American women, see Arrom (1985, 129-34, 140-41); Couturier (1978, 145); Lavrin (1978, 30-35, 41); and Socolow (1978, 35-43).

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Antonia adopted the popular method of prolonged breast-feeding (which is not all that effective unless nursing is very frequent):

After my birth, my mother said that she wished to nurse me herself, without help from another woman such as she had had with all the other daughters she had raised. And she did as she said, for I never took a drop of milk from any woman other than my mother. I remember quite well that when I had reached the age of five, my mother still nursed me at her breast . . . to avoid childbirth yet again. After I was born, she began to entreat the Lord to send her no more children, for she was quite worn out with the number she already had. But the Lord, who knows full well what is best for us, did not grant her wish; and yet again, to test her patience, after I turned five He sent her twice more into childbirth. When she knew that she was again with child, she felt sorrow and grief, though she was always resigned to the will of God.

Antonia Palacios yielded some power in her marriage, some control over her body and her daughters' education, but she became a more visible actor in family decisions after her husband died.

Luis Palacios's death in 1667 altered family power relations, allowing the only son, Tomás, to make family decisions with his widowed mother. This pairing of mother and son, however, often created tensions. On becoming a widow, Señora Palacios legally assumed full ownership of any property she had brought into her marriage as well as one-half of the profits derived from the combined property of both spouses. She also controlled the guardianship of her children. Yet Tomás assumed responsibility for running the hacienda and became the ostensible head of the household. His authority was thus based on society's adherence to a patriarchal system and not on the ownership of much property.[37] On the one hand, María noted how well Tomás completed his economic obligation: "He has been both father and protection to my mother and to his sisters; he has seen to it that we all were given some station in life and support. And in addition to all this, he has maintained the two haciendas that my father left." On the other, she described how in his role as head of the household, Tomás often put his foot down on decisions concerning his sisters' fates, and his mandates usually conflicted with the wishes of Antonia and her daughters. María repeatedly described her brother as uncompromising and difficult, one of the biggest hindrances to her vocation: "If by chance my brother came upon some letter, or if he happened to hear that steps were being taken to arrange my entrance into the convent, his regret or anger was such that he knew not what he said or did. And so there were great trials and quarrels at home, especially with my poor

37. My thanks to Muriel Nazzari for pointing out that Tomás would have inherited at most a *mejora* (one-fifth of the estate) and at the least an equal share of his father's estate with his eight sisters. Antonia Palacios would have owned the largest share of the estate. See Lavrin and Couturier (1979) for information on inheritance laws in colonial Mexico.

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mother. My brother's opposition to my entrance into the convent was long-lasting and terrible."

The interaction within the Palacios family supports theories advanced by several historians that tyrannical male authorities often caused family tensions that resulted in young women fleeing to the convent, seeking both a vocation and the comfort of a sisterhood, and that women at home used indirect means to control domestic affairs.[38] In María de San José's autobiographical account, her mother emerges as the spiritual and authoritative center of the family, while Tomás is characterized as the tyrannical male upholding the patriarchal vision of family honor.

On one occasion that had long-lasting effects, Tomás denied his sisters the opportunity to accept the Bishop of Puebla's offer to provide the dowries for entrance into a *colegio* that was later converted into the Convent of Santa Mónica. One reason for Tomás's resistance was his concern with upholding the family's honor: "He grew angry, saying that so long as he should live, it would be to his discredit for his sisters to enter any such school; if it were a matter of entering a convent of nuns, in such a case we might enter, but failing that, in no way would he consent." Tomás believed that his sisters' association with a colegio, an institution for women that followed the religious life but was not granted the status of a convent (which required papal consent), was unsuitable for women of their class.[39] Perhaps he was also aware of the former status of the colegio: although established as a *recogimiento* (shelter) for noble married women when their husbands were away or had abandoned them, it later became a recogimiento for "mujeres malas," a forced refuge for women who did not follow society's sexual and behavioral prescriptions.[40] But on another occasion, María suggested that Tomás's "upright and severe character" was the cause for his opposition. He told María that Bishop Santa Cruz was wrong to open a new convent because there were already many convents in Puebla: "It seemed to him a very faulty plan, for he thought it better for the bishop to give support and make improvements on all the convents that there were in the city—for so many had already been built and founded." Tomás's stance against the bishop's convent and his sister's petition to enter it may also have been a reaction to Santa Cruz's failure to pay the dowry he had promised to Tomás's sister Francisca on her entrance into the Convent of San Jerónimo. Even more likely, Tomás probably realized that sending his sisters to the convent was a financial drain on precious

38. See Destephano (1977, 100). Another feature of family life may have influenced María's decision: she apparently had a special sympathy for her mother's trials with pregnancies, economic difficulties, and the remoteness of the hacienda. María reported that Antonia Palacios had "her purgatory here in this life, with all she suffered and bore."

39. For more on the concept of honor in the colonial period, see Lavrin, ed. (1989), especially the essay "Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy" by Ann Twinam (1989, 118–55).

40. Medel (1940) provides a history of the convent.

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family resources. It appears that the hacienda was not entailed, and therefore on Antonia Palacios's death his sisters would inherit their share of the estate. The most he could hope to inherit was a fifth of the estate, clearly not enough to maintain an hacienda de labor. For him, the best situation would have been to have his sisters neither marry nor enter the convent because then they would remain with their shares on the hacienda with him.[41] In any case, Tomás exerted power over María's desire to take the veil and interfered with his sisters' and mother's efforts to work with the bishop: "We were very sorry that my brother should quarrel so with His Excellency, because it continued to affect us all long afterwards, and we lost all the good [the bishop] could have done for us."

Despite Tomás's stubborn insistence on making decisions concerning his sisters' futures, Antonia Palacios discreetly manipulated the outcome of family conflicts to circumvent his control in a number of situations. For example, when he forbade his sisters to enter the colegio and demanded that they have no further contact with Bishop Santa Cruz, Antonia continued to correspond with the bishop and to allow her daughters to see him. Antonia thus worked actively without Tomás's consent to help two of her daughters become nuns: "As for my mother and all her daughters, we visited and spoke at great length with His Excellency, even though it might cause trouble and affliction with my brother. . . . This was a source of great pain and sorrow for my mother and for all of us. My mother never let the lord bishop know about this quarrel that she had with my brother. . . . Whenever a matter arose that required visiting or writing [to the bishop], my mother did it alone, without my brother's having a hand in anything." On other occasions when Tomás caused family conflict, Antonia Palacios gently steered the girls away from dealing with their brother. For instance, when María failed to appear at the dinner table because she was experiencing a charismatic vision in the garden, Tomás became furious. Antonia advised María to avoid speaking with him: " 'My dearest daughter, . . . you see that Tomás is very angry; don't answer anything that he says to you.' " Thus while Tomás was outwardly the head of this largely female household, Señora Palacios's firm hand kept the family peace and aided the daughters who wanted to leave the hacienda.

Similarly, María characterized all but one of her seven sisters according to their roles as either helping or hindering María's efforts to take the veil. The nature of these relationships was intertwined with the sisters' birth order and aspirations. For the most part, María depicts those who did not compete with her for a dowry or for claiming a special call to the religious life as facilitating her vocation. For example, she mentions her special trust in her two youngest sisters. They helped her recover from

41. I am indebted to Muriel Nazzari for this insight.

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incidents of severe self-mortification, such as removing a lice-infested hair shirt from her waist and teaching her to speak again: "I loved these two, Isabel Margarita and Catarina, with most tender care, because they were the youngest." One older sister, Leonor, who entered the convent well before María was of age to take the veil, became the young María's teacher and model. Leonor read devotional books with her younger sister, and once she was a nun, tried to arrange for her sister's entrance into the Clarist convent. Other siblings were not as supportive, however.

Despite the social prestige of having a family member in the convent, it was not uncommon for siblings and parents to resist sisters' and daughters' attempts to enter the cloister. There were several compelling reasons for this behavior. Some siblings might have opposed a sister's choice of a religious vocation because it was not as economically advantageous to the family as having her remain on the hacienda or contract a good marriage.[42] Second, in reformed orders (such as the Carmelites and Augustinian Recollects), a nun had to cut most ties with family members. Professed nuns, who were considered "dead" to the secular world, became part of a spiritual family in which nuns were their sisters, abbesses their mothers, priests their fathers, and Christ their husband. Some family members undoubtedly found this practice difficult to accept.

María's oldest sister, Agustina, exemplified how some family members' affection for their sister thwarted the young woman's attempts to become a nun. Agustina had helped Señora Palacios raise the younger children and had developed a strong bond with María: "My sister Agustina . . . was the oldest of all and was mother and helper to the entire household." Yet Agustina's love for her younger sister often caused problems: "because of her great love for me, she felt most strongly any separation from me, as she had raised me from the time I was a very little girl; she was like a mother to me, and I loved her and respected her just like a mother." For years this eldest sister joined forces with Ana to block María's efforts to take the veil. During one of the few family trips to Puebla, they successfully halted María's secret preparation to become a Carmelite nun and forced her to confess the plan to a priest.

Another sister objected to María's vocation not out of affection but apparently out of jealousy and fear. Five years María's senior, Francisca also wanted to become a nun, and she would have been the first to receive a dowry. This situation created jealousy between the sisters, and because such behavior hardly fit the portrait of a perfecta religiosa, María struggled with presenting this relationship in her account. Several times she

42. A cash dowry was usually required by a convent, but a dowry for marriage was often based on goods or the promise of an inheritance. Thus the latter was generally less of an immediate drain of economic resources and also had the possibility of establishing a tie with a wealthy family.

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delayed narrating her "bloody war" with Francisca and never divulged the details of the conflict. Instead, she first cautiously characterized her sister as disagreeable but basically a good Christian. Then María went on to say that, influenced by the devil, Francisca tried to convince María to end the life of prayer and penance that she had begun: "In this my sister was, as they say, as stubborn as a mule. Not a soul could drive from her mind the notion the devil himself had made her believe and assert, which was that I was bound to bring about the shame and dishonor of all our family line."

Although the Catholic Church and society actively encouraged people to lead ascetic, charismatic lives, once individuals undertook such a lifestyle, they often came under close scrutiny and criticism. This was particularly true for women living outside the cloister. A lay woman claiming to have charismatic visions without the guidance of a confessor potentially could have been brought before the Inquisition and denounced as a false holy woman (*falsa beata*).[43] María apparently spent a good deal of time without any adult supervision, either alone in the garden saying prayers or with an Indian servant who helped her with flagellations. Francisca, who did not adhere to the same ascetic life as her sister, perhaps harbored not only a vocational jealousy but a fear that María might bring dishonor to the family if she were denounced as a false holy woman or worse: "[My penances] roused suspicion in my older sister, for she convinced herself more and more every day that I was on the road to ruin, and that I must sooner or later end by committing some base and dishonorable act and robbing all our good name from the family line." Jean Franco has interpreted Francisca's accusation that María was imperiling family honor as a reflection of Francisca's suspicion that María may have used the Indian servant for perverted behavior, highlighting the fine line between sanctity and perversion in seventeenth-century New Spain.[44] Francisca's suspicions certainly reflected the zealous concern for honor and purity among seventeenth-century creoles. As studies by Asunción Lavrin and Ann Twinam have shown, the honor of the individual and the family in the upper strata of creole society depended on maintaining the purity of female family members (see Lavrin, ed., 1989).

Francisca disrupted the entire household in her efforts to prevent María's interaction with Apolonia, the servant who aided María with her penances: "With every passing day, my sister's opposition became a war that grew more and more bloody. . . . All [the Indian women] were in an

43. Cases brought before the Inquisition in seventeenth-century New Spain illustrate society's mistrust and attempts to weed out false mystics. Many examples can be found in the Inquisition records. See, for example, "Relación del proceso contra Juana de los Reyes, falsa beata" (1692), Ramo Inquisición, Archivo General de la Nación, vol. 539. See also the recent transcriptions of several cases in Bravo and Herrera (1984) and Ramírez Leyva (1988).

44. See Franco (1989, 8); for further discussion of the topic, see Ortega (1986).

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uproar and quite ill-humored with my sister because she was carrying on a thousand quarrels and disputes with all of them. It was all one great fray. Not a dinner or supper took place without some affliction." At first, Francisca targeted Apolonia and caused her to run away. Later, other servants began to flee Francisca and the hacienda: "Yet there was no end nor did we have any peace from the quarrels that arose on this account with the servants. For when she set herself against one of them, then until the woman quit the house entirely, there was no end. And with each one of these servants in turn the house came down about our ears, for nobody understood anyone else. . . . In the end, people began to desert the house. The only ones who stayed were the servant-women who were already of age and had good sense." The gravity of the sisters' competition and conflict can be perceived in María's blaming a seven-year illness on Francisca. According to her own account, María recovered only after her sister left for the convent (around 1675).

Strikingly, the powerless servants are the only group above criticism in María's interpersonal relationships with household members. While numerous, these Indian servants neither had the power to make decisions about her entrance into a convent nor were they competing for a dowry. Although an integral part of the household structure, they were apart from it. Even within the group of household servants, a hierarchy existed; those having a special relationship with the owners (usually nurses and housekeepers) occupied privileged positions within the household (see Karasch 1986, 272–75). As part of the extended family, an Indian nurse helped raise María: "A little while later, [Señora Palacios] turned from me and sent me away from her side to be cared for by my older sisters, and especially by a maid who had been raised in the house, and who was a girl of great virtue." Servants' children were raised along with and played with the Palacios sisters: "The family at home was very large, for there were many servants, and so there were girls to play with and make mischief; all were very close to my age." Later, when María took a vow to follow an ascetic life within the confines of the hacienda, servants became instrumental in her new life. Apolonia helped her build a hut to retire to, and others offered to help the young woman observe a fasting diet by cooking special meals for her. In addition, María described how all the Indians living in the vicinity recognized the strength of her vocation by showering her with gifts when she left for the convent: "For knowing that I was soon to go, all the people who knew of me came to take leave of me. . . . Most of them were Indian men and women, both those from the hacienda and those who lived close by. . . . Nor did they come empty-handed; everyone brought some sort of present to give me."

Although Indians were among the few capable of recognizing María's religious calling and helped her realize that calling, the nun was apparently ambivalent about relating her own intimacy with the servants. Racial ten-

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sions between creoles and Native Americans, evident in questions of landownership, existed within the household as well, although often more subtly. Despite the common practice of rearing female Indian servants' daughters with the hacienda owner's daughters, María often felt compelled to explain her continued intimacy with servants once she entered puberty. Typically, as children grew into adulthood, they were expected to follow the norms of behavior for their class and race, and so a distance usually developed between Native Americans and creoles. María apparently did not follow this practice as closely as expected by her society. For instance, she visited a sick servant and was reprimanded for it by her sister. Moreover, María defined Indian household servants in Christian terms, like those of her own kind (perhaps to prove that they would not have taken part in immoral acts as Francisca may have suspected), arguing that they in fact enhanced her virtue. María explained how Apolonia and later Nicolasa were essential to completing her penances, and she highlighted the servants' own Christian virtue: "I had need of . . . a maid servant [Apolonia] whom my mother had raised at home. And though she was an Indian, there was nothing Indian in the understanding and virtue with which God had endowed her. . . ; Mother . . . gave me another [Nicolasa] of the many servants there were at home; she was also an Indian and a very good Christian." María became deeply concerned about Apolonia's virtue after the servant ran away: "There was no end to my suffering because of the risk she ran of falling into perdition and ruining the virtue she possessed." By emphasizing their capacity for virtue, María may have been justifying her intimacy with servants.

This narrative strategy may have been necessary because Indian servants, according to María, also possessed several undesirable qualities. They often fled the hacienda, leaving the family shorthanded. Although María blamed Francisca for the exodus of servants from the house, she expressed the typical view about servants being unreliable: "this business of having run away is characteristic of servants." Elsewhere María singled out servants (but only in passing) as being different from the immediate family and not completely trustworthy; even when fasting, she had to be present in the dining room, because it was unsafe to be alone at this hour: "While they were eating supper I would stay there, seated in a chair, as a precaution; my mother had ordered me to do so, because there were a great many servants in the house, and it was necessary to be very careful indeed." Such remarks about relations between masters and servants are few, but they reveal a good deal about the sometimes subtle lines dividing races in colonial society.[45] María de San José's account reveals the complexities involved in creoles and Indians living in the same household.

45. I am indebted to Asunción Lavrin for this observation.

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Raised by both, María sometimes seemed caught between the creoles' prejudiced views of Indians and the actual supportive roles the latter played in her daily life.

María's account also reveals the tensions and conflicts existing in the power structure of a rural creole family. The subtle competition between mother and son for authority to make family decisions, the competition among sisters for a dowry and recognition of a religious vocation, and the social pressure on creoles to avoid close association with servants after a certain age all expose the realities of family life on an hacienda de labor.

The interpretation and framing of these household relationships within the conventions of spiritual autobiography show the strategies employed by María de San José to explain the tensions in her life at home. First, María claimed her own chosen status in God's will and in doing so exonerated herself. The nun asserted that she was only a vile instrument of the Divine plan. Intentionally or unintentionally, she minimized her role in family conflicts by placing them in a larger religious context. In other words, Tomás's moves to block her entrance into the convent and Francisca's suspicions were mediated and framed by María as part of God's plan—He was the final arbitrator and the ultimate authority, the creator of these family relationships. Moreover, as God's chosen bride, María ultimately possessed more spiritual authority than her adversaries in the family. This mechanism for claiming control can be detected in several ways in her account. María recorded all her conflicts as evidence of her perseverance toward her goal, and she claimed God's signature in her record of her secular life.[46] God told her, " 'See how I aid you and fail you not; write it down, for everything comes from me, and nothing from you; if it were not so, think whether, left to yourself, you could have taken one single step or done what you have done.' "

On the one hand, then, María de San José attempted to describe family conflicts as seen from her later position as a model nun of fifteen years, singled out by priests, bishops, and God Himself. On the other hand, the manner in which she treated these relationships with her family is evidence of a less conventional narrative of one's call to God's service. Indeed, María's story closes with a brief sentence about the achievement of her twenty-one-year desire to become a nun—she took the veil as a novice in 1687 and professed one year later. But the story's true ending is the detailed narration about her reconciliation with Francisca. Rather than explaining the joy and ceremony involved in taking the veil, the author chose to describe the touching reconciliation with and farewell to her sister. Before entering the convent, María visited Francisca at the Convent of San Jerónimo. She describes their meeting and apology:

46. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Myers (1992).

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I too asked her forgiveness for all the trouble I had given her, and the two of us forgave each other. And I was also very tearful and weeping, all the more so because she asked me, for her consolation and to be sure that I forgave her with all my heart, to grasp her hand through the turn [the revolving shelf at a convent door permitting communication without visual contact]. And I did so, although this matter confused me and touched me deeply. And as I recognized that my sister was suffering grief and pain because of what had happened between us, I tried my best to comfort her, telling her that the past was now left behind and that no sorrow or regret remained in my heart.

This ending emphasizes the significance of her own secular life. Even after fifteen years as a nun, María was still emotionally involved with family members, still struggling to resolve, through the act of writing about her life, the conflicts she had encountered during her life on the hacienda.[47]

Using the conventional religious genre of spiritual autobiography, María de San José revealed the very real context for the formation of her person: rural hacienda family life. Despite the genre's ostensible purpose—to present herself to her confessor as a perfecta religiosa—the act of writing also enabled her to work through the reasons underlying her twenty-one-year struggle to become a nun. María addressed the conventions expected of a religious woman writer but also revealed her own personal voice and individual self, one formed by the isolation and provincialism of the hacienda, the routines of family life, and the power struggles and interaction of household members caused by differences in gender, birth order, and caste. By recording her relationship with the world around her, María de San José revealed the formation of her creole identity and endowed her account with a social and personal richness.[48] Her testimony further illuminates recent studies on the roles of women of her class, revealing significant details about the traditionally feminine realms of domestic life, relationships, and spirituality, and enabling scholars to perceive how women worked actively within these areas to create vital roles for themselves in colonial society.

47. A first draft of María's story of these years at home confirms her emotional ties to family members. Written around 1691, it vividly reconstructed the tearful exchange between mother and daughter when she left the hacienda for the cloister, *Oaxaca Manuscript*, vol. 12. A similar scene is found in the opening pages of vol. 2.

48. For more on the development of creole identity, see Pagden (1987).

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