

2018

Review of Sarah E Owens, *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*

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Recommended Citation

Ball, Rachael (2018) "Review of Sarah E Owens, *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1300>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol43/iss1/16>

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Owens, Sarah, E. *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*. Diálogos Series. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017. xii + 195 pp.

In *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*, Sarah Owens makes a significant contribution to growing bodies of scholarship on nuns and early modern women's writing. She retraces the journey of a group of female religious, as they traveled from their convent in Toledo to the Philippines to found a convent of Poor Clares in Manila. Owens accesses their fascinating history through rare book and archival research. Her key source is a 450-folio manuscript written by one of the convent's co-founders, Sor Ana de Cristo. Although Owens does not provide a translation of this document here, she draws upon it to examine the life of its author and one of its primary subjects, Sor Jerónima de la Asunción, whose exemplary piety made her a candidate for sainthood. She contends that nuns used literacy to negotiate expectations and rules about their behavior in order to make their way through the diverse spaces of the Spanish Atlantic and Pacific Worlds.

The first chapter focuses on the initial leg of the nuns' journey, from Toledo to Cadíz. It also traces some important background about some of the nuns selected to found the first female convent in the Philippines. Owens sets the scene with rich details and provides clear explanations of Tridentine rules of enclosure and definitions for the Poor Clares. This early chapter also discusses convent patronage. Sor Jerónima's sanctity became widely known, and this fostered ties between the convent and the outside world of Spanish aristocrats and even members of the royal family. Donations provided the means for commissioning paintings, reliquaries, and other devotional items. These lavish and visible elements of early modern Catholic piety coexisted with Sor Jerónima's professions of poverty and donations of money to the poor. Owens describes another recurring issue: the stark contrast between Sor Jerónima's body, which was weak from self-imposed abuse and fasting, and the real necessity that the nuns have the physical fortitude for the journey. As the author points out, the hagiographic nature of the text emphasizes Jerónima's weakness over her strength and health.

Following Chapters continue to trace the nuns' journey. In Chapter Two, the author highlights the presence of lay and religious women, including many of color, such as innkeepers and visionaries, encountered by the entourage of nuns as they traveled through the Caribbean and Mexico. Clergy, friars, and nuns transformed the ship headed to the Philippines into "a floating convent worthy of enclosed nuns." (76) The third Chapter also covers details that will interest historians of medicine, as Owens considers the impact of epidemics, discusses some disease symptoms and common cures, and speculates on the cause of the illness and death of one of the nuns, Sor María de la Trinidad.

Readers will appreciate the richly detailed descriptions of the physical landscape and of the social milieu of Manila. The newly arrived nuns faced numerous challenges, from a half-hearted donor to resistance from the local elite. High-ranking colonists needed

to consider the local marriage market and did not want their daughters performing their own chores or living under the more restrictive First Rule of Saint Clare, which Sor Jerónima hoped to implement and to extend to women of color. Conflicts over the convent led the Franciscan provincial to excommunicate Sor Jerónima and to depose her as abbess. It took letters and petitions to other authorities, including the monarch and commissary general of the Franciscan Order, for the saintly cofounder to be reinstated. Owens discusses Sor Ana's rhetorical strategy of appending the letters written by authorities in response and her own commentary to help make the case for Sor Jerónima's sanctity.

Finally, the book turns to the inclusion of other nuns' voices into Sor Ana's text. Owens considers the broader context of early modern religious women's rhetorical strategies and use of writing to memorialize their convents. The final Chapter of the book examines this broader "complex landscape of literacy, writing, and inspirational role models" for conventual histories and sacred biographies (118). Owens returns to a close examination of Sor Ana's account and concludes that it constitutes "a hybrid genre of writing that is as much biographical as it is autobiographical" (135). The book ends with an epilogue that briefly traces the fate of the convent through centuries of natural disasters, invasions, wars, and eventual relocation.

Occasionally, Owens extrapolates from sources about later groups of female religious to fill in gaps in Sor Ana's text. In general, she does this with caution and care. In part because this book is directed to a broader audience, there are a few times when a bit more detail might be warranted. For example, in her section on the sisters' time in the islands of Guadeloupe, the author could engage more in the broader historical context of and debates over the capacity of indigenous peoples as well as the growing body of work on the history of race in the Spanish Empire. However, these minor issues should not detract from the book's achievements. Owens is successful in showing how this particular group of Poor Clares used their own writings in the process of dealing with the challenges of building and administering a new convent and maneuvering socially, politically, and spatially within the Spanish Empire.

Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire is a welcome addition to the field. It provides a lesser-known case study to reexamine some oft-explored topics in early modern Iberian historiography. Although some of the conclusions drawn about religious women's writing, trade networks, and the tensions between theory and reality for enclosed communities, especially those on the move to found new religious houses in the Spanish Empire, are not especially new, this book makes these complex themes accessible. This book could easily be assigned to students in graduate seminars or undergraduate classes focused on the Iberian World or on early modern women.

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