Rethinking Time and Space: Gender, Transnational Scholarship, and the Perils of Periodization

Allyson M. Poska, University of Mary Washington, History
Elizabeth Lehfeldt, Cleveland State University, History
Lisa Vollendorf, San Jose State University, Literature

Workshop Description: Scholars of early modern women have long realized the difficulties in organizing their within the temporal boundaries of traditional periodizations. Although the historical moments that often mark the transition from medieval to early modern and from early modern to modern, like the invention of the printing press, the contact with the Americas, the end of the Habsburg dynasty in Spain, the French Revolution, and American independence movements without a doubt affected women’s lives, it is not clear that these were the primary moments of change for women. Recently, transnational and transatlantic scholarship on women has further called into question the utility of those traditional historical markers as they blur the nation-state boundaries around which much scholarship has been created. Women’s experiences cannot be neatly packaged within national borders as Religious Orders, networks of correspondence, and even legal norms transcended those man-made limits. In this workshop we want to explore the ways that transnational/transatlantic scholarship on women has complicated the traditional conceptualizations of the beginning and end of the early modern period. Among the issues that we hope to address:

Does the periodization of early modern differ from one nation-state to another? Does early modern have a different meaning when dealing with colonial subjects, as in the Spanish and English cases? What does it mean when the periodization of metropole and a colony do not coincide?

How does the eighteenth century fit into our conceptions of early modern/modern when it comes to women?

Is there a literary periodization that is different than the historical one?

To what degree do traditional markers of the transition from medieval to early modern, such as the War of the Roses and the succession of Ferdinand and Isabel in Spain also represent changes in women’s experiences or was there more of continuum?

Attached Readings:

Suggested Readings:


Gender, Change and Periodisation

Alexandra Shepard and Garthine Walker

This volume marks the twentieth anniversary of Gender & History by revisiting and reasserting the potential of women’s history and gender history both to complicate and, more fundamentally, to revise received narratives of change. As Ludmilla Jordanova has observed, periodisation hinges on the privileging of particular vantage points and the selection of ‘symbolic markers’ according to ‘the weight given to distinct fields of human activity’, and thus constitutes ‘a form of classification of the past’.1 Associated narratives of change are also determined by issues of scale, depending on whether the lens of analysis is focused, to use Fernand Braudel’s calibration, on the longue durée, the conjoncture, or the événementiel, and depending on our formulation of the relationship between structure and agency.2 Despite historians’ oft-articulated dissatisfaction with traditional period markers associated with teleological accounts of western civilisation – ‘ancient’, ‘medieval’, ‘renaissance’, ‘reformation’, ‘early modern’, ‘modern’ – their usage persists even if the narratives recounted about them have undergone serious revision as a result of the inclusion of a wider range of historical actors and as the moral or analytical frameworks for the evaluation of change have been dismantled and/or reconfigured. The incorporation of women, and the beginnings of a broader gender analysis that encompasses masculinity, has done much to refine and challenge the characterisation of these epochs but little to question the validity of particular ‘periods’ as discrete units of study.

Questions of change and periodisation implicitly and explicitly informed women’s history and feminist history from the beginning. The women’s history that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was not only inspired by second-wave feminism but also reflected its trajectories and themes. In the UK, for instance, where historians of women frequently had ties to the political Left and the labour movement, women’s history was simultaneously informed by and constituted part of developments in social and labour history. Sheila Rowbotham’s Hidden from History (1973) began with the words: ‘This book comes very directly from a political movement’; she was motivated by the desire to ‘unravel historically’ questions that arose in ‘the women’s liberation movement and on the Left about the situation of women in contemporary capitalism’.3 Such concerns had precursors in the work of early twentieth-century scholars, notably Alice Clark (1919) and Ivy Pinchbeck (1930), who investigated the impact on women’s work and lives of industrialisation and technological developments. New editions of Clark’s book were issued in 1968, 1982 and 1992, and Pinchbeck’s in 1969, 1977 and 1981, when feminist interest in these issues was rekindled.4 In the US, where feminist activism...
was commonly connected to the civil rights movement, much women’s history of the 1960s and 1970s shared liberal concerns about women’s claims to citizens’ rights. Earlier scholarship here had similarly focused on women’s rights and suffrage, the *History of Women’s Suffrage* (1881) being perhaps the best known example. By the end of the 1980s, the contributions to a volume marking the state of women’s history internationally, which spanned twenty-two countries and all continents, demonstrated the extent to which contemporary feminism not only stimulated women’s history but also injected it with a particular flavour according to diverse national and cultural contexts.

Histories of women inspired by feminism sought both to chart the changes over time that brought women to their present circumstances and to create change in the present in order to produce a future for them that was different from their past. The question of where women fitted into conventional accounts of change over time was rapidly reframed to ask, first, *did* women fit into such historical narratives at all, and second, were such changes positive or negative for women? Joan Kelly’s 1977 essay on whether women had a Renaissance is perhaps the most-cited example. Indeed, Kelly believed that interrogating accepted schemes of periodisation from women’s perspective was one of ‘the tasks of women’s history’. She argued that, while conventional accounts of the Renaissance presented it as a period of great cultural progress, women’s legal, economic and political conditions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries deteriorated rather than improved. Kelly’s work had implications for the history of the Renaissance as much as for the history of women. The association of the Renaissance as a period of great cultural progress is challenged if conditions declined for some half of the European population. Over the past four decades, historians have applied similar questions to other centuries and regions.

While familiar periodising categories have been declared inappropriate for the history of women, they have not usually been replaced by alternative schemas. Historians have been less diligent in investigating the role of women and gender in constituting change. In work on women and gender in history, questions of periodisation and change appear often to have been jettisoned altogether in favour of continuities and stasis. Partly this is a consequence of viewing History as a story of progress and women’s emancipation as the standard by which ‘progress’ for women is evaluated. Hence Gerda Lerner’s assertion in 1975 that ‘all history as we now know it is, for women, merely pre-history’. This not only applies to textbooks and surveys (where broad brushstrokes are typical and not reserved for women’s history) but also constitutes a metanarrative favoured by certain kinds of women’s history, especially that informed by radical feminism with its emphasis upon the transhistorical nature of patriarchy and women’s oppression by men. Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), for example, roared across periods and continents, finding and illuminating patriarchy’s horrors in Indian sati, Chinese foot-binding, African genital mutilation, European witch burning and American gynaecology. In this story of misogyny, women are accorded little agency; or rather, their agency is punished by a society that insists upon their inferiority. For radical feminists, patriarchy, whatever form it takes, always and inevitably insists upon the oppression of women by men. Change over time from this perspective was insignificant as, over the centuries, patriarchy merely shifted to oppress women in new ways. Some forms of women’s history did allow for the potential of women’s agency and change within existing social, economic and political...
structures. Liberal feminists, for instance, emphasised the role of education in bringing about change in women’s status relative to men, while socialist feminists viewed such change as the desired and possible outcome of a broader restructuring of economic and political life.

From the outset, historians of women lamented the inadequacies, limitations and inapplicability of existing explanatory and theoretical frameworks within academic history.\(^{13}\) Women’s history played a key role in the development of new methods and approaches to historical research in dialogue with practitioners of the then ‘new’ social history, the Annales School, and feminist scholars in other disciplines. Historians of women were also at the cutting edge of historical research in the 1980s and 1990s. One such development was that of comparative women’s histories across nations and continents as well as time. The International Federation for Research in Women’s History/Fédération internationale pour la recherche de l’histoire des femmes was founded in 1987 in order to foster such comparisons. Another was the cultural or linguistic turn, as historians of women, sexuality and masculinity were among the first to explore the implications of linguistic theories – especially post-structuralism – for History as a discipline.

The emergence of ‘gender’ as an analytic category is often associated with this shift as if there was a linear evolution from a focus on feminism (politics) to women (specialised history) to gender (theory). But this is an oversimplification of a far more complex trajectory.\(^ {14}\) However defined, historians continue to explore and publish research categorised as women’s and as gender history and, in many instances, the distinction between them is false. The concept of gender was not new in 1986 when Joan Scott first published her essay on gender as a category of historical analysis (nor did she claim it to be). Nor did it ‘replace’ or sideline women’s history. In fact, both *Gender & History* and *The Journal of Women’s History* were founded in 1989, and *Women’s History Review* followed three years later. Issues of gender – the consequences of being male or female, the meanings ascribed to femininity and masculinity, the manner in which those categories are constructed, the practical repercussions of gendered language and concepts, and the relation of gender to power – were already present in women’s history and feminist scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s.\(^ {15}\)

The category of gender was most thoroughly defined and theorised for historians by Joan Scott in 1986, and rapidly became the most popular tool employed to dig deeper below the top soil that earlier women’s historians had turned up.\(^ {16}\) Scott’s article is one of the most cited historical works of its time, leading to comparisons with E. P. Thompson in terms of its influence on the discipline in general.\(^ {17}\) So great an impact has her definition had that twenty years later, the editors of one volume of gender history describe the concept of gender in Scott’s words without acknowledgement in either the text or notes.\(^ {18}\) Scott’s achievement was not to invent ‘gender’ but to define and theorise it as an analytic category in a more nuanced and sophisticated way than historians had done hitherto, and to present a method of analysing the concept at work in any historical period. A great strength of this definition and approach lies in its potential to identify and analyse not only gender but also other categories such as class, race, religion, ethnicity, or any other form of difference, and – crucially – the ways in which they operate together discursively to legitimate or undermine historically specific relationships of power. Gender thus offered a lens by which historians could explore not only relations between the sexes, women, or sexuality, but also markets,
classes, diplomacy and, indeed, masculinity. An approach that disrupted what seemed to be fixed oppositions such as nature/culture and public/private, and the analysis of how such language and concepts changed over time and in different contexts, did allow for agency and change. However, not everybody has interpreted Scott’s argument in this way.

The most heated responses to Scott’s work are perhaps from those who made little or no distinction between her debt to post-structuralism and what they believed to be the grave implications for the discipline of History of post-structural linguistic theory in its purest form. In particular, critics suggested that the kind of gender history advocated by Scott locked women into a position of inferiority via binary oppositions in language, which allowed no room for change and, therefore, agency on the part of women and other subaltern groups. A category of analysis that privileged language (and representations) rather than experience (and reality) at its heart was both ‘difficult’ and ‘dangerous’ when applied to women’s history. Some works of gender history may seem to (re)produce a history of gender that looks very much the same no matter which century or culture is examined. This, however, reflects a broader methodological shift that is not confined to gender historians. The cultural turn has brought with it losses as well as gains. While the influence of post-structuralism, literary and cultural theory, and symbolic anthropology has generated qualitative and textual analyses of particular historical moments, there is little attempt to explain change over time in much historical writing. It is perhaps this, rather than the concept of gender per se, that distinguishes much recent gender history from the women’s history of the 1970s. Yet change and periodisation were already thorny problems within women’s history: the tendency to measure change in terms of either progress or decline, liberation or repression, or alternatively to see these issues as transhistorical; the recognition that the category of ‘woman’/‘women’ itself collapsed in the face of the plurality of women’s experiences that defied generalisation about ‘the position of women’ and therefore its measurement over time. The fact that gender history proved not necessarily to solve all of these problems is not simply a matter of ‘gender’ leading us astray from what was otherwise a clearly lit path.

Neither have questions of chronology and periodisation been at the forefront of the history of masculinity since its dramatic growth out of the ‘new men’s studies’ of the 1980s. Some of the blame can again be laid at the door of the ‘new’ cultural history. Emerging alongside the cultural turn, the history of masculinity has emphasised the multiplicity and contingency of male identities, rather than a category that might be traced in a singular way across a linear time scale, and has prioritised representation above the material and subjective realities of men’s lives which provide the key to understanding historical agency and the link to questions of causation. As Laura Lee Downs has put it, ‘without some way of connecting discursive process to social experience, historians are hard put to explain how the meanings of masculine and feminine might shift over time’ – let alone how gender has been a constitutive part of wider processes of transition. The most ambitious account of change over time has been undertaken not by a historian, but by the sociologist R. W. Connell, in an attempt to identify the long-term roots of hegemonic forms of contemporary Euro-American masculinity in the Reformation, the rise of individualism, and the relentless engine of imperialism. As Konstantin Dierks has observed, the history of masculinity has tended to work within received metanarratives rather than engage or challenge them.
This general diversion from issues of chronology and periodisation is reflected in the content and coverage of *Gender & History* over the last twenty years. The inaugural volume of the journal included very little discussion of matters of change, with historiographical essays reflecting primarily on the relationship between women’s history and gender history, alongside innovatory work in the history of masculinity. While less concerned with challenging established chronologies than with staking out a feminist agenda for the analysis of enduring systems of patriarchal oppression, Judith M. Bennett’s landmark essay in that volume implicitly invoked the *longue durée* as the appropriate time-span for gender historians – a point to which she returns in her reflections below.23 However, subsequent contributors have mostly retained narrower and largely conventional timeframes. One notable exception by Julia M. H. Smith, examining the place of women in the extensive cultural adaptation associated with the transformation of the Roman world, demonstrates the potential of gender history to illuminate key phases of transition without sacrificing complexity or resorting to generalisations about the position of women.24 Several other essays have similarly sought to integrate gender analysis to enrich existing accounts of change, for example in relation to class formation and its associated modes of capitalist patriarchy, or the reconfiguration of the medieval into the early modern Italian church.25 Yet the challenges of reshaping established chronologies, while repeatedly lauded as a goal of gender history, have largely been overshadowed by the more urgent imperative of widening coverage in order both to reflect the myriad forms of gender construction and varied experiences of women and men, and to counter the Euro- and US-centrism of gender analysis.26 *Gender & History* has arguably achieved more success in broadening its geographical than chronological coverage with reference to its stated aims of displacing periodisation based on the dominant narratives associated with the post-Enlightenment west.27 The only period term to receive any sustained critical engagement within the journal’s covers is ‘modernity’.28

This celebratory volume was envisaged as an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which gender analysis suggests alternative chronologies to conventional periodisation.29 More fundamentally, the essays it features explore the ways in which gender functioned as a force of endurance or transition in the past, and the ways in which it might have been constitutive rather than merely reflective of either continuity or change. It seems a fitting tribute to twenty years of *Gender & History* to engage with questions at the heart of the discipline of history as a means of showcasing the contribution gender analysis can make to our characterisation and classification of the past. In the essays that follow, this has involved not only the rejection of some period markers and the confirmation of others, but also the interrogation of some of the foundational narratives of change associated both with women’s history and the shifting construction of gender categories over time. Further, it has generated some theoretical discussion of both how we are to approach women’s agency in the past and how we might best deploy the concept of gender as a category of analysis in ways that avoid partiality and anachronism. Obviously, constraints of space mean that we cannot offer exhaustive coverage of these wide-ranging questions and what follows is both geographically and chronologically limited to a few select (albeit as varied as possible) times and places. Sadly, geographical breadth in this instance has given way to chronological depth, despite our many efforts to solicit articles with a non-western and more global range. However the essays gathered here demonstrate the rich possibilities for rethinking the central tenets
of European historiography – including several foundational claims of women’s and
gender history – even from within the perspectives generated by western scholarship.
And the many general reflections on methods for the classification of change and its
implications for the interrogation of gender as a category will be of relevance to periods
and regions that are not represented here. It is therefore hoped that this collection of
essays will both re-open questions that were of fundamental importance to first- and
second-wave feminist scholarship and stimulate further investigation both under and
beyond the umbrella of gender history.

With one exception, the contributions that directly interrogate conventional
chronologies reject rather than confirm the integrity of period markers in the light of
gender analysis. Lynda L. Coon’s exploration of early medieval ‘somatic styles’ chal-

lenges both the notion of a ‘rupture’ between classical antiquity and the so-called ‘Dark
Age’ and the assumption of an alien pre-Enlightenment sexuality based on a ‘one-sex’
model of the body against which a ‘modern’ sex/gender system has frequently been
juxtaposed, emphasising the eclectic and varied use of classical medical teachings even
by the clerical elites whose voices dominate the sources surviving from the seventh to
tenth centuries. Investigating the more recent past, Padma Anagol demonstrates how
historiographical privileging of the nationalist response to imperialism in modern In-
dian history has obfuscated women’s agency under colonial rule and created a truncated
account and inadequate appreciation of feminism in India and the broader formation
of Indian subjectivities. Anagol’s essay provides a model of the problems generated
by gender-blind scholarship and the legacy of its chronological frameworks that, in
this instance, actively inhibit analysis of women’s agency. Critical too of discursive
approaches to gender for their neglect of female agency and their lack of chronological
moorings, Anagol goes on to place gender relationships at the heart of the formation
of modern India, stressing its deep roots in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
as a corrective to an undue emphasis on the period from 1885 to 1947. Kevin Passmore
is similarly critical of the way in which political religions’ theorists, explaining the
rise of fascism as a feature of the transition between tradition and modernity, have af-
forded no space for women’s agency. Cast as the embodiment of tradition on the basis
of femininity’s timelessness, women are associated with passivity and superstition in
order to draw a distinction between the compliant (feminised) masses and the mascu-
line elite. Passmore traces these assumptions back to the totalitarianism theory of the
1950s and 1960s and, more fundamentally, to the canonical thinkers of the sociological
tradition from which political religions theory derives. Moreover, Passmore warns that
conventional sociology presents a problematic legacy that also risks being unheeded
by gender historians.

The one conventional period marker that receives any defence amongst the essays
below is ‘early modernity’. While happy to dispense with the organising principles
and disciplinary boundaries associated with the term ‘Renaissance’, Merry Wiesner-
Hanks argues that there certainly was an ‘early modern’ period for European women
and that gender analysis is critical to understanding the key transitions with which it
is associated – in particular the Reformation, military revolution, and the dramatic in-
tensification of global interaction. Wiesner-Hanks is concerned not to render women’s
history ‘motionless’ over the longue durée by contrast to the changes deemed defini-
tive in men’s lives, and argues not only that women’s as well as men’s lives were
transformed by the key events associated with early modernity but also that women

© The authors 2008. Journal compilation © Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008
were key agents and gender played a constitutive role in these changes. These conclusions are given further weight by Martha Howell’s essay on the commercial expansion associated with the early modern west. The commercial revolution, she argues, was accompanied and enabled by the creation of a class-specific, normative gender binary that newly afforded honourable masculinity to the merchant by realigning production with the male householder citizen and domesticating (and thereby taming) consumption as the purview of the virtuous wife. Gender was inextricably bound up with, and a dynamic force in, the creation of the class identity of the European bourgeoisie.

Alongside concerns with conventional periodisation, several of the contributors are sceptical about some of the foundational narratives of change and accompanying chronologies produced by women’s history and gender history. Monica H. Green takes to task western feminist narratives concerning the history of women’s healthcare, and rejects the categorisation of the late medieval period or (more loosely) a pre-modern era as a ‘golden age’ for European women’s medical practices in relation to reproductive health. Such accounts have come about, she argues, from a politically motivated and polarising perspective that has produced a partial story shaped by a moral framework which accords liberating potential to the deeds of women and patriarchal oppression to the activities of men on the basis of distorted evidence and, ultimately, in the face of improving medical outcomes. Lynn Abrams wrestles with the stranglehold that the dominant narrative of ‘separate spheres’ has placed on the history of women in modern Europe and the paradox created by this model’s failure to represent women’s sense of their own past within local contexts. Exploring what happens when women’s voices are prioritised by historians, Abrams seeks a path through the dissonance created by the relationships between the general and the particular, the mainstream and the margins that leads her to more than a simple confirmation of the heterogeneity of female experience. Rather than a timeless exception to a European rule, Shetland women’s accounts of their own agency offer a situational corrective to the narratives told about modern European women and, more importantly, to the methodologies by which they are constructed.

Perhaps one of the most entrenched, albeit widely contested, narratives of change (re)produced by gender history has its roots in Thomas Laqueur’s argument that eighteenth-century Europe witnessed a fundamental shift in the construction of the sexed body as a ‘pre-modern’, ‘one-sex’ model – based on a male–female hierarchical continuum – was replaced by a ‘modern’, ‘two-sex’ system of incommensurable difference. Dror Wahrman revisits these claims, and the counter-arguments they have produced that emphasise either long-term continuities or enduring synchronic diversity (and which are also represented here in the essays by Lynda Coon and Monica Green). He does so less to adjudicate the merits of each side of the argument than to explore the relationship between gender history and cultural history and the methodological and conceptual limits of the latter’s ‘uncompromising constructivism’ which, he argues, lacks explanatory force when confronted with evidence of long-term continuity. Breaking one of the persistent taboos of feminist history against naturalising the body, Wahrman challenges gender historians to undertake a ‘corporeal critique’ in order to explore ‘where the culturally constructed ends and the ahistorical and extracultural begins; and thus, most importantly, how they relate to each other’. This involves widening the lens of analysis to encompass the deep historical perspective afforded by
neurohistory – an example of which Wahrman offers to complement other such forays on the basis of psychoanalysis or evolutionary psychology.

Jeanne Boydston’s essay is also concerned with the conceptual limits of gender analysis, but prescribes attending to local particularity above deep historical continuity. Claiming that gender’s status as a ‘category of analysis’ risks ahistoricism by reifying a contemporary, western epistemological order, Boydston argues that we should instead approach gender as ‘historical process’ and historicise gender as a concept. If gender is the product of social constructionism, then it should behave differently across time and space. The appearance of long-term continuity for Boydston, then, is a chimera that has been produced by the inability of the category of gender to accommodate difference that does not conform to an oppositionally based binary which risks (wrongly) assuming universal status across place and time.

Finally, by way of an epilogue to the volume, Judith M. Bennett contributes some short reflections that once again reiterate the importance of the _longue duréé_ to feminist history. Concerned that women’s history has narrowed its sights to the recent past, Bennett urges historians of women and gender to reinvigorate history’s relationship with feminist theory in order to restore its potential to address contemporary agendas for change vested in the long view the distant past affords. We have come, then, full circle to the agenda articulated by the emergent field of women’s history in the 1970s. The essays in this volume have, however, proceeded by way of some approaches and conclusions that are radically at odds with many of the foundational methods and findings of both women’s history and gender history. Noting that gender-blind scholarship has not been alone in producing partial accounts of female agency, several contributors confront the uncomfortable reality that women’s agency did not only occur in progressive domains, but could sustain and benefit from systems of oppression. Others wrestle with the conceptual constraints inherent in the deployment of gender as a category of analysis, particularly in relation to gender’s close association with both the strengths and weaknesses of cultural history. While Boydston advocates detailed attention to the particularities and localities that contradict an assumed oppositional binary pitting male against female, the general consensus is that the long view is one that gender history cannot afford to lose. Nor can the discipline of history afford to be without the perspective this allows, since conventional timeframes are constructively enriched and challenged by gender history and the analysis of women’s agency in the past.

**Notes**


18. See e.g., the introduction to the Special Issue on ‘Gender, Nationalisms and National Identities’, in which the ‘need to reconsider existing chronologies in the formation of nations’ in the wake of gender analysis is acknowledged but deferred as a task for the future. *Gender & History* 5 (1993), pp. 159–64.

19. See e.g., the introduction to the Special Issue on ‘Gender, Citizenship and Subjectivity’, *Gender & History* 13:3 (2001), and the forum on ‘Domestic Service since 1750’, *Gender & History* 18:2 (2006).
29. The volume has its origins in a two-day workshop held at Christ’s College, Cambridge, in April 2007. We are grateful to the Master and Fellows of Christ’s College for hosting the workshop, and to the participants at the workshop for their contributions. We are also indebted to the George Macaulay Trevelyan Fund for financial support for this event.

GENDER IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD:
WOMEN’S WRITING IN IBERIA AND LATIN AMERICA

Lisa Vollendorf and Grady C. Wray

Scholarship of the past fifty years has revealed fascinating connections among the social and economic mechanisms of change that impacted the Iberian Atlantic diaspora during the age of exploration.1 Political, maritime, economic, and cultural historians have given us a wealth of details about the diversity of that diaspora, in which Cuzco differed from Mexico City, La Coruña from Madrid. We also know that Inquisitional culture influenced individual and collective behaviours and choices in places as far flung as Guatemala and Andalusia. The bustling trade that characterised early modern port cities, including Lisbon, Seville, São Paulo, and Lima also hastened the arrival of complex mercantilist structures. In spite of the current knowledge about the to and fro of people, objects, and ideas in the early modern world, women’s history has yet to be satisfactorily integrated into our understanding of the emergence of an Ibero-American Atlantic. It bears mention that much work remains to be done to understand women’s and gender history in discrete areas of that Atlantic space.

While that field is growing, we nonetheless have even less information about that history from a transatlantic perspective. We only recently have begun to understand the roles played by Iberian women sent to the Americas to model Catholicism for native populations beginning in the early decades of the sixteenth century, for example. While we have numerous examples of female-centered evangelism until the period of independence, we have yet to see rigorous comparative work on women’s

complement in research on Iberia, yet we have only recently begun to see research that bridges the Atlantic and seeks to build a broader understanding of the commonalities and differences that characterised women's lives throughout the Ibero-American Atlantic sphere. Traditional scholarly boundaries have separated Iberia from the Americas or encouraged work that focuses on European influences on the Americas. Scholars with training in Europe and the Americas have made headway in breaking down this theoretical scaffolding. Recently we have begun to see analyses of lesser-studied regions, groups, and individuals, and contextualisation has begun to include the Atlantic lens. By focusing on women who resisted and assisted the imperial enterprise in Iberia and the Americas, the present essay probes the contours of the Atlantic diaspora from the perspective of women and gender and lays claim to the centrality of women's textual and cultural history to Atlantic world studies. Similarly, we urge a more nuanced approach to gender history, one that transcends the common divisions between Europeanists and Latin Americanists and aims to map women more successfully onto the Atlantic world.

Focusing on women as economic, political, and cultural actors, this essay assesses current research and builds on the promise of Atlantic


studies for the better integration of women into Ibero-American studies in the pre-nineteenth century era.⁴ We take as our guiding principles three concepts that have provided a framework for the study of women and gender in colonial Latin America and early modern Spain: power, patriarchy, and authority. As our examples and sources suggest, the social fabric of the Ibero-American Atlantic was comprised of variations influenced by time and place. Given the speed with which Atlantic studies as a field of inquiry for cultural historians and literary scholars has grown in the past ten years, scholars of women and gender face the urgent challenge of simultaneously attending to local specificity while also engaging in comparative work that will help us more effectively map women onto the Atlantic world. Seen in this light, analyses related to power, patriarchy, and authority provide a framework, but also beg re-examination as we move toward more effective integration of women’s and gender studies into the broader Atlantic rubric. In acknowledging the need for a continual re-examination of paradigms, the essay that follows considers recent research that challenges, interprets, and expands definitions of patriarchy and power. We examine those definitions vis-à-vis influential women writers—including St. Teresa of Avila, María de Zayas, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz— who solidified the foundations for a women's writing tradition in the Ibero-American Atlantic. Such writers helped to shape women’s writing in rhetorical, stylistic, and thematic terms. These and other women in the Ibero-American Atlantic setting simultaneously navigated authority and personalised their literary production. They also worked within culturally-imposed strictures that nominally limited women’s participation in education, politics, and social processes that shaped the early modern and colonial worlds. Our analysis concludes with a case study of a lesser-studied Guatemalan woman, Sor Juana de Maldonado y Paz, whose literary production exemplifies the need for the attention to the complex web of local particularities and more generalised commonalities that often can be found in women’s writing across the Ibero-American Atlantic diaspora.

⁴ As suggested by numerous essays in the present volume, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has been at the forefront of a movement to insert Iberia into Atlantic studies. See, for example, Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550–1700 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For an excellent overview of Hispanic and Atlantic studies, see Lisa Voigt, ‘Hispanism and the Cultural Geography of the Early Modern Atlantic’, Renaissance Quarterly 62.2 (2009): 40–49.

1. Conceptual Challenges: Power and Patriarchy

Many studies on women and gender history use patriarchy as a starting framework for the exploration of power and authority in different locales and among different classes or groups in the Ibero-American Atlantic. As Bianca Premo indicates in Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Peru (2005), “Historians of Latin America often parse the concept of patriarchy in order to describe various relations of power and subordination in different periods and regions”. Yet, as Premo argues, speaking separately of patriarchy, patriarchal practices, paternalism, or patriarchalism, amounts to a “fracturing each of these relations into multiple, separate categories [which] can prevent us from seeing them as colonial (people) did—as different aspects of an integrated whole”.⁵ In thinking about that integrated whole, it also is relevant to note that Steve Stern’s idea of ‘pluralising the patriarchy’—a catch-all term for attempts by the disenfranchised to pit men and male institutions against each other—also has been deployed in research that attempts to decipher strategies used by individuals and groups to gain advantage in the face of patriarchal processes.⁶

An overview of twenty-first century historical studies on different aspects of women’s lives in the Ibero-American Atlantic captures some of the conceptual challenges posed by current uses of the patriarchal framework. In The Mendoza Women: Gender and Power in Golden Age Spain (2004), editor Helen Nader found herself in the position of explaining the surprising influence exerted by many Mendoza women, particularly with regard to the political realm. There, Nader hypothesised that matriarchy must have co-existed with patriarchy, since there seem to have been few constraints placed on women’s decision making or power within that

⁵ Bianca Premo, Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Lima (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 9–10. Other scholars also have engaged the question of how to move forward in women’s history frameworks. Alison Parks Weber, for example, has summarised the ways in which historians of women and gender have struggled to find appropriate frameworks to understand women’s history, relying in the early years on “(i) terms such as ‘gendered domains’, ‘separate spheres’, and ‘the public/private dichotomy’”. See Weber, ‘Locating Holiness in Early Modern Spain: Convents, Caves, and Houses’, Structures and Subjectivities: Attending to Early Modern Women, ed. Joan E. Harman and Adele Seiff (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007, 50–76), 50.

family's sphere of influence. Allyson Poska grappled with similarly unorthodox data about peasant women in *Women and Authority in Early Modern Spain. The Peasants of Galicia* (2005). Findings about high rates of illegitimate births, concubinage, and other localised sexual practices led Poska to suggest that Galician peasants operated within a matrifocal culture in the early modern period. That is, in the face of high rates of male emigration over the centuries, women seem to have found ways to adapt patriarchal sexual norms to a local culture in which women played more important, long-term roles in family arrangements and economic production. Kimberly Gauderman took this idea one step further in *Women's Lives in Colonial Quito: Gender, Law, and Economy in Spanish America* (2003), a study that challenges the assumption that patriarchy universally applied to colonial Latin-American society. Gauderman's claim—that patriarchy cannot be reconciled with women's legal status in colonial Spanish America—is perhaps the most radical of the arguments that have sought to devise useful frameworks for understanding the interstices of power, authority, and imperialism in the early modern Ibero-American Atlantic. 

All of these studies share an interest in defining the local impact of nation-building practices and policies throughout the Iberian empire. One of the most nuanced responses to the patriarchy controversy can be found in Bianca Premo's discussion of intergenerational conflict in colonial Lima, where, as Premo asserts that patriarchal authority "was a mutable, conditional, and potentially combustible concept. This authority was derived from the laws of European kings and popes, but it was practised in a way that often departed from the principles of male right enshrined in codes and canons." By focusing on the ways in which everyday people sought, obtained, and exercised authority, Premo echoes literary scholar Alison Weber's call for a methodology that would "account for how power and agency sometimes elide spatial categorisation and migrate between spaces and subjectivities." Weber's call stems from the need for early modern studies to assess current methodologies and to develop new critical questions that will help us move forward in our efforts to develop more nuanced understandings of women in different times and places as well as of individuals and groups in the early modern world.

Perhaps nowhere have the interstices between the macro- and micro-level processes of early modern empires and colonial spaces been better illuminated than in Weber's own field of women's religious history. A significant body of scholarship has emerged on women's engagement with religion and spirituality throughout the Ibero-American Atlantic, with particular attention to both women's complicity in and resistance to gender-based behaviour norms in the Catholic world. Based on texts originally produced In Inquisitional, legal, secular, and convent settings, this scholarly focus has illuminated a multiplicity of self-authorising strategies employed by individuals of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and class backgrounds in Europe and the Americas. Since Catholic ideologies about women's roles and identities pervaded most aspects of the early modern nation- and empire-building enterprise, a focus on Catholicism provides an important tool for further unpacking the vexed methodological problem of patriarchy by helping us look to numerous local contexts and examine how those fit into a broader, pan-Atlantic scope for Iberia and the Iberian empire.

II. Women and Authority in the Catholic Atlantic

The Catholic Reformation—with its evangelical tenets and insistence on women's enclosure—provided the backdrop for the Habsburg and Portuguese imperial expansions of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is not surprising, then, that the Iberian legacy of cultural production, including art and literature, reflects Catholicism and Catholic doctrine at the heart of most artistic and discursive representations. Prologues, prefaces, introductions, and dedications generally followed rhetorical strategies that rendered allegiance to God or God's representatives on earth and reflected Catholic language and logic. Early

---

8 Poska, *Women and Authority*.
texts, especially those of the sixteenth century, often focused on evangelisation efforts in the Americas. Spanish cultural production also emphasised the importance of religious texts and themes, although a booming industry of secular narrative, poetry, and plays existed alongside that literature. The two Americas, the prohibition on non-devotional fiction until the period of independence reinforced this religious emphasis and shaped women's writing to be even more religiously-focused than it was on the Peninsula. Also, because of the rising American criollo sense of place and identity in the seventeenth century and beyond, texts from the American side of the Atlantic increasingly reflected more local achievements and presented them in a prideful manner. Seen through this lens, the colonies seemed to compete with the metropolis and show that 'New Spaniards' could produce pieces of equal or better quality with touches that rivalled those of the metropolis. Natural elements, dialectic changes, and indigenous characters began to appear in competition with those expected in typical Spanish texts. The texts of the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), Bernardo de Balbuena (1561/63–1627), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645–1700) affirm that cultural expression from the Americas increasingly reflected what we recognise today to be a Latin-American aesthetic.

In terms of women's cultural history, the emphasis on female piety and enclosure provided a common thread in spite of some artistic and ideological differences that emerged over time between Iberian and Latin-American cultural expression. It should not surprise readers today that most women—within and outside of the convent—infused their writing with rhetorical styles, themes, and strategies taken directly from Catholic traditions. By and large, most extant texts penned by women were written within the convent, where women wrote convent histories, hagiographic celebrations of their sisters, plays and poems for celebratory occasions. Convent writing also included record-keeping, correspondence, autobiography, biography, and, less often, secular fiction. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) provides us with the most prominent example of a nun who produced secularly-themed fiction: her three-act play, *Trials of a Household* (Los empeños de una casa) stands out for its thematic, rhetorical, and structural similarities with popular theatrical texts of the day. Importantly, Sor Juana followed in the footsteps of Santa Teresa de Jesús (1515–1582) and María de Zayas (b. 1590) when she wrote poetry and prose that challenged the gender norms of her day.

Most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women writers whose texts come down to us today operated more strictly within the religious context, where formulaic expressions of humility, grace, and piety were both expected of and produced by most women who put pen to paper or whose words were recorded by others (such as in Inquisition trials or hagiographies). Regardless of whether women were nuns or noblewomen, women authors shared a position of privilege insofar as they had more access to the necessary education and life circumstances that would allow them to write. This cultural milieu was heavily dominated by Catholic ideologies of femininity, chastity, and obedience. Women's texts reveal a complex web of strategies that both uphold and subvert the status quo. The rhetorical, thematic, and aesthetic similarities among women's texts provide a striking reminder of the social dynamic by which women of all social classes, nationalities, and ethnicities were subjected to similar ideas about femininity, chastity, humility, honour, and obedience.

The self-representation strategies that upheld and sometimes counteracted dominant restrictions varied little across time and place during the period. Women were not alone in combating those restrictions: often confessors and other male authority figures lent their support to the women's writing activities and, knowingly or not, promoted discourse that challenged women's secondary status. It is tempting to see challenges to authority in women's texts, yet we also must give a word of caution. While twenty-first-century readers may find refreshing the way in which writers challenged ideologies, we must accept the possibility that these arguments did not even rise to the level of the slightest censorship. It also is possible that such arguments became so intertwined with dominant rhetoric that only after reexamining these texts centuries later do they appear outstanding because of the artful way in which writers manoeuvred within the dominant rhetoric. Where twenty-first-century readers see resistance and challenge, it is possible that the writers' contemporaries saw women who embraced imperial and religious ideologies.

As these multiple interpretive possibilities suggest, it is particularly difficult to decipher artists' and authors' intentions in writing from this period. Self-representation strategies used by men and women were intimately related to dominant Catholic culture to the point that even guessing at an individual's subject position poses numerous interpretive risks. Modern autobiographical subjectivity outside of the religious sphere did not completely surface until the eighteenth century. For example, almost

---

all biography, autobiography, letters, and other non-fiction produced in the period relied upon rhetorical devices such as capitatio benevolentiae, unbridled humility, and self-effacement. Nowhere are these effects better probed than in Alison Parks Weber’s *Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (1989), a study that revolutionised our understanding of Saint Teresa’s mastery of discursive strategies that allowed her to express deeply complex theological and philosophical positions while simultaneously representing herself as innocent to such manipulations. In noting that “Teresa’s defensive strategy was to embrace stereotypes of female ignorance, timidity, or physical weakness but disassociate herself from the double-edged myth of woman as seductive/seductive”, Weber put forward an argument that has become central to the study of early modern women’s studies for the Catholic world. Indeed, to a large extent, the strategies used by women after the Catholic Reformation were modeled on Saint Teresa and, later, Madre María de Ágreda (1602–1665). Saint Teresa’s influence on Ibero-American women’s writing and spiritual activities cannot be overstated: the brilliant strategies she used to simultaneously appear submissive and mount sophisticated theological arguments led to the widespread circulation of her writing throughout the Catholic world. Furthermore, as Weber has argued, Madre Teresa’s advocacy for religious women’s educational and leadership roles in the convent also was a major hallmark of her contributions to how women were positioned within the church.

Madre María de Ágreda also produced texts that circulated widely in the transatlantic region. Both she and Madre Teresa managed to transcend restrictive gender norms while wielding great authority within and beyond church structures. Tellingly, both were investigated by the Inquisition for possibly heretical beliefs and activities. Both successfully avoided serious punishment, but their ordeals were prolonged and threatened to diminish their status as important spiritual women of the time. Proof of their ongoing influence can be found in Madre Teresa’s efforts that led to the Discalced order, numerous convent foundations, and, later, a widespread legitimisation of women as cultural actors. Similarly, María de Ágreda maintained spiritual and political influence in Spain and, thanks to her apparitions in New Mexico, in the Americas. In addition to the evangelical work attributed to her through those apparitions, she also became famous for maintaining a twenty-two-year correspondence with King Philip IV, during which she advised him on personal, political, and spiritual matters.

The examples of Teresa de Ávila and María de Ágreda capture the tension between individual expression and societal censure. In an environment that emphasised the control of women, these nuns reinforced the socialisation of women to the ideal of Catholic femininity but also transcended those restrictions through intellectual prowess and social and political power. While prevailing humanistic views—such as those expressed by Fray Luis de León (1527–1591) in *La perfecta casada* (*The Perfect Wife*, 1583)—endorsed limited education for women and their primary obligation to house and home, women writers necessarily challenged those restrictions by presenting themselves and other women to be capable of complex intellectual engagement with philosophy, theology, and literary traditions. Put another way, regardless of theme, style, or message, women who wrote implicitly asserted authority and challenged dominant gender norms. Yet, as Teresa of Ávila and María de Ágreda’s Inquisition investigations also suggest, assertion of authority and challenges to dominant ideologies were inherently risky activities. In a word, while the spectre of the Inquisition made writing a dangerous undertaking for men and women during the period, the cultural insistence on women’s subordination and obedience made writing a more significantly risky activity for female authors.

### III. A Fine Line: Navigating Authority

Much ink has been spilled about a culture of oppression during the age of empire and the Inquisition. For many whose bloodlines or actions betrayed them to be New Christians or heretics, the assertion of authority potentially carried the risk of investigation, imprisonment, and even

---


16 Weber argues in “Spiritual Administration: Gender and Discernment in the Carmelite Reform” that Madre Teresa “also proposed innovations in governance that are less well known, innovations which depended, to a large extent, on an enhanced role of prioress roles as spiritual teachers, healers, and guardians for the nuns under their charge”, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31.1 (Spring 2000): 123–46, 125–26.

17 Consolación Baranda provides a succinct overview of the personal and political content of the letters between Philip IV and María de Jesús de Ágreda in her introduction to María de Jesús de Ágreda: *correspondencia con Felipe IV. Religión y razón de estado* (Madrid: Castalia, 2001), 9–48.
death. Whereas indigenous populations in the Americas were not subject to the Inquisition, contact zones quickly evolved into complex spaces of identities, beliefs, and social systems whose very mestizaje challenged imperial organisational systems, including the legal, familial, and social structures imposed by Europeans. Examples from monastic and secular writing show numerous ways in which women navigated these challenges in the early modern period. In addition to the rhetorical strategies of humility discussed above, one of the most common strategies involved a balancing act between embracing dominant ideologies related to religion and the state while challenging others. Some of the most studied examples of this simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the status quo appear in the popular author María de Zayas y Sotomayor’s novellas. Widely read in their time, Zayas’s *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (*Exemplary and Amorous Novellas*, 1637) and her *Desengaños amorosos* (*Disenchantments of Love*, 1647) overtly question women’s exclusion from mechanisms of social justice, including their lack of education and access to arms to defend themselves. The two-volume collection tells story after story of women mistreated by husbands, lovers, fathers, and brothers. With no recourse but self-protection, the female characters who survive often withdraw from the marriage market entirely and retreat to the convent. Among early modern women in the Ibero-American Atlantic, Zayas is the most studied non-convent writer. The majority of scholarship reads her—correctly, in our view—as a proto-feminist thinker. Yet Zayas’s pro-aristocratic advocacy infuses her discourse insofar as she focuses on the violation of aristocratic women’s bodies and the behaviour of their aristocratic male protectors. While some servants, slaves, and non-white characters nobly protect the protagonists, more often than not they are shown to facilitate violence. Zayas therefore crafts a message that challenges only one aspect of early modern society: she protests the mistreatment of women, denounces men for violating women’s rights, and calls upon women to protect themselves for as long as society refuses to do so. Simultaneously, Zayas upholds many other values of the dominant culture and weaves into her texts what today we perceive as xenophobia, homophobia, and classism.

This balancing act was common among early modern women authors throughout the Ibero-American Atlantic: many questioned the treatment of women within and outside the church while simultaneously expressing support for the imperial, social, and religious forces that undergirded the empire.

For the Ibero-American Atlantic diaspora, we have over one hundred examples of women writers from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Most of those women wrote from convents and most focused on women’s issues at least peripherally. Teresa de Ávila’s sophisticated theological arguments, María de Ágreda’s intimate royal correspondence, and Zayas’s graphic depictions of violence do not typify women’s writing in the period, but these authors do help us understand in broad terms the variety and complexity of women’s relationship to the written word in the period. Several important facts about early modern literacy must be noted: women’s ability to read ranged from as low as 0 per cent in rural zones to 40 per cent in cities; many women and men knew how to write, but not how to read, and vice versa; and aural literacy was the most common access point to literary texts. A recent publication, *Women’s Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*, makes clear through essays on libraries, tutors, literary patronage, and reading practices, that while noblewomen often had access to tutors and family-based education, convents represented the best hope for women of different classes to have access to literacy training. As Anne J. Cruz notes in that book’s introduction, “Although the education received from mothers and tutors contributed significantly to noblewomen’s learning, convents were by far the most democratic and the principal sources of literacy instruction for early modern women.” With these points in mind, it is difficult to say whether women outside convent settings had access to other women’s texts and whether non-aristocratic women through the seventeenth century would have had knowledge of women’s intellectual activities outside the important popular examples of Saint Teresa, Zayas, María de Ágreda, and Sor Juana.

---

19 For lists of known women writers in Iberia and Spanish America, see Vollendorf, “Transatlantic Ties: Women’s Writing in Iberia and the Americas” in Kostroun and Vollendorf, 79–112.

20 Pedro Catedra and Anastasio Rojo have made important arguments about women’s reading and writing in the period in *Bibliotecas y lecturas de Mujeres. Siglo XVI* (Salamanca: Instituto de Historia del Libro y de la Lectura, 2004), particularly 39–44.

21 Anne J. Cruz, “Introduction”, *Women’s Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*, eds. Anne J. Cruz and Rosilhe Hernández (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 1–16 (5). Among the many important contributions in the volume, of particular note is the essay by Trevor J. Dadson, who focuses on a well-known noblewoman (the princess of Eboli) to explore women’s reading practices. See Dadson, "The Education, Books and Reading Habits of Ana de Mendoza y de la Cerda, Princess of Eboli (1540–1592)", Cruz and Hernández, 79–104.
From the American side of the Atlantic, the expression of support for and challenges to imperial mechanisms was complicated by the colonial setting. Whereas Zayas—as a noblewoman and a Spaniard living in Madrid—wrote from an absolutely central position in the empire, women in the Americas had to navigate their relationship to the empire from the periphery. Sor Juana clearly wrote within European and Catholic literary traditions, as seen in the genres she cultivated, the success with which she engaged baroque style and ideas, and even in her 1676 depiction of the Virgin Mary as a female Don Quijote. By the same token, Sor Juana wove Aztec and other Mexican indigenous cultural references into numerous texts, including her *autos* and *loas*, specifically her *Loa para el auto sacramental de "El divino Narciso"*. Her *villancicos* are also a major source for references that reflect her Americaness. The sets of *villancicos* on the Assumption (1676), the Conception (1676), and San Pedro Nolasco (1677) include verses that reflect an indigenous and African population with different manners of pronunciation that imitate the local speech of many New Spanish ethnicities. Here, she writes certain sections entirely in Nahuatl while in other parts she code-switches in Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl. Additionally, many of her ballads (*romances*) and sonnets pay homage to New Spanish dignitaries and other important citizens.

One less-studied example of women's complicated navigation of literary authority in the colonial context is that of Sor Juana de Maldonado y Paz (also known as Sor Juana de la Concepción). A Guatemalan who lived from 1598–1666, she took her vows in 1610 and was one of the first known female poets in the Spanish colonies. Sor Juana de Maldonado was, like many other criolla women who entered convents, the daughter of a ranked official, an *oidor* (don Juan de Maldonado y Paz), a standing that afforded her high social status. She also is said to have been the object of envy, intrigue, and scandal that had its roots in the rivalries that divided the principal families in modern-day Antigua, which was known in colonial times as Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala. Known not only by Spanish-speaking and indigenous people, but also by the seventeenth-century Dominican friar, sir Thomas Gage, Sor Juana de Maldonado appeared in Gage’s book, *The English-American, His Travail by Sea and Land or a New Survey of the West-Indies* (1648). Like Bartolomé de las Casas before him, Gage portrayed the Spanish as violent oppressors of indigenous populations and aided the creation of the Black Legend. Gage also recorded the luxurious, social, and artistic life that Sor Juana de Maldonado purportedly enjoyed in the convent.

Like many other writers in the colonial setting, Sor Juana de Maldonado y Paz cultivated European genres in which she integrated local cultural practices and references. Her *Entretienimiento en Obsequio de la Guida a Egipto (An Entertainment in Honour of the Flight into Egypt)* is an *auto navideño*—a Spanish Christmas play—that includes indigenous settings and characters. Sor Juana set her dramatic poem in Guatemala and integrated two indigenous characters that help the Virgin Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt. As is typical in convent Christmas plays, certain characters, such as shepherds, participate in the adoration of the Christ child. The nuns of Sor Juana de Maldonado’s convent fulfill these roles at the end of the piece to offer gifts and shelter to the holy family. Linguistically rich with indigenous speech patterns, this piece sympathetically depicts the indigenous people around the Conceptionist convent in which Sor Juana de Maldonado lived.

The text recounts the flight of Mary and Joseph to Egypt after the baby Jesus is born, but the flight takes place in Guatemala. At the beginning, Mary is seated under a tree, resting and singing a lullaby to Jesus. The stage directions, written in a not-yet-standardised Spanish of the period, indicate that a native woman, Rosa, enters the scene. Rosa presents herself and expresses concern for the Virgin and offers assistance, inviting the holy family back to her dwelling. Her soliloquy reflects indigenous speech patterns and pronunciation that contrast starkly with the more standardised Spanish used by the Virgin, Joseph, and in the stage

---

22 Sor Juana’s 1676 *villancico* refers to the Virgin as an avenger of wrongs, a rescuer of the weak, and a freedom fighter for the unjustly incarcerated ("La que venga los agravios, y anula leyes injustas, asilo de los pueblos, y amparo de las viudas; La que libertó los presos de la cárcel donde nunca, a no intervenir su aliento, esperan la soltura"). The 1676 *villancico* (*Loa*) is on the Dartmouth Project (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sorjuana/).

23 So much scholarship exists on Sor Juana that we hesitate to limit our citations, but we refer readers to three important studies of Sor Juana that simultaneously locate her within a pan-Atlantic and Mexican context and take into account her role as an important cultural figure and important woman writer in her day: Merrim (1999); Wray (2003); and Vincent Martin and Electa Arenal, eds. and intro., Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *El divino Narciso* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2009).

24 Information about Sor Juana de Maldonado’s life and all citations from her texts are taken from Luis Méndez de la Vega, *La comedia y perseguida sor Juana de Maldonado y Paz* (Guatemala: Programa Patrimonio, Cultura e Identidad en América Central, NUPU/Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2002). The year of her vows is mentioned on page 84.

25 Méndez de la Vega, 13.

26 *Autos navideños* (Christmas plays) were written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by famed Spanish authors Juan de la Encina, Lucas Fernández, Gómez Manrique, and Gil Vicente, for example.
directions. This representation of indigenous voices is sustained throughout the text and thereby suggests many interpretive possibilities regarding Sor Juana de Maldonado's intentions as to the representation of non-Spanish and non-criollo characters. The compassion expressed by Rosa and her husband, Francisco, toward the Virgin and child includes their offer to prepare them native dishes while they rest. Another linguistic marker of difference arises when the two men speak to each other: Joseph uses tú and Francisco uses the more formal vos, thereby denoting a hierarchical difference between them. The pronouns and the speech of the indigenous characters therefore clearly mark Rosa and Francisco as more lowly, less educated, and, likely, less Catholic, characters in comparison to the holy family. Like the Spanish authors who represented rural commoners in a similar manner, Sor Juana de Maldonado went to great pains to differentiate the indigenous characters' speech from that of the holy family.

The Conceptionist nun's depiction of the indigenous characters transcends linguistic concerns and opens the possibility for a subversive reading of Catholic femininity. While she carefully constructs what we might read as an indigenous Spanish, she also conveys a stereotypically self-effacing and humble personality in Francisico. His purportedly "Indian" character surfaces in his self-sacrificial impulse to give his head instead of giving up the child. He also insists upon carrying the bags because Joseph should not have to do so if "his Indian" is present. Certainly we must read these lines through a lens of the period. Sor Juana's imposition of humility and lack of self-worth onto the indigenous characters projects a successful imperial and evangelical mission in Guatemala: the indigenous man is the perfect "Indian" in that he poses no threat to the Spanish throne, accepts Christianity, and sacrifices himself at the expense of others.

The more interesting contrast in characterisations appears in the two main female characters. The presumed star of the show—the Virgin Mary—rarely speaks. When she does, she speaks to protect her child or to yield to Joseph's will. It is worth noting that while other women writers of the time, including Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Madre Ágreda, found less traditional interpretations of the Virgin, Sor Juana de Maldonado portrayed the humble, maternal, and subservient role of the Virgin. Sor Juana de Maldonado's Virgin appears to have no self-will. In one salient example, when the nuns of the convent ask that the Holy family stay in the convent for the evening, Joseph asks Mary's opinion of the offer. The Virgin responds that she will do whatever he desires because his wish is also hers: "Lo que tu pecho quiera / eso mismo quiero el mio" (whatever your heart desires, mine wants the same). By contrast, Sor Juana de Maldonado depicts Rosa the indigenous woman in a strikingly active and self-expressive role. While the Virgin rarely speaks and always demurs to male authority and needs, Rosa is the first character to individually speak. Thereafter she directs much of the action through her decisions and suggestions. Moreover, she is unafraid to express an opinion or disagree with her husband. While Méndez de la Vega has interpreted some of the banter between Rosa and Francisco as a comic element, the fact that the female indigenous voice expresses such strong and important opinions reveals a textual complexity that allows for a less obviously imperialistic, traditionally European depiction of indigenous women. The play also opens the possibility for a performance that could have subtly challenged dominant notions about the ease with which indigenous populations could be converted to Catholicism. With a strong-willed indigenous woman as part of the holy family's exodus to Egypt, Sor Juana de Maldonado's Entremetimiento en Obsequio de la Guía a Egipcio provides a fascinating glimpse into the ways in which one woman author used the European genre of the Christmas play to alter—or perhaps challenge—the boundaries of accepted views on imperialism and evangelism in the Americas.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Sor Juana de Maldonado's emphasis on local culture in her Christmas play reminds us that we must attend to the local contexts in which women operated throughout the broader Atlantic diaspora. Her play also

27 Méndez de la Vega, 105–06.
28 Méndez de la Vega, 108. In modern Spanish the use of vos can imply an informal relationship. Yet, as Méndez de la Vega notes, this text documents "the primitive use of the vos form for the rural indigenous people that represents a form of respectful submission when addressing Spaniards and ladinos, imitating the courteous colonial Spanish vosotros" ("el voso primitive del indígena rural, pero aquí en una forma de respetuoso sometimiento, al dirigirse a españoles y ladinos, en una imitación del cortés 'vosotros' del español colonial") (77).
29 Méndez de la Vega, 106.
30 Méndez de la Vega, 117.

31 For an examination of less traditional roles for Mary such as redeemer and her link to wisdom see Wray, The Devotional Exercises, 77–101.
32 Méndez de la Vega, 116.
33 Méndez de la Vega, 76–77.
exemplifies the dangers of over-interpretation: we simply cannot know whether Sor Juana de Maldonado and, by extension, the nuns in her convent who performed the Christmas play, had a conscious awareness of the limitations of dominant views toward indigenous people. The nuns could have performed the indigenous characters sympathetically and even parodically, and still not have been aware of any contradictions between their own beliefs and their representation of a weak Virgin Mary versus a strong indigenous woman rescuer. Or perhaps those contradictions were easily resolved in their local context, where indigenous populations outnumbered Catholic, criollo populations and where strong men and women looked out for one another in dangerous situations.

The complex—and sometimes unanswerable—questions raised by the study of women’s writing throughout the Ibero-American Atlantic diaspora add to our knowledge of how men and women of European, indigenous, African, and Asian descent interacted and operated in that expansive world. The larger historical picture—based on trade routes, urban settlements, evangelisation, and political alliances—has been mapped much more successfully than local concerns related to the everyday lives of men and women throughout the diaspora. There is no doubt that the Catholic impulse of the Iberianisation of the Americas gave rise to many similar social structures, beliefs, and attitudes throughout the Ibero-American Atlantic. To paint a more detailed portrait of that Atlantic world and its relation to individuals and empire, to natives and Europeans, we must also remember to include the growing scholarship on patriarchy, power, women, and gender in Iberia and Ibero-America. Women’s texts provide a rich source of information about the interstices between gender norms and individual experience as well as the interactions between Catholic, imperial, and patriarchal processes and local realities.

As we dig deeper, the variety of ethnic, national, class, and personal identities of women throughout the Atlantic diaspora inevitably should lead us to uncover the broadest possible spectrum of life experiences and beliefs throughout that great space. We already know that women both upheld and challenged dominant ideologies and that many specifically engaged with gender norms that narrowly defined women’s roles and opportunities. Our next step is to simultaneously continue our research on women and gender roles in different times and places in the Ibero-American Atlantic while we also continue to insist on a more integrated approach to Atlantic studies, one that considers women’s and gender history as an important part of the fabric of the entire Atlantic world.