

Sarah E. Owens

*Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*

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The history of women in the context of the early modern globalization is still largely unwritten, despite the increasing gender awareness of this research field. Among the reasons for this historiographical deficiency is the scarcity of sources produced by women in the Renaissance, also due to a lower female schooling during this age. In addition to this, the world of transoceanic sailing was particularly lacking in female presence, even for Renaissance standards. Women on board ships could create disorders among the motley crews, which were composed by sailors, soldiers, and adventurers of all kinds. As we can easily imagine, the captains were not eager to embark ladies. However, this was not a strict rule and there is abundance of exceptions. Noblewomen, widows, prostitutes, slaves, and servants often had room on board. To these categories we can add that of the nuns. Sometimes, an exception within an exception, thanks to their greater literacy, they could produce written sources and testimonies of their travels.

This is the case of the compelling story told by Sarah E. Owens in her book *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*. The source used by the author is a 450 folio manuscript, written between 1623 and 1629, kept today in the Convent of Santa Isabel de los Reyes in Toledo, Spain. The document tells the story of a group of Clarisse nuns who went from Spain to the Philippines in an epic fifteenth-month journey via the Atlantic Ocean, Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean. The manuscript was written by Sor Ana de Cristo, one the nuns who embarked in the voyage. Sor Ana writes about the difficult travel, the struggle to establish the convent once arrived in Manila, and focuses especially on Sor Jerónima de la Asunción (1556-1630), the leader of this group of adventurous Poor Clares. Nonetheless, Sara Owens' book is not about the manuscript written by Sor Ana but focuses instead on the voyage made by these nuns. The author

narrates with great sensitivity the story of a group of women engaged in a dangerous enterprise. Owens' book skilfully combines a detailed historiographic analysis from many points of view (social, cultural, political) with a psychological insight that suggests to the reader, without imposing, the inner and psychological world of these nuns.

The narrative follows in its stages the journey undertaken by Sor Jerónima and Sor Ana. After receiving approval to leave for the foundation of a monastery in Manila, in October 1619, the journey began in April 1620 with the departure from Toledo with a group of six nuns. At their arrival in Seville, two more nuns joined the group, and after a brief stay, they headed to Cadiz to embark. The story continues with the Atlantic crossing that ended with the arrival in Mexico City in September 1620. There the group resided in the local convent of the Poor Clares for six months, where two other nuns joined the small expeditionary force. On Ash Wednesday, 1621, the nuns led by Sor Jerónima left Mexico City for Acapulco, where they boarded the San Andrés galleon for the Philippines on April 21. The crossing of the Pacific Ocean lasted until July 24, almost fifteen months after the departure from Toledo.

During the trip we find descriptions of the people encountered by the nuns in the cities and new territories they visited, giving a complete cross-section of the world of their time. In addition to this, the book focuses on the private moments of these women and their confrontation with the great trials of life, such as death. An interesting example of these experiences is the encounter of the nuns with the natives of Guadalupe Island. As Owens points out, Sor Ana's manuscript highlights the sorrow of the nuns for the superficial Christianization of those populations which, in her own perspective, wanted more attention from the missionaries. This attitude on the part of Sor Ana tells us a lot about the Poor Clares' perception of themselves and their active role in the dynamics of the first globalization. They were an active part of this process.

A highly dramatic aspect of the trip was the encounter of the nuns with black women slaves. One of these slaves named María had attempted suicide, raising Sor Jerónima's concern. Despite the nuns' adherence to a rigid class system that did not question slavery, they were very touched by the story of the slave María, whose feelings are described in Sor Ana's manuscript, giving us a very precious and rare human portrait. Another example is the confrontation with death, one of the most iconic and dramatic experiences of the great oceanic crossings. During the navigation on the Pacific Ocean, Sor María de la Trinidad had died of some tropical fever. The event

produced deep emotion on board. However, this was not the only danger faced by the nuns in the open sea. Enemy ships could represent another serious threat. During a drill set up by the captain to see his sailors' reaction time, the authors explain, when Sor Jerónima was asked to hide in the hatchway, not knowing that it was only a trial, she answered that she would load the cannons herself to "tell those heretics a thousand things" (p. 83).

However, slavery, death and war were not the only events with which these nuns had to cope. Facing such a long journey meant also long periods of routine, both on land and on sea. Of particular interest is their daily life once arrived in Manila. The enthusiasm which initially followed the nuns' arrival in their 'promised land' was soon replaced by the difficulties of a very complex society, which combined the rigid European social hierarchies with the difficulties of a land inhabited by various ethnic groups. Even the changes in the political balance within the Franciscan family, whose support the sisters were hoping at the moment of their arrival became an element of difficulty and tension. However, there were also happy moments. For example, despite criticism from the local Hispanic nobility about Sor Jerónima's inclination for accepting too many Creole novices, she persevered in her inclusive intent. On the list of novices, we also find a Japanese noblewoman from the city of Kyoto, Naitō Lucía, who later professed under the name of Sor Lucía de San Juan (p. 108-109).

Another important aspect that Owens considers in her analysis is the educational and cultural background of the nun authoring the manuscript at the basis of this story. It is thanks to Sor Ana's literacy that we possess such a rare and revealing source, which not only portrays an epoch and a journey but also the author's very inner world. As mentioned, in fact, among the main problems in reconstructing women's history is the relative lack of self-produced sources. Writing was generally a male-dominated sphere. Among the most important exceptions is the one represented by religious women, who were more likely to receive a literary education. Literacy was particularly important in early modern catholic monasteries and convents. Nuns were required to learn how to read and write if they wanted to assume leading roles in their communities. Contrary to what is sometimes believed today, in pre-industrial Christian societies convents and monasteries, when freely chosen, could be a place of emancipation and self-accomplishment for women. Culture, often denied or limited in the domestic sphere, was one of the tools to pursue this goal. Despite male authorities not being always favourable to women's literacy, a strong female culture advocating education was being

established also thanks to strong religious symbols. Among these we find Saint Teresa of Avila who, as the author says, “served as a solid role model for women religious throughout the Iberian Atlantic” (p. 118).

In conclusion, Sarah Owens’ book stands out in the recent panorama of female historiography for its non-aggressive commitment, capable of merging the rigour of historical research with a pleasant narrative and an attention to the human being that never falls into a predictable rhetoric.

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