Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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12. Religious Spaces in the Far East

Women’s Travel and Writing in Manila and Macao

Sarah E. Owens

Abstract
This essay examines the travel and writings of Sor Magdalena de Cristo (1575–1653), one of the co-founders of the first Franciscan convent in the Philippines and another convent in Macao, China. Her harrowing journey emerges in a letter written by her confessor, who was also her advocate. While in Manila, Sor Magdalena wrote her magnum opus, Floresta Franciscana, a three-volume mystical treatise glorifying the Franciscan order. Based on unpublished letters and manuscripts gathered from archives in Spain and Italy, this essay explores Sor Magdalena’s role as an intrepid traveler and author, and also analyzes how she collaborated and formed a writing community with her peers, helping her Spanish sisters cultivate their own religious and literary space in the Far East.

Keywords: Franciscans; Saint Clare; Macao; Manila galleon; nuns

Women’s agency in the early modern period could take on many different forms. In this volume of essays, we encounter the nuances of women’s action and agency through an examination of their unique garb, the items found in their dowries, and their representation in portraits, among other examples. This essay delves into the networks formed by Spanish religious women who traveled from Spain to the Philippines and then to China in the first half of the seventeenth century, another way in which women shaped the world around them. Even by modern-day standards, the verve required to take on such a journey is astounding. Much of what we know about this story comes from the pens of the original nuns who set out to establish the first female Franciscan convent in the Far East. Other firsthand accounts come from the friars who accompanied the nuns or who later interviewed them for biographies.

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The main journey began in Toledo, Spain in May of 1620 and took ten nuns on two transoceanic voyages, the first across the Atlantic to Mexico and the second across the Pacific on a Manila galleon, finally arriving in Manila in August of 1621. During their fifteen-month odyssey, the founding nuns had to endure bouts of high fever and diarrhea, fight off swarms of mosquitos, mount mules, cross rivers, sleep cheek by jowl in the cramped quarters of musty galleons, and bury one of their own sisters at sea. The founder of the convent in Manila, Sor Jerónima de la Asunción, was immortalized in a portrait by Diego Velázquez when the nuns stopped in Seville on their way to the port of Cádiz, Spain. At the time, Sor Jerónima was 64 years old; she would go on to live another ten years in Manila. During her lifetime and even until the present day, Sor Jerónima was revered not only as a holy woman, but as the founder of the first convent in the Philippines. Much of what we know about Sor Jerónima comes from her first biographer, Sor Ana de Cristo, one of her travel companions and close confidant. Both nuns hailed from the same convent in Toledo, Spain, and Ana had known Jerónima for more than 35 years. My recent book, *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*, is based largely on Sor Ana’s 450-folio biography, which also includes a detailed account of their difficult journey to the Philippines. There is, however, another fascinating story that has to do with a branch of the same group of nuns that went on to found a Franciscan convent in Macao, China. One nun in particular, Sor Magdalena de la Cristo (1575–1653), stands out for her prolific writing and for her role in the foundation of Macao.

In many ways, Sor Magdalena shines at the center of the group, not only for her own works but also as the promoter of others. Although Sor Magdalena faced many challenges during her lifetime, this essay will show how she also became the center of nuns’ intellectual and religious space in the Far East. She collaborated and formed alliances with several nuns and friars, but she also undoubtedly faced disappointment, especially when she and several other nuns were expelled from the island of Macao in 1644.

Mariana González de Avila, as she was known before she took the veil, was born on 14 August 1575 in Pinto, Spain, a small village near Madrid. According to her anonymous biographer, she was born three or four months premature, so tiny that her ears stuck to her head and her mouth barely opened. For weeks Mariana was fed with a straw and wrapped in uncured lambskin to keep her warm. Evidently her premature birth did not harm

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1 For a translated excerpt of the journey, the portion from Mexico to Manila, see my translation, ‘Sor Ana’s Travel’.
2 ‘Resumen de la vida’, fol. 338r, 338v. All translations from archival documents are mine.
Mariana physically or intellectually. She learned to read at the age of three and entered the convent of Santa Maria de la Cruz in Cubas, Spain as a teenager. Later in life, at age 45, she traveled halfway around the world with Sor Jerónima to Manila to help found the Convent of Saint Clare (1621). At age 58 she crossed the South China Sea from Manila to Macao to establish another Franciscan convent, but returned to Manila ten years later after being expelled from Macao. She passed away in 1653 at age 78 from old age and complications due to hidropesía (edema).

We do not have a portrait of Sor Magdalena, but it is easy to imagine her with the same intractable determination as Sor Jerónima. In fact, Sor Magdalena had been selected as vicaress on the journey to Manila, and by all accounts, if Jerónima had died en route, Magdalena would have become the next abbess. It is unclear exactly why Sor Magdalena never held that position in Manila. Perhaps she was waiting for her chance to become abbess in Macao, a post she would later hold, or perhaps convent politics held her back. Regardless, she did form deep alliances with her Franciscan sisters from Spain, Mexico, and Manila.

As vicaress of the initial foundation in Manila and second only to Sor Jerónima, Sor Magdalena held sway over the other nuns. Years earlier, she had become inspired to travel to Asia after she met Friar Luis Sotelo when he stopped at her convent in Cubas on his way to Rome as interpreter of a Japanese Embassy. Fray Sotelo, who later would be martyred in Japan, had spent much time in Manila and Japan and longed to see convents of nuns spread throughout Asia, especially China. Fray Sotelo had a similar conversation with Sor Jerónima in Toledo. These women yearned to participate in the missionary endeavors of their male counterparts and Fray Sotelo’s visit helped them realize their dream. Indeed, they could not officially act as missionaries in the traditional sense, but on their journey they did interact with numerous local peoples and could influence them through conversations and their presence alone. Magnus Lundberg’s excellent study Mission and Ecstasy speaks to the need to expand our traditional view of men as the only missionaries. He writes, ‘I understand mission much more inclusively as acts made by a person perceived to be in favour of the salvation of others. Using such a definition, religious women could and did, have a missionary role: they were contemplative missionaries or active in a contemplative apostolate.’ Such a perspective helps us understand why Sor Jerónima, Sor Magdalena, and the other nuns would want to embark on such a long and dangerous journey.

3 ‘Resumen de la vida’, fol. 347v, 348v.
4 Lundberg, Mission and Ecstasy, p. 16.
Although nowadays very few people have heard of Cubas, Spain, it is not surprising that Sotelo stopped there to speak with the nuns at the convent of Santa María de la Cruz. That convent was renowned for its connection to the community’s founder, Madre Juana de la Cruz, who lived from 1481 to 1534. Many Spaniards believed Madre Juana to be a beata, a holy woman, and although she was never canonized, she was referred to as santa or saint Juana. Employing another nun as scribe, Madre Juana dictated her lengthy Libro del conorte, a series of 72 sermons that she preached in a state of rapture every Sunday over the course of thirteen years. She also dictated her life story to the same scribe who we are told learned how to write through miraculous literacy (an inspiration, mentioned directly by Sor Ana who only learned to write during the long voyage to the Philippines). Furthermore, Juana de la Cruz supposedly had received miraculous rosary beads blessed by the Virgin Mary and Christ himself. When chosen for the Manila foundation, Sor Magdalena brought some of those very beads on their long journey to the Philippines. According to several accounts the nuns used the rosary beads to ward off fierce storms at sea, cure their sisters from diarrhea, and expel the devil from an enslaved African woman on the Manila Galleon.

Far from their home convents in Toledo and Cubas, the nuns in Manila and Macao inspired each other to document their experiences, write about each other, and craft their own mystical treatises. They also felt inspired by their famous predecessor Madre Juana and her literary works. Oftentimes, the nuns literally took writing into their own hands, telling each other to pick up the pen. Notably, it was Sor Magdalena de la Cruz who first approached Sor Ana de la Cruz, saying, ‘Write the vida of our Mother [Sor Jerónima de la Asunción], because that is why you were taught.’ It appears that Sor Ana knew how to read before the nuns left Toledo, but still did not know how to write when she left Spain—a scenario that was not so uncommon in the early modern period, since reading and writing were taught as two separate skills. It was the nuns’ confessor and travel companion, Fray José de Santa Maria, who served as Sor Ana’s instructor, teaching her to put words on paper.

Indeed, confessors and ecclesiastical authorities played a substantial role in the writing process, especially because they often sanctioned the works or authorized them once they were finished. The words crafted by the nuns could also be used to further their missionary campaigns in the

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5 For more on Madre Juana de la Cruz, see Boon ‘Mother Juana de la Cruz: Marian Visions’ and Boon and Surtz, Mother Juana.

6 Sor Ana, AMSIRT, fol. 68v.
Philippines, Japan, and China, and often became the rough drafts that they would use for their own works. For example, two Franciscan friars, Ginés de Quesada and Bartolomé de Letona, used Sor Ana’s manuscript as the basis of their own published biographies of Sor Jerónima de la Asunción.\(^7\)

Another friar played a crucial role in encouraging the nuns to write about their experiences. Fray Montemayor, commissary general of the Franciscan order, wrote to the nuns from Mexico in 1626 ordering them to write about the foundation in Manila, including biographies of the founding nuns.\(^8\) Officially sanctioned by their superior, the nuns took this mandate seriously. In addition to her own autobiography (which unfortunately has been lost), Sor Magdalena served as scribe for another nun, Sor Juana de San Antonio. During the early hours of the morning while she plucked chickens, Sor Juana de San Antonio dictated her lengthy Noticias de la Verdad (or News of the Truth) to Sor Magdalena, a series of spiritual revelations, which she claimed came directly from the Lord and the Virgin Mary.

In addition to her role as amanuenses, Sor Magdalena also wrote a short prologue to the three volumes of Noticias de la Verdad. In the prologue she alludes to the precarious state of female authorship by stating that she had no time to edit the work and that she wanted Franciscan friars to correct any errors, suggesting that she recognized writing could lead to censorship or even persecution by the Holy Office. She even adds another layer of protection for herself, stating that Sor Jerónima had read the work ‘and authorized it with incredible joy in her soul.’\(^9\) (Her worries were not unfounded: years later the Inquisition did accuse Sor Juana de San Antonio of spreading heretical doctrine through her works and put her under house arrest outside the convent, where she died in 1661.)\(^10\) Another one of the co-founders, Sor Leonor de San Buenaventura (one of the two nuns who joined the expedition in Mexico) wrote her own endorsement of Noticias by adding a two-page document at the end of volume, attesting to its legitimacy and urgency: ‘and it has been written with such haste that you can hardly see the hand of the secretary [Sor Magdalena] since the author speaks so quickly.’\(^11\) It is not surprising that she would comment on Sor Magdalena’s dexterity with the pen, since Magdalena wrote 770 folios over a period of fourteen months. On an interesting side note, Sor Leonor de San Buenaventura mentions

\(^7\) Quesada, Exemplo de todas; and Letona, Perfecta religiosa.

\(^8\) Montemayor’s letters to the nuns in the Philippines can be found in Sor Ana, AMSIRT, fols. 152r–56v.

\(^9\) Sor Magdalena de la Cruz, prologue to Juana de San Antonio, Noticias de la verdad, vol. 1, n.p.

\(^10\) ‘Proceso y causa criminal’, fols. 122r–42r; and Owens, Nuns Navigating, pp. 103–105.

in this same document that she was writing her own autobiography, but unfortunately, that manuscript appears to have been lost.

For the most part these women banded together in collaboration and alliances, but some of these alliances disintegrated when they crossed into areas of power struggles. Some of these struggles stemmed from a backlash toward Sor Jerónima's push to follow the strict First Rule of Saint Clare, while others were due to global tensions such as the final split of Spain and Portugal's joint monarchy in 1640. Convent and political politics were already brewing when, in 1633, Sor Magdalena and Sor Leonor de San Francisco, both originally from Spain, and six other women from Manila set sail for Macao to establish the first Franciscan convent in China. Sor Magdalena and her sisters built up the new community in Macao until she and several others were expelled from the island in 1644.

In the initial foundation to Macao, Sor Magdalena once again took the role of vicarress and her co-founder Sor Leonor took the helm as abbess. Sor Magdalena's biographer alludes to the incongruity of her not being chosen as abbess when he writes, 'One could point out that if this servant of God was what we have described, why hadn't the prelates chosen her as abbess and principal founder of this new foundation?' He goes on to explain, however, that this was part of God's divine plan to hide her leadership virtues (even from herself), until the proper time. Sor Magdalena did eventually become abbess after Sor Leonor, and when her three-year term was finished, she became novice mistress. 12

Again, it appears that convent politics, along with the tense political situation between Spain and Portugal, played a big role in who stayed and who left Macao. By 1644 the Portuguese crown had split away from Spain and Spanish residents were forced to leave Macao. 13 It is unclear to me, however, why several of the original founders remained in the convent, including Sor Leonor (originally from Spain), who once again had taken the helm as abbess, and Sor Melchora de la Trinidad (a nun from Manila who would later die of breast cancer). 14 Sor Magdalena de la Cruz, along with a small group of at least three nuns, family members, and two friars, left Macao in October of 1644 accompanied by Spanish soldiers and other military personnel.

12 ‘Resumen de la vida’, fol. 348v.
14 For more on this time period in Macao (1633–1644), see Penalva, pp. 71–113. See also Martínez, Compendio histórico, pp. 298–299.
We know much about the details of the harrowing journey back from Macao to Manila because the chaplain of the Macao convent, Fray Antonio de Santa María Caballero (1602–1669), who accompanied Sor Magdalena and the other nuns, wrote a letter back to the nuns in Macao as a type of account of their journey. The French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes, who met Fray Antonio and another friar in Cochinchina (present-day Vietnam), also wrote an account. Like many of the other friars discussed in this study, Fray Antonio de Santa María apparently had developed a deep friendship with Sor Magdalena, also becoming her close advocate and promoter of her life and works. He had met her in Macao while preaching at the Convent of Saint Clara, and volunteered to become her confessor when she told him about her plan to write *Floresta Franciscana*, or ‘Franciscan Grove’. Sor Magdalena's anonymous confessor tells us that she first received inspiration to write this work while listening to Fray Antonio's sermon. Apparently, his words transformed into a net of multicolored flowers and she found herself in a state of rapture with her ‘Esposo’ (divine Husband). While holding her in his arms, God told her to write about ‘the conception of his Mother’ and that she should title the work *Floresta Franciscana*. She wrote the first chapter for Fray Antonio in Macao, but her work was interrupted when the nuns and other Spaniards were forced to leave China.

At age 68, this voyage cannot have been easy for Sor Magdalena. According to Fray Antonio, they ran into a terrific storm that almost caused the boat to capsize, and ‘the holy nuns were tossed from one side of the deck to the other, spilling their guts with vomiting.’ After the tempest, the ship's captain was forced to land on Cochinchina where entire crew, along with the nuns and their confessor and another friar (Antonio del Puerto), were taken prisoner by a Mandarin king at the port of Turon (modern Da Nang). Fray Antonio narrates the nuns’ saga from October 1644 until April 1645. His account highlights Sor Magdalena's bravery and her role in converting many Mandarins to Christianity and helping invigorate the nascent Christian

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15 A transcription of this letter can be found in Penalva, ‘Carta de relación sobre los sucesos de los castellanos que saliendo de Macan por el mes de Octubre de 1644, arribaron a Cochinchina’, pp. 151–168. The original is located in Rome at the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Jap-Sin 68, fol. 48r–59r. See also Alberts, *Conflict and Conversion*, pp. 162–167. Fray Antonio was a prolific letter writer. Transcriptions of his letters, mostly written from China (1648–1662), can be found in *Sinica Franciscana*, pp. 354–606.

16 The two friars also wrote letters to Rhodes during his imprisonment describing the nuns’ ordeal in Cochinchina. See Rhodes, pp. 155–163.

17 ‘Resumen de la vida’, fol. 352r–352v.

community already started by Jesuit missionaries such as de Rhodes, who just so happened to be imprisoned at that time in Pulocambi, Cochinchina.

According to Fray Antonio, the Mandarin king and queen took a liking to the nuns and were awed by the fact that they had cut their hair. A gendered power struggle played out when the King asked the women to remove their veils so he could see their faces, but they refused to do so in front of so many men. They did, however, lift their veils for the queen. At one point the queen had one of her servants reach under the nuns’ wimples to touch their bare heads. According to Rhodes, “The lady touched the head of the oldest one and finding no hair on it exclaimed loudly that it was certainly true. This was considered a very great wonder.”²⁹ The queen herself had a private meeting with the nuns without any men present and signaled out Sor Magdalena when she took her by the hand. Despite the fact that Fray Antonio described the queen as ‘very devoted to idols and temples (pagodas),’²⁰ it appears that her female gender afforded her special privileges in the eyes of Sor Magdelana, especially since she allowed herself to be touched on the head by one of her ladies-in-waiting.

While at court, the nuns stayed at the home of a Christian Mandarin called Joachin and his wife Anne. Many Christians and non-Christians alike visited the women. Throughout his account Fray Antonio repeatedly emphasizes the nuns’ role in ‘showing them the way to heaven’ and ‘in the ten days that the madres and two friars were at court and in the aforementioned house, 54 men and women were baptized.’²¹ Although in this case the exact number is difficult to verify, it is definitely plausible since studies show that between the 1580s and 1800 there were about 300,000 converts to Christianity in China (many from the Jesuit Mission).²²

At 68 years of age, Sor Magdalena made an obvious impression on the Mandarin monarchy and eventually the entire group was allowed to return to Manila. Overall, Fray Antonio stresses the success of their visit, but according to an eighteenth-century Franciscan historian, he also expressed fear that the ‘barbarians would commit some indecent act against his daughters.’ That fear was also expressed by the nuns themselves, who prayed to the Lord and Saint Clare to save them from this danger.²³ In all of these documents related to the nuns, we never actually hear the word rape and the nuns

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always seem to miraculously escape physical and sexual violence. Whether or not this was true is difficult to ascertain from primary sources, but they obviously traveled at great risk.

In her excellent study, Alberts delves deep into Fray Antonio’s letter along with Alexandre de Rhodes’ account. On the one hand, Alberts’ study highlights the nuns’ unique role in the spread of Christianity, but also points to other scholars of Catholic conversion in Japan and China who examine the impacts or lack thereof of western religious women. In the case of Japan, for example, ‘local conditions could lead to ambivalent responses to Christianity’ since bikuni (Buddhists nuns) were respected and admired by men and women alike. She also highlights studies by Caroline Brewer, Nhung Tuyet Tran, and Barbara Watson Andaya, all of whom analyze the complexity of gender roles and female participation in religious society of the early modern Philippines, Vietnam, and all of Southeast Asia respectively. Indeed, Spanish nuns did not have a monopoly on spiritual agency and we must be careful not to silence the participation of local women in their roles in their own communities.

Once back in Manila, Sor Magdalena felt inspired to continue her magnum opus, Floresta Franciscana, her own three-volume mystical treatise, ultimately glorifying the Franciscan order. This work probably would not have been possible without the encouragement of Fray Antonio de Santa María. As adeptly pointed out by Jodi Bilinkoff in Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, nuns and confessors often formed close bonds, some of which could inspire nuns to become writers. In the case of Sor Magdalena and Fray Antonio, the confessor–penitent relationship was one of much more of an equal standing. His name is on the cover of Floresta Franciscana as confessor of Sor Magdalena and he provides annotations for the three volumes. He helps Sor Magdalena cast herself as a mouthpiece of the Lord by asking her to document the ways in which she received inspiration to write this massive work. In a twenty-page introduction, Sor Magdalena responds to his query expounding on the different visions and experiences that help her put pen to parchment. She explains how it all started in December 1643, when the Eternal Father granted her ‘grandes favores’ (‘great favors’). He sent seraphim, who told her to write down all of her experiences gathered during prayer. In her introduction, Sor Magdalena repeatedly emphasizes how she was granted these encounters with her Divine Husband, the Virgin.

26 See Brewer, Shamanism, Catholicism; Tran, Familial Properties; Andaya, The Flaming Womb.
Mary, and angels and says that she had no choice but to document them, because ‘nada es mio’ (‘nothing is mine’). She employs rhetoric of humility, typical to nuns’ writings, describing herself as ‘tan nada’ (‘nothing’) and ‘miserable.’ And yet, we can also catch glimpses of Sor Magdalena’s voice as a writer and the pleasure she derives from crafting such a monumental work. Reminiscent of present-day authors who refer to ‘flow’, a feeling of getting lost in the satisfaction of writing, Sor Magdalena explains how ‘everything that they give me comes in a lightning bolt of clarity, light, and tranquility’.27 Drawing on garden imagery and in keeping with Franciscan spirituality, she sees her words as fruits of the Lord, comparing the material for her work with bunches of grapes and fruit trees heavy with pears, apples, and cherries. The title itself, Floresta Franciscana, pays homage to the verdant grove of the Franciscan order.

Throughout the 62 chapters in three volumes, Sor Magdalena embarks on different biblical scenes such as the creation of Adam and the fall of Lucifer, while others touch on the Immaculate Conception or on important Franciscan figures such as Saint Clare and Saint Francis. This highly polished work, edited by Fray Antonio, was certainly intended for distribution and perhaps publication. One can still peruse extant copies at the Archivo Franciscano Ibero-Oriental in Madrid or at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

In conclusion, far from their home communities in Spain and Mexico, the original founders of the convents of Manila and Macao formed together as a writing community in the Far East. Although many of the manuscripts have been lost over the years, most notably because Allied bombing at the end of World War II completely destroyed the Manila convent and its archive, we know that at least six of the original ten founder nuns wrote some type of document, including letters, biographies, autobiographies, poetry, and mystical treatises. Many of the lost documents, such as Sor Jerónima’s spiritual autobiography Carta de marear en el mar del mundo (‘Chart for navigating the worldly sea’), are mentioned in extant letters and other manuscripts. Thankfully, the Franciscan order sent many documents back to Spain before the Spanish American War in 1898 and some of those manuscripts can be found in the original convent in Toledo or in other small archives. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I believe that Sor Magdalena shines at the center of this writing community. Not only did she compose her own autobiography and a three-volume mystical treatise, Floresta Franciscana, but she also served as scribe for Sor Juana de San Antonio, and she encouraged Sor Ana de Cristo to write her biography of Sor

27 Floresta franciscana, vol. 1.
Jerónima. With the collaboration of friars and confessors, and the inspiration of santa Juana, their famous spiritual female predecessor, Sor Magdalena helped her Spanish sisters cultivate their own religious and literary space in the Far East. Clearly, the literary and missionary contributions of these Spanish women should not be minimized.

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