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Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Print in Colonial Mexico

This paper addresses the relationship between gender and print culture in Mexico through the figure of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1694), cloistered nun and celebrated writer of her time. Protected by powerful Spanish patrons, Sor Juana was able to produce poetry and plays despite the disapproval of the ecclesiastical authorities and publish three volumes of her works in Spain (one posthumously). At this time, the Mexican printing press almost exclusively produced religious texts such as tracts, hagiographies, and sermons. By circulating her works in Spain, Sor Juana gained transatlantic renown in a market far from the perceived provincialism of the colonial context. An incipient American identity and pride in the regional was often tempered by a deep insecurity regarding metropolitan views of colonial culture. Consequently, European approval was the ultimate ratification of writing talent. The clergymen who opposed Sor Juana's literary activities were often poets themselves. None of them were to achieve the fame Sor Juana enjoyed in Spain or to see their works printed so lavishly for such an international public.

In this paper I examine the gendering of print culture in Mexico, and its connection to issues of access to knowledge and power. What role did the politics of publishing play in the clergy's persecution of Sor Juana? Given that the central figures responsible for her downfall were all themselves prolific authors, how can we read her success as an affront to the carefully calibrated institutional power of male knowledge? And, finally, within this context how can we interpret Sor Juana's stated desire for a purely private intellectual life alongside the public dissemination of her works?