

# SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ: AN ARTISTIC INQUIRY

by

ISABELLA SENATORI

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Spanish  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

May 2023

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Isabella Senatori for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of Spanish to be taken June 2023

Title: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: An Artistic Inquiry

Approved: Leah Middlebrook Ph.D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

This thesis offers a two-pronged inquiry into the work of seventeenth-century nun and polymath Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695). I explore Sor Juana as a gendered writer through two disciplines: literary criticism and painting. By using an interdisciplinary approach to engage with Sor Juana, I can explore popular and scholarly realms of discourse and reflect Sor Juana's own creative and versatile approach to intellectual pursuit. I explore the theme of gender in the context of seventeenth-century New Spain, a selection of Sor Juana's literary work, the portraiture and the representation of women, as well as in Sor Juana's lived experience. I position the poem, "*Hombres necios*" ("Foolish Men"), as an avenue to understanding Sor Juana since it is so often the first poem that readers encounter. The cumulative work of this project contributes to current discourse in Translation Studies, Sor Juana Studies, and Decolonial Studies to showcase the relevance and brilliance of Sor Juana's message as she touches on pertinent topics of race, class, and gender.

## **Acknowledgments**

I'd like to express gratitude to my thesis committee for joining me in this project. I want to give special thanks to my primary advisor, professor Leah Middlebrook, for all the guidance and support she provided during my thesis writing process. I could not have produced this work without her expertise.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures	5
Introduction / Chapter 1	6
Methods	8
Literary Analysis	8
Interpretive Lens	8
Medium	9
Contextualizing Sor Juana	12
“ <i>Hombres necios</i> ” as an Entrance Point	14
Chapter 2: Sor Juana’s Writing	16
“Hombres necios”	17
“Este, que ves, engaño colorido”	20
Primero sueño	22
La Respuesta	24
“Romance 19”	25
Chapter 3: Representation & Portraiture	27
Chapter 4: Painting Analysis	30
The Setting	32
The Birds	32
The Snake	35
The Lilies	36
The Pointer	38
The Table	40
The Books	41
The Mirror	42
The Bottom Corner	43
The Nun	44
Chapter 5: Contribution & Conclusion	46
Translation Studies/Transmediation	46
Sor Juana studies	47
Decolonial Studies	48
Bibliography	50

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Concept Collage

Figure 2: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: An Artistic Inquiry

Figure 3: Birds in the Upper Right Corner

Figure 4: *The Immaculate Conception* painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo

Figure 5: The Snake

Figure 6: Calla Lilies

Figure 7: *The Flower Seller* Painting by Diego Rivera

Figure 8: Hand Pointing Toward White Lily

Figure 9: *The Creation of Adam* Painting by Michelangelo

Figure 10: Instruments of Intellectual Pursuit

Figure 11: The Mirror or Frontispiece

Figure 12: Devil, Flesh, and the World

Figure 13: The Nun, a Representation of Sor Juana

## Introduction / Chapter 1

My artistic inquiry into Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz began as a visual interpretation of just one of her poems, “*Hombres necios*” or “Foolish Men.” The poem was my introduction to Sor Juana and the inciting incident for my love of her work. However, this isn’t surprising since the poem is one of her most famous literary achievements. “*Hombres necios*” exemplifies her wit and attention to the world as she dismantles the double standards of patriarchal thinking using prose. And doing so, might I add, as a nun in the seventeenth-century crisis of women’s education where the public seemed to be torn in support and opposition of her.<sup>1</sup>

Despite all of this, the poem remains unfamiliar to readers who do not possess ample knowledge of the Spanish language, the context in which the poem was created, or the intricacies of baroque literature. In this way, an in-depth understanding of the poet requires a very specific kind of education that relies on access to things like academic rhetoric, periodicals, libraries, reading practices, etc. For these reasons, my interest in Sor Juana grew in the context of a classroom and with scholarly intentions. With this project, however, I hope to create more accessibility to Sor Juana scholarship by operating in a visual mode, appealing to the universal language of imagery and breaking away from the typical scholarly investigations.

My project no longer centers on the poem, “*Hombres necios*.” Instead, I position the poem as an introduction to understanding Sor Juana as a gendered writer. Sor Juana takes on gender in her “*Romance 19*” and omits the gender of the poetic speaker in her complex masterwork, the “*Primero sueño*,” or “First Dream,” which concludes with the world’s awakening from sleep, “y yo despierta” (“and I [feminine] awake”). After reading more of Sor

---

<sup>1</sup> Merrim, Stephanie. Early Modern Women’s Writing and Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz. p. 193

Juana's other work, I realized that I had to expand my thesis to include more than "*Hombres necios*," since her view of gender was more complex than the poem led me to believe. As I continued researching, I discovered other nuances in the ways Sor Juana's life and literature interact. Although she was a lover of the arts, Sor Juana felt skeptical of the representation of women in portraiture since it was often created to serve the male viewer.<sup>2</sup> Even though she was a nun, she never had a portrait *coronada* to depict herself as a bride of Christ, leading many to believe that she might have rejected this title.

I came to understand Sor Juana as a complex figure who accessed the world through knowledge and writing. This newfound understanding of Sor Juana's complexity seemed noticeably different from some of the representations of the poet in popular culture where she often appears in an altered form, reflecting one modern value or another. I began to explore the possibilities and drawbacks present in both realms of discourse, engaging with them creatively and retroactively to form a more comprehensive image of Sor Juana.

To accomplish this, I took an interdisciplinary approach. The flexibility of a creative inquiry enabled me to engage with ideas through creative dialogue rather than pure analysis. I found that creative dialogue better conveyed the many facets and complexities of Sor Juana's character, including aspects of the poet's rich popular and scholarly afterlife. Additionally, by employing literary analysis and visual art, I was able to include a more varied set of information to inform my artistic production, drawing from history, literature, portraiture, and visual motifs.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. "My Original, A Woman" Copies, origins, and Sor Juana's iconic portraits. p. 93

## **Methods**

### *Literary Analysis*

Although the central component of my thesis is an interpretive painting, the artwork itself is informed by a particularized context, a historical figure (that is, Sor Juana, her life, and the scholarship that has grown up around her), and a selection of that figure's literary work. For this reason, my approach requires the use of literary analysis before any sort of artistic methodology. I use the term “literary analysis” broadly, since I deploy a variety of approaches and examine writing across multiple fields of study. This thesis considers a diverse set of texts that includes history, prose, academic and popular discourse, translation, and fine art. To derive meaning from this varied content, I employ close reading and knowledge of literary devices as techniques to form my understanding. I define close reading as the careful consideration of details in a particular text or section of text that when understood together can produce meaning for the reader. While performing close reading, I also draw on an understanding of literary devices such as metaphor, irony, personification, etc. to deepen my comprehension.

### *Interpretive Lens*

When I began researching Sor Juana, I found that the complexity of her work made it possible to form multiple interpretations. For this reason, I developed an interpretive lens to direct my research and position it within the current discourse. I call this lens “Sor Juana as a gendered writer.” Scholars often refer to this lens as a “gender studies framework” or “feminist reading.” I believe that Sor Juana’s literature demands consideration of gender no matter what the framework since her context as a woman in seventeenth-century New Spain dictated so much of her life and limitations.



As feminist and woman-centered scholarship began to emerge, Sor Juana quickly became a symbol of feminist writing. However, by positioning Sor Juana as a gendered writer, rather than exclusively as a feminist or woman writer, I can consider her gendered context while also leaving space for a gender-neutral soul in my interpretation. In her “*Romance 19*” to the Vicerine she writes, “...*que las almas / distancia ignoran y sexo*” (“...our souls have no gender and know no distance”).<sup>3</sup> Scholar Emilie Bergmann claims that Sor Juana’s solution to gender was “androgyny rather than anonymity.”<sup>4</sup> For these reasons, my interpretive lens focuses on gender but aims to leave a figurative space for Sor Juana in the gender consciousness of modernity.

### *Medium*

The artistic inquiry itself takes the form of an oil painting on stretched canvas. Like literary analysis and the development of my interpretive lens, the painting calls for unique methodology and reasoning. It requires an understanding of fine art and skills in visual communication to render complex ideas visually. In terms of the medium, I chose painting because it reflects the artistic traditions of the seventeenth century. Sor Juana was an amateur painter, appeared in numerous portraits herself, and also wrote of representation in painted portraits. If I chose digital art as the medium instead, the project would lack this historical connectivity.

I first conceptualized the imagery for this project in the form of collage, which Merriam-Webster defines as “a creative work that resembles such a composition in incorporating various

---

<sup>3</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. Expanded 2nd ed. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009. P.11

<sup>4</sup> Bergmann, Emilie, Janet Greenberg, Gwen Kirkpatrick, Francesca Miller, Marta Morello-Frosch, Kathleen Newman, and Mary Louise Pratt. *Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America : Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America*. Reprint 2019. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990. P. 169

materials or elements.”<sup>5</sup> This definition reflects the core of my interdisciplinary approach which assembles “elements” of Sor Juana from different sources to form a representative image. The elements do not represent the poet literally, rather metaphorically and abstractly through pieces of her literature, thought, and context. In doing so, the collage creates a self-contained dialogue between the elements which when viewed together form meaning. The meaning that is derived from my project in many ways relies on the viewer as an interpreter. In the same way that scholars interpret Sor Juana’s texts and analyze her life, I want the viewer of my painting to access this type of thinking as well.

In creating the painting, there is no doubt that my “voice” as a creator comes through in the form of my artistic choices. The perceptibility of my mark-making, and therefore myself, is undoubtedly present for the viewer. For this reason, I made every effort to be intentional with my choices to maintain relevance to my topic. For instance, the collage includes bright colors, a common feature in my own artistic practice, but when beginning the painting I purposefully made it dark to mimic the baroque painting style and create a connection to Sor Juana’s poem, the “*Primero sueño*,” which prominently features the night and coming of dawn.

---

<sup>5</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, “collage.”



Figure #1: Concept Collage.

## Contextualizing Sor Juana

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born of Spanish heritage in *Nueva España* during Mexico's colonial period in the mid-seventeenth century. The year of her birth was either 1648 or 1651 in Nepantla, Mexico. In 1661, Sor Juana's family moved to Mexico City where the most significant institutions of political and religious life were located.<sup>6</sup> The new location exposed the young writer to Latin liturgy and discourse in Spanish, indigenous, African, and *ranchero* dialects.<sup>7</sup> Sor Juana became hungry for knowledge, but because she was a woman, she could not attend the university, so she pursued an education of her own making.

In her famous *Respuesta*, an autobiographical letter she prepared for Church authorities, she describes bothering "[her] poor mother with insistent and annoying pleas, begging her to dress [her] in men's clothes and send [Sor Juana] to the capital, to the home of some relatives she had there, so that [she] could enter the university and study," however, when Sor Juana's mother refused, she "quenched [her] desire by reading a great variety of books that belonged to [her] grandfather, and neither punishments nor scoldings could prevent [her]."<sup>8</sup> By the age of fourteen, Sor Juana had written her first poem and showed no desire to stop her intellectual pursuits. This insatiable hunger for knowledge would cause her to pursue convent life, a convent being the only space where women could live and continue learning during this period.

Before entering her first convent, the Monastery of San José, at the age of sixteen and becoming "the Mexican nun" of historical legacy, Sor Juana became a lady-in-waiting for the viceregal court. This began a long personal relationship between Sor Juana and the vicereines of New Spain, Leonor Carreto (1616-1673) who served as vicereine between 1664 and 1673 and

---

<sup>6</sup> Cañeque, Alejandro. "The Empire and Mexico City" Religious, political, and social institutions of a transatlantic enterprise. p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p. 51

Maria Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga who served from 1649 to 1721. Both maintained close relationships with Sor Juana, and she wrote lovingly about each throughout her literary career.<sup>9</sup> The viceregal powers provided Sor Juana with continuous patronage and the encouragement of her intellectual pursuits for the majority of her life. In fact, Maria Luisa brought Sor Juana's poetry to Spain for it to be published. Eventually, however, the support would end due to economic, political, and social crises that caused many of Sor Juana's supporters to return to Spain.<sup>10</sup>

It wasn't until 1669 that Sor Juana took the veil at the convent of San Jerónimo where she would remain until her death. The wealthy convent allowed her to continue her intellectual pursuits, but not without some resistance. During Sor Juana's time, educated women were considered "fascinating and abnormal" by the public.<sup>11</sup> Women's education usually ended once they attained enough literacy for "devotional and domestic purposes" while men continued their education to achieve "the humanist legacy of the European Renaissance."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, she received a mix of both criticism and protection for her intellectual curiosity. The most notable resistance came from her confessor, Antonio Nuñez de Miranda, who believed that Sor Juana's education made her scandalous and interfered with her path to salvation.<sup>13</sup>

One of Sor Juana's most famous literary works came from a tension that arose from a piece of theological argumentation, "*Carta Atenagórica*" (1690), which had been published as a refutation to a sermon by Antonio Vieira. The controversy surrounding Sor Juana's refutation swelled and the Bishop of Puebla delivered her critique to the press with "Sor Filotea" as a

---

<sup>9</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. P.11

<sup>10</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p.12

<sup>11</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p.2

<sup>12</sup> Cruz, Anne J., and Rosilie. Hernandez. *Women's Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*. p. 1

<sup>13</sup> Kirk, Stephanie. "The Gendering of Knowledge in New Spain" *Enclosure, women's education, and writing*. p. 23

preface, asking Sor Juana to defend herself. *La Respuesta* or “The Answer” (1691), was Sor Juana’s response to the bishop where she defended her right to intellectual pursuit and creative production. Despite vicereine María Luisa’s attempts to defend Sor Juana and restore her reputation, the nun gave away her belongings that year, in 1692, including the contents of her library. Sor Juana would write close to nothing the next two years and died a few years later during an epidemic in 1695.

From her first poem at the age of fourteen until her self-imposed literary silence near the end of her life, Sor Juana accomplished so much. She was a self-educated, *criolla* woman, “nun, rebel, genius, poet, persecuted intellectual, and proto-feminist” whose work marked the end of the Spanish Golden Age.<sup>14</sup> During her literary career, Sor Juana wrote for both the church and the state, as well as for herself and those she loved. Her writing has deeply penetrated Mexican popular culture, with school children still memorizing her powerful verse today.<sup>15</sup> Since her death in 1695, Sor Juana and her work have been adapted into numerous different languages and across multiple platforms, including both film and song. I hope to continue exploring Sor Juana’s legacy in this project through my artistic inquiry, contributing further to a rich and evolving afterlife.

### **“*Hombres necios*” as an Entrance Point**

Although my thesis no longer centers on “*Hombres necios*,” the poem still plays an important role in my project as the entrance point to a deeper understanding of Sor Juana and her writing. It was “*Hombres necios*” that first sparked my interest in Sor Juana and began my path in research. Without my exposure to the poem, my project would likely not exist, or at least not

---

<sup>14</sup> Bergmann, Emilie L., and Stacey Schlau. p. ix

<sup>15</sup> Bergmann, Emilie L., and Stacey Schlau. p. iii

exist in the same capacity as it does now. I expect that “*Hombres necios*” assumes a similar role as an introduction for many like myself, especially for those with limited or no exposure to Mexican literature from the seventeenth century. For this reason, I want “*Hombres necios*” to show prominently in my artistic inquiry since my project aims to make Sor Juana accessible and the poem seems to be the point of access for those just beginning to know the great poet.

“*Hombres necios*” has also played a significant role in Sor Juana’s reception history after her death. According to scholar Martha Lilia Tenorio, “even when artistic and aesthetic concepts changed and her work was no longer liked or read, Sor Juana remained present thanks to only one poem, the famed *redondillas*, “*Hombres necios*.”<sup>16</sup> The poem has enabled her to persist in popular and scholarly consciousness for hundreds of years, and for this reason, I include the poem in my inquiry as an entrance point.

“*Hombres necios*,” has come to represent Sor Juana as a historical feminist, but this reading alone does not characterize her completely.<sup>17</sup> Other works (discussed more in the “Sor Juana’s Writing” section of this thesis) contribute to her image differently and portray her as “an intellectual, saint, victim of the Inquisition, representative of the Spanish monarchy, indigenist, first nationalist,” and more.<sup>18</sup> However, the poem situated Sor Juana in the tradition of women’s writing, along with all its gender-related constraints. Since my thesis focuses on Sor Juana as a gendered writer, “*Hombres necios*” is a necessary component of my inquiry in representing Sor Juana’s view of an unfair gendered reality.

---

<sup>16</sup> Tenorio L. Martha. "Readings from the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries" *Hagiography and Nationalism*. p.51

<sup>17</sup> According to Amanda Powell, “Through the mid-twentieth century, studies citing Sor Juana as the ‘first feminist of the Americas’ routinely read a largely construed biography” (64).

<sup>18</sup> Tenorio L. Martha. "Readings from the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries" *Hagiography and Nationalism*. p.51

## Chapter 2: Sor Juana's Writing

"*Hombres necios*" is Sor Juana's most well-known poem, and yet it barely scratches the surface of her life's literary accomplishments. She wrote sixty-five sonnets, sixty-two *romances*, thirty-two *loas* (play preludes), three sacramental *autos* (one-act dramas), two comedies, a *sarao* (celebratory song and dance), a variety of other works in different Castilian metrical forms (*endechas, liras, redondillas, decimas, silvas, sainetes*), and designed an archway that conveyed the virtues of good government for the arrival of the new viceroys.<sup>19</sup> Sor Juana embraced many literary forms and topics, including those of religious and political institutions, science, and philosophy, adapting them to reflect her views and values as an evolving intellectual, artist, and woman. However, these aspects of Sor Juana often go underappreciated or ignored in critical discourse in order to champion the popularized narrative of the "first feminist of the Americas."<sup>20</sup>

Due to the popularity of "*Hombres necios*" and Sor Juana's historical significance as a woman, critics often attribute to her character "a hazily specified defiance to patriarchal and ecclesiastical forces rather than scholarly erudition, philosophical rigor, esthetic quality, theological expertise, or prolific output."<sup>21</sup> In this way, our understanding of Sor Juana's literature is usurped by the legacy of her "feminist poem," thus limiting our understanding by overlooking diverse aspects of her life and writing. As Rosario Castellanos claimed in 1966, many scholars have left out "*su vocación intelectual y religiosa, del ambiente en que se forjó, de los obstáculos ante los que adquirió reciedumbre, ... de la manera como su obra entronca con la tradición y de los matices con que la enriquece ...*" ["her intellectual and religious calling, the

---

<sup>19</sup> Cañeque, Alejandro. "The Empire and Mexico City" Religious, political, and social institutions of a transatlantic enterprise. p. 3

<sup>20</sup> Powell, Amanda. "Passionate Advocate" Sor Juana, feminisms, and sapphic loves. p. 65

<sup>21</sup> Powell, Amanda. "Passionate Advocate" Sor Juana, feminisms, and sapphic loves. p. 65



environment that shaped her, the obstacles that endowed her with resilience... the way her writings spring from tradition and in turn subtly enrich it”].<sup>2223</sup>

My thesis considers Sor Juana as a gendered writer, and it therefore necessitates the inclusion of “Hombres necios” as this poem demonstrates her frustration with gender relations; however, the inclusion of other literary works is also necessary to honor the fullness of her life beyond the features and limitations of her gender. In this section, I will discuss five works of Sor Juana’s literature that I considered for my artistic inquiry: “*Hombres necios*,” *Primero sueño*, “*Romance 19*,” “*Este que ves*,” and *La Respuesta*.<sup>2425</sup>

“*Hombres necios*”

The poem, written as a *redondilla*, comes from Sor Juana’s *sátira filosófica* (“philosophical satire”) and comments on the senselessness of patriarchy. It begins with the infamous stanza that addresses the generalized “hombres” directly:

*Hombres necios que acusáis  
a la mujer sin razón,  
sin ver que sois la ocasión  
de lo mismo que culpáis*

You foolish and unreasoning men  
who cast all blame on women  
not seeing you yourselves are cause  
of the same faults you accuse

---

<sup>22</sup> Powell, Amanda. “Passionate Advocate” Sor Juana, feminisms, and sapphic loves. p. 65

<sup>23</sup> Castellanos, Rosario. “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) – En la mirada de otros. Retratos y autorretratos literarios de los siglos XVI a XX.”

<sup>24</sup> All translations of “Hombres necios,” “*Romance 19*,” “*Este que ves*,” and *La Respuesta* are by Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell in *The Answer / La Respuesta (Expanded Edition): Including Sor Filotea's Letter and New Selected Poems*.

<sup>25</sup> All translations of *Primero sueño* are by Luis Harss in *Sor Juana’s Dream* (1986).

This stanza sets up the position for the rest of the poem in which Sor Juana criticizes the hypocrisy of the patriarchy to impose a double standard on women. She creates irony by using the language of the oppressor to “accuse” him of being accusatory. As the poem continues, Sor Juana addresses different modes of the double standard, for instance:

*Queréis, con presunción necia,  
Hallar a la que buscais,  
Para pretendida, Thais,  
Y en la posesión, Lucrecia*

With ridiculous conceit  
You insist that woman be  
a sultry Thais while you woo her;  
A true Lucrecia once she’s won.

Here, the poet introduces the double standard of purity/impurity in which men desire a woman to be both “pure” and “impure.” Thais is a figure of Greek myth, known as the promiscuous companion to Alexander the Great. In contrast, Lucrecia represents ultimate purity in ancient Rome as she committed suicide following her rape (seen as a loss of purity, or great sin). Sor Juana criticizes these ideas using logic:

*¿O cuál es más de culpar,  
Aunque cualquiera mal haga  
La que peca por la paga,  
o el que paga por pecar?*

Or which more greatly must be faulted,  
though either may commit a wrong:  
She who sins for need of payment,  
Or he who pays for his enjoyment?

In this stanza, Sor Juana poses a question that reveals the logical fallacy of the double standard. The poem effectively provokes this realization in the reader by appealing to their logic, asking them to answer the question and come to a conclusion for themselves. Specifically, the stanza refers to prostitution, but it is related to the larger value of purity where women are blamed for being impure while patriarchal society “incites” and perpetuates the impure behavior. The poet utilizes these rhetorical questions throughout the sonnet to interrogate various injustices imposed by a masculine culture and criticize them by showing their illogical nature, often blaming men directly:

*¿Qué humor puede ser más raro  
Que el que, falto de consejo,  
él mismo empaña el espejo  
y siente que no esté claro?*

Whose behavior could be odder  
Than that of a stubborn man  
Who himself breathes on the mirror,  
And then laments it is not clear?

In this way, Sor Juana uses her intellect to dismantle accepted ideas about the relation between men and women in society, identifying the hypocrisy and criticizing men. The poem concludes with the following stanza:

*Bien con muchas armas fundo  
Que lidia vuestra arrogancia,  
Pues en promesa e instancia  
Juntáis diablo, carne y mundo*

Thus I prove with all my forces  
The ways your arrogance does battle:

For in your offers and your demands  
We have devil, flesh, and world: a man.

In this final stanza, Sor Juana employs a powerful metaphor that weaponizes the masculine culture's arrogance and hypocrisy against women, and men are reduced to the devil, flesh, and the world.

*“Este, que ves, engaño colorido”*

Another piece of Sor Juana's *sátira filosófica*, *“Este, que ves, engaño colorido”* (“This object which you see, a painted snare”) is a sonnet that the poet wrote about her own self portrait.

It begins:

*Este que ves, engaño colorido,  
que, del arte ostentando los primores,  
con falsos silogismos de colores  
es cauteloso engaño del sentido;*

This object which you see—a painted snare  
Exhibiting the subtleties of art  
With clever arguments of tone hue—  
Is but a cunning trap to snare your sense;

Here, the poet notes the deceptive quality of portraiture, specifically in the portrait's depiction of beauty. As other scholars have discussed, Sor Juana's perspective on portraiture might stem from a larger critique of the representation of women as desirable objects for the male gaze, although this piece does not explicitly mobilize a wider critique. She continues,

*éste, en quien la lisonja ha pretendido  
excusar de los años los horrores,  
y venciendo del tiempo los rigores  
triunfar de la vejez y del olvido,*

This object, in which flattery has tried  
To overlook the horrors of the years  
And, conquering the ravages of time  
To overcome oblivion and age

In this stanza, Sor Juana gets specific about her skepticism, noticing the lack of internal depth that can be achieved in an image. To her, the portrait lacks the complex “horrors” of life; the process of aging for instance. The idea of aging or dying operates in direct opposition to beauty, seen in part as the value that women offer to the world, an idea that is amplified in visual mediums. The next two stanzas deepen the skepticism, introducing the topic of vanity and concluding the poem the way Sor Juana often does, with a strong image:

*es un vano artificio del cuidado,  
es una flor al viento delicada,  
es un resguardo inútil para el hado:  
  
es una necia diligencia errada,  
es un afán caduco y, bien mirado,  
es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada.*

This is an empty artifice of care,  
A flower, fragile, set out in the wind,  
A letter of safe-conduct sent to Fate;  
It is a foolish, erring diligence,  
A palsied will to please which, clearly seen,  
is a corpse, is dust, is shadow, and is gone.

When paired with the idea of vanity and the portrait of a woman, the mention of a flower conjures ideas of delicacy and purity. The flower often represents femininity and attributes these qualities to women. The final stanza reminds the reader of death, again, where Sor Juana asserts the lack of reality in the portrait.

## *Primero sueño*

The long-form philosophical poem, *Primero sueño* (“*First Dream*”), composed in the Castilian verse form of the *silva*, is one of the most well-known and intimate poems of Sor Juana’s literary career. The poet herself stated, “*No me acuerdo haber escrito por mi gusto sino es un papelillo que llaman El Sueño*” (I recall having written nothing for my own pleasure save a trifling thing they call the *Dream*).<sup>26</sup> Due to the length of the poem, I am not providing detailed literary analysis in this section, but a more generalized discussion of the poem’s content as it pertains to my particular project.

This work is critical to understanding Sor Juana as a gendered writer. In the poem, the speaker is genderless for 975 lines. It begins with the body of the speaker going to sleep, and as the poem progresses, we follow the speaker’s soul through space. According to scholar Martínez-San Miguel, “*el sujeto femenino se ve obligado a abandonar su cuerpo para acceder a un conocimiento, pero a la vez se ve imposibilitado para obtener este conocimiento si no puede regresar a la instancia original*” [“the female subject is forced to abandon her body in order to access knowledge, yet at the same time the subject is unable to obtain this knowledge without returning to the original condition”].<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup> In this way, Martínez-San Miguel argues, the poem “construct[s] a subject whose intellectual activity is intimately connected to the body. [The poet] envisions a feminine subjectivity that aspires to cultural intelligibility once it can establish that gender is incidental and not essential to the capacity to acquire and create knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> Here, the connection between gender and knowledge is clearly illustrated, specifically through the

---

<sup>26</sup> Luiselli, Alessandra. “PRIMERO SUEÑO” Heresy and knowledge. p. 176

<sup>27</sup> Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. *Saberes Americanos: Subalternidad y Epistemología En Los Escritos de Sor Juana*. Pittsburgh, PA: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Universidad de Pittsburgh, 1999. p. 81

<sup>28</sup> Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. *Saberes Americanos: Subalternidad y Epistemología En Los Escritos de Sor Juana*. Pittsburgh, PA: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Universidad de Pittsburgh, 1999. p. 81

<sup>29</sup> Daniel, Lee A., and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel. “Saberes Americanos: Subalternidad y Epistemología En Los Escritos de Sor Juana.” *Hispania* 85, no. 4 (2002): 857–. P. 102

presence and absence of gender in the poem. As the gender of the speaker is unknown and then known, the shift of power becomes apparent to the reader in which the feminine body is made to be abandoned in order to gain access to the knowledge of the world. *Primero Sueño* exemplifies the complexity of Sor Juana as a gendered writer in which her life and literature were deeply affected by a gendered reality.

This abstraction of gender occurs during the night in the poem, since the day is ruled by men through the patriarchal structure of society. It concludes with the coming of day in the typical cyclical style of the baroque where the speaker must again adhere to the confines of gender and knowledge. In the words of Nanfito, the autobiographical poem “validated her place within the context of a “patriarchal cartography corresponding to the reality of seventeenth century Mexico.”<sup>30</sup> In the final stanza, this becomes clear:

*El fugitivo paso  
y en su mismo despeño recobrada  
esforzando el aliento de la ruina,  
en la mitad del globo que ha dejado  
el sol desamparado,  
segunda vez rebelde determina  
mirarse coronada,  
mientras nuestro hemisferio la dorada  
ilustraba del sol madeja hermosa,  
que con luz juiciosa  
de orden distributivo, repartiendo  
a las cosas visibles sus colores  
iba restituyendo  
entera a los sentidos exteriors  
su operación, quedando a la luz más cierta*

---

<sup>30</sup> Nanfito, Jacqueline C. (Jacqueline Clare). *El Sueño : Cartographies of Knowledge and the Self*. p. 146

*el mundo iluminado, y yo despierta.*

To westward rule over  
The dark half of the globe  
Forsaken by the sun.  
While, as in golden mane,  
Our hemisphere, resplendent, is arrayed  
In his judicious light,  
Where all things, ordered  
And distributed, regaining  
Their color and shape,  
And the outward senses their domain,  
The world, made visible,  
Is clarified, and I awake.

### *La Respuesta*

Unlike the other works discussed in this section, *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* is a piece of correspondence, a letter, rather than a piece of stand-alone literature. Sor Juana wrote the letter to the bishop of Puebla, who had published her *Carta atenagórica* (“*Athenagoric Letter / Letter Worthy of Athena*”) without Sor Juana’s permission. The missive, which the Bishop titled “*Carta atenagórica*” stirred up controversy around the poet and her criticism of Antonio Viera’s “Maundy Thursday Sermon,” viewed as a scandalous intervention. The letter is significant to this project because it offers insight into Sor Juana’s life and position in society from her own perspective. It’s important to me that my exploration of Sor Juana as a gendered writer centers on her own views. As Wray points out, the *Respuesta* also serves as a well-argued treatise that addresses issues of women’s participation in study and intellectual discourse, making it, for



many, a groundbreaking proto-feminist text that takes its place alongside other women-authored works that advance the status of women as active contributors to culture and knowledge.”<sup>31</sup>

On the topic of writing, Sor Juana shares the following in her *Respuesta*:

*...desde que me rayó la primera luz de la razón, fue tan vehemente y poderosa la inclinación a las letras, que ni ajenas reprensiones —que he tenido muchas—, ni propias reflejas —que he hecho no pocas—, han bastado a que deje de seguir este natural impulso que Dios puso en mí.*

...For ever since the light of reason first dawned in me, my inclination to letters was marked by such passion and vehemence that neither the reprimands of others (for I have received many) nor reflections of my own (there have been more than a few) have sufficed to make me abandon my pursuit of this native impulse that God Himself bestowed upon me.

Sor Juana discusses her passion for writing, a passion she links to intellectual pursuit. She also alludes to the controversy of her position, claiming that she did everything in her power to avoid the ridiculed path of a woman intellectual. However, throughout the *Respuesta*, Sor Juana argues for learning. She denounces the jealousy of her critics, claims that her education is a way to better understand theology, and continues to push back against gender-related constraints.

“*Romance 19*”

During her lifetime, Sor Juana wrote poems to three vicereines. The most notable of these is María Luisa Manrique. According to Sor Juana Scholar Nina Scott, the literature Sor Juana created for the vicereine makes up “more than 15 percent of Sor Juana’s lyric corpus.”<sup>32</sup> The poems often included themes of love, which for many years scholars dismissed. But in more

---

<sup>31</sup> Wray, Grady C. “Challenging Theological Authority” *The Carta atenagórica / Crisis sobre un sermón and the Respuesta a Sor Filotea*. p. 133

<sup>32</sup> Gómez, Isabel. “Translations of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz” *Ideology and interpretation*. p. 83

recent scholarship, discussion around sexuality and gender have deepened, including discussion of Sor Juana's possible "lesbianism" or "sapphic love."<sup>33</sup>

My thesis does not attempt to further theories of Sor Juana's sexuality or gender expression, but considers her as a gendered writer. In particular, I am interested in the Neoplatonic concept of the gender-neutral soul that appears in some of Sor Juana's writings. In "Romance 19," dedicated to the vicereine, Sor Juana writes:

*Ser mujer, ni estar ausente,  
no es de amarte impedimento;  
pues sabes tú que las almas  
distancia ignoran y sexo.*

Your being a woman, your being gone  
cannot pose the slightest hindrance  
to my love, for you know our souls  
have no gender and know no distance.

I chose this translation of the romance because Amanda Powell conveys the Neoplatonic concept of the gender-neutral soul by choosing to translate the Spanish word "sexo" as "gender" (Gómez, 83). To me, considering Sor Juana as a gendered writer must include both the fluidity of modern conceptualizations of gender as well as Sor Juana's own views, and an acknowledgement of how gender limitations impacted the writer. I do not wish to impose my own views or modernized views onto Sor Juana, but to foster a creative dialogue that generates a new space for Sor Juana's legacy to operate.

---

<sup>33</sup> To read more about this discussion, see "Passionate Advocate" Sor Juana, feminisms, and sapphic loves by Amanda Powell, "Contemporary Mexican Sor Juanas" Artistic, popular, and scholarly by Emily Hind, and the introduction to Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell's *The Answer / La Respuesta* (Expanded Edition): Including Sor Filotea's Letter and New Selected Poems.

### Chapter 3: Representation & Portraiture

Sor Juana begins sonnet 145 with this famous line: “*Este que ves, engaño colorido*” (“This object which you see, a painted snare”).<sup>34</sup> Here, the speaker of the poem gazes upon her portrait and expresses distrust towards the image. Like sonnet 145, “several of Sor Juana’s poems (e.g., *décimas* 61, 102, 103, 126, 127, and especially 89) also lament the false and seductive nature of portraits in general and painted women in particular.”<sup>35</sup> To scholars who interpret Sor Juana through a gendered lens, myself included, her apprehension regarding the representation of women in portraiture seems to connect “portraiture’s compulsive lying with the patriarchy’s need to make up, represent, and contain women’s bodies and identities as it chooses.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, my representation of Sor Juana necessitates the consideration of representation and how my “portrait” considers the poet’s views and beliefs.

I believe that the most valuable portrait of Sor Juana was created by the poet herself through her own literary self-fashioning. In the words of Arenal, “She painted portraits in words: to express love of María Luisa Manrique de Lara, to ridicule the preposterous exaggerations used to describe women in poetry, to disparage the expectation that women never age. Men put up mirrors, she showed, to view what they wanted to see. Hers bore a different image.”<sup>37</sup> Besides the ways in which she portrayed herself, Sor Juana’s image has evolved with time where popular and scholarly discourse have taken hold to make her life part of an inaccessible fiction.

During her lifetime, Sor Juana experienced multiple attempts of censorship “to transform a speaking intellectual into yet another of portraiture’s gratifyingly “silent ladies.”<sup>38</sup> In this way,

---

<sup>34</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p. 159

<sup>35</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa “My Original, A Woman” *Copies, origins, and Sor Juana’s iconic portraits*. p. 91

<sup>36</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. “My Original, A Woman” *Copies, origins, and Sor Juana’s iconic portraits*. p. 92

<sup>37</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. p. 15

<sup>38</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. “My Original, A Woman” *Copies, origins, and Sor Juana’s iconic portraits*. p. 92

ensorship was an attempt to manipulate Sor Juana's image to fit the values of her time. Only one portrait of the poet by Juan de Miranda might have been created while she was alive, leaving all other representations as symbolic projections onto an invented physical form.<sup>39</sup> Even Miranda's painting, although created during Sor Juana's life, took place in an art tradition where "a woman's role as the implicitly desired and beautiful object of the male subject-viewer who portrays and thus "creates" her."<sup>40</sup>

As interest surrounding Sor Juana grew and her work was first translated into English, translators prioritized depicting her as a "charming Mexican lady."<sup>41</sup> Even in recent years, new depictions of her have shown up, centuries after she lived. For instance, the 1990s film adaptation of her life, *Yo, la peor de todas*, in which Sor Juana's sexuality takes priority in her portrait in what the Boston Globe described as "lesbian passion seething behind convent walls."<sup>42</sup> All of these portraits of Sor Juana are different, and impose a desired image of the poet, whether or not these images offer any sort of accuracy.

Due to the nature of my thesis which explores Sor Juana as a gendered writer through artistic inquiry, I depict the poet both visually and conceptually and therefore create a "portrait" of her. The power of portraiture is seen in its ability to oppress and impose a preferred image onto an individual, but also can provide an opportunity for representation that respects the subject of the image. According to Lyon, "a painted likeness will likely outlive and redefine the sitter by virtue of its very materiality and objecthood. A portrait's mere existence resurrects the dead."<sup>43</sup> In this way, I hope that my thesis resurrects the parts of Sor Juana's literary self-

---

<sup>39</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. "My Original, A Woman" Copies, origins, and Sor Juana's iconic portraits. p. 93

<sup>40</sup> Garrard, Mary D. "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist." p. 571

<sup>41</sup> Lee, Muna. "A CHARMING MEXICAN LADY." *The American mercury* (1951) 4 (1925): 105-.

<sup>42</sup> Bemberg, Maria Luisa., Lita. Stantic, Antonio Larreta, Assumpta Serna, Dominique Sanda, Héctor Alterio, and Octavio Paz. *Yo, La Peor de Todas = I, the Worst of All*.

<sup>43</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. "My Original, A Woman" Copies, origins, and Sor Juana's iconic portraits. p. 92

fashioning that the poet would have wanted. More specifically, my painting omits Sor Juana's face (as seen in portraits that adhered to the "fictively candid form of naturalistic portraiture" that consumed the Spanish after the 1620s) and instead champions the intellectual and artistic messaging in her literature.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. "My Original, A Woman" Copies, origins, and Sor Juana's iconic portraits. p. 91

## Chapter 4: Painting Analysis

The product of my artistic inquiry, a 40'x 48' oil painting on stretched canvas, explores Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as a gendered writer. Inspired by Sor Juana's historical context, literature, portraiture, and discussion within both popular and scholarly discourse, the painting fosters a creative dialogue between these elements of Sor Juana's experience and a literary afterlife, synthesizing them into a cohesive image. The medium and portrait-centered aspects of the painting create historical connectivity, where I engage with themes from the baroque painting style of Sor Juana's time, and blend them with my own practice to ground the inquiry in the present. The visual themes of the painting connect to a selection of Sor Juana's works, portraits of the poet, and visual metaphors of my own making.

It was my intention with this painting to honor Sor Juana's lived experience, including her apprehension of being represented. In doing so, I must acknowledge that I'm representing someone without a voice in modernity, someone who cannot speak to her own representation. This creates the possibility of misrepresentation or the creation of a single-story representation of a person who contains multitudes. For these reasons, my project considers gender, while leaving space for a gender-neutral soul. Thus, avoiding the typical woman-centered view of Sor Juana, and instead focusing on gender as something that influenced her experience, and therefore her writing.

The painting represents Sor Juana through metaphor and imagery from her own literature to connect viewers to Sor Juana's poetic power rather than an imposition of my own view of the poet's physique. The remainder of this section will provide a discussion and brief analysis of the different elements in the painting, however, it is my personal belief that works of art should be able to speak for themselves and to each viewer individually.



Figure 2: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: An Artistic Inquiry (2023). Oil on canvas, 40x48 inch.  
Isabella Senatori.



### *The Setting*

The scene that forms the content of the painting occupies an outdoor setting, a landscape that reaches the mountains and horizon with limited subjects occupying the foreground, middle ground, and background. I chose to set the painting outside because of the connection between nature and femininity, think “Mother Earth.” The feminine power of nature extends, in my mind, to the world as a gendered space where “society,” unlike nature, is ruled by patriarchal power structures which define a gendered binary and forms of gender-related oppression. When developing a metaphorical space to situate my inquiry, the natural world seemed like the perfect place to conceptualize Sor Juana as it removes her from a specified or limited context and surrounds her with visually conveyed ideas.

In Sor Juana’s poem, *Primero sueño* (“*First Dream*”), the speaker’s soul leaves her body and takes flight, returning at the start of the day which restores the reign of man. The speaker’s gender is ambiguous until the final line, making the reign of man also signifies the return to a gendered reality of femininity. My painting is situated at this point, during dawn, to convey this transitory period between freedom and existence within the gendered world. The painting conveys both elements of freedom and oppression simultaneously; the bird of peace, taking flight, and the oppressive lily which confines the feminine character to purity and virginity, for instance. Lastly, the setting portrays a geographic specificity as it features the mountainous countryside of Mexico, in Sor Juana’s time “New Spain,” but lacks landmarks that anchor the poet to a certain time period.

### *The Birds*

In the top left corner of the painting are two white doves, one in flight and another stalling above the engraved frontispiece. I chose to include the birds because of their religious



significance and symbolism. The dove often represents peace, innocence, and freedom, but simultaneously appears in religious circumstances, including Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's painting *Immaculate Conception* which celebrates a sinless life.<sup>45</sup> I took the image of one of the doves from this painting when I was first conceptualizing my project. *Immaculate Conception* was commissioned by King Charles III of Spain, 72 years after Sor Juana's death, but contains themes that were well established during her time. The dove in Tiepolo's painting appears above the Virgin Mary who is praised for her conception without sin, and she stands on a snake to represent her victory over the devil.

Sor Juana had a complex relationship with religion. First, she pursued convent life primarily as a way to further her learning and avoid marriage, and she asserted this in *La Respuesta*. While Sor Juana did write for the Church and argued for the benefit of her studies for theology, she also faced censorship at the hands of her own confessor who believed that learning interfered with her path to salvation. Lastly, Sor Juana criticized the sermon of the priest Ant3nio Vieyra, leading to backlash and her eventual self-silence. In these ways, Sor Juana's relationship to the church creates a distance between the poet and the values of the religious institution. For this reason, I put two birds. One represents peace and freedom, and the other symbolizes the expectations of purity imposed on the poet, but at the end of the day, they are birds which, to me, evade negative impositions as they are connected to nature.

---

<sup>45</sup> Tiepolo, Giovanni Battista. "Immaculate Conception." Painting. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. 1767. Image source: Museo del Prado. <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-immaculate-conception/8da40987-dd6b-4bb3-ab0e-4210ecb6495e>



Figure 3: Birds in the Upper Right Corner.



Figure 4: *The Immaculate Conception* painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo.

### *The Snake*

As in Tiepolo's painting, I used the snake as a symbol for the devil and sin in my piece. In fact, the image of a snake was not uncommon for nuns of the seventeenth century who



experienced “visions” of the devil.<sup>46</sup> The snake resides under the table and serves as an element of balance for the “goodness” and “purity” morals imposed by religion that show up elsewhere in the painting. The snake is also connected to nature, and thus, simultaneously evades negative impositions like the doves.



Figure 5: The Snake.

### *The Lilies*

Like the birds, I chose the lilies for their symbolism. The white lily often represents purity, virginity, and femininity. These values are imposed on women as ideals and so the comparison of women to delicate flowers is frequent in poetry, and likely familiar to Sor Juana as a poet. The lilies in the painting are calla lilies which I first experienced in Diego Rivera’s painting, *The Flower Seller*.<sup>47</sup> I chose calla lilies because, in addition to their symbolism, they

---

<sup>46</sup> Lopez, Rosalva. “The Devil, Women, and the Body in Seventeenth-Century Puebla Convents.”)

<sup>47</sup> Rivera, Diego. “The Flower Seller.” Painting. Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City, Mexico. 1942. Image source: Norton Simon Museum, Gift of Mr. Cary Grant. <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/P.1980.2.3/>



convey geographic connectivity to Mexico's flora and in Rivera's painting they depict the feminine connection to nature.

In the painting, one lily replaces the face of Sor Juana in the engraved frontispiece while another extends outside the frame towards a pointed hand. The lily that appears as Sor Juana's own image in the "mirror" functions as a reflection of how the world wants to see Sor Juana, as an image of purity, virginity, and femininity, rather than a scholar or anything else. The other flower faces a pointed finger which gestures towards the Spadix, the reproductive part of the lily, placing an emphasis on the outward imposition onto the feminine sexual experience.



Figure 6: Calla Lilies.



Figure 7: *The Flower Seller* Painting by Diego Rivera.

### *The Pointer*

In the top right corner of the painting, a masculine hand points towards one of the lilies as mentioned in the previous section. The hand, taken from *The Creation of Adam*, appears as a gesture of accusation, pointing toward the reproductive part of the flower.<sup>48</sup> This gesture evokes a sense of shame unto the feminine image and is meant to represent the imposition of the

---

<sup>48</sup> Michelangelo. "The Creation of Adam." Ceiling fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. 1508-1512. Image source: Musei Vaticani Mobile. <https://m.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani-mobile/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-sistina/volta/storie-centrali/creazione-di-adamo.html>

patriarchy, especially in regard to sexuality and gender. More than this, the hand can be viewed as either the hand of God or the hand of Man since in terms of control over women, they are synonymous during this time.



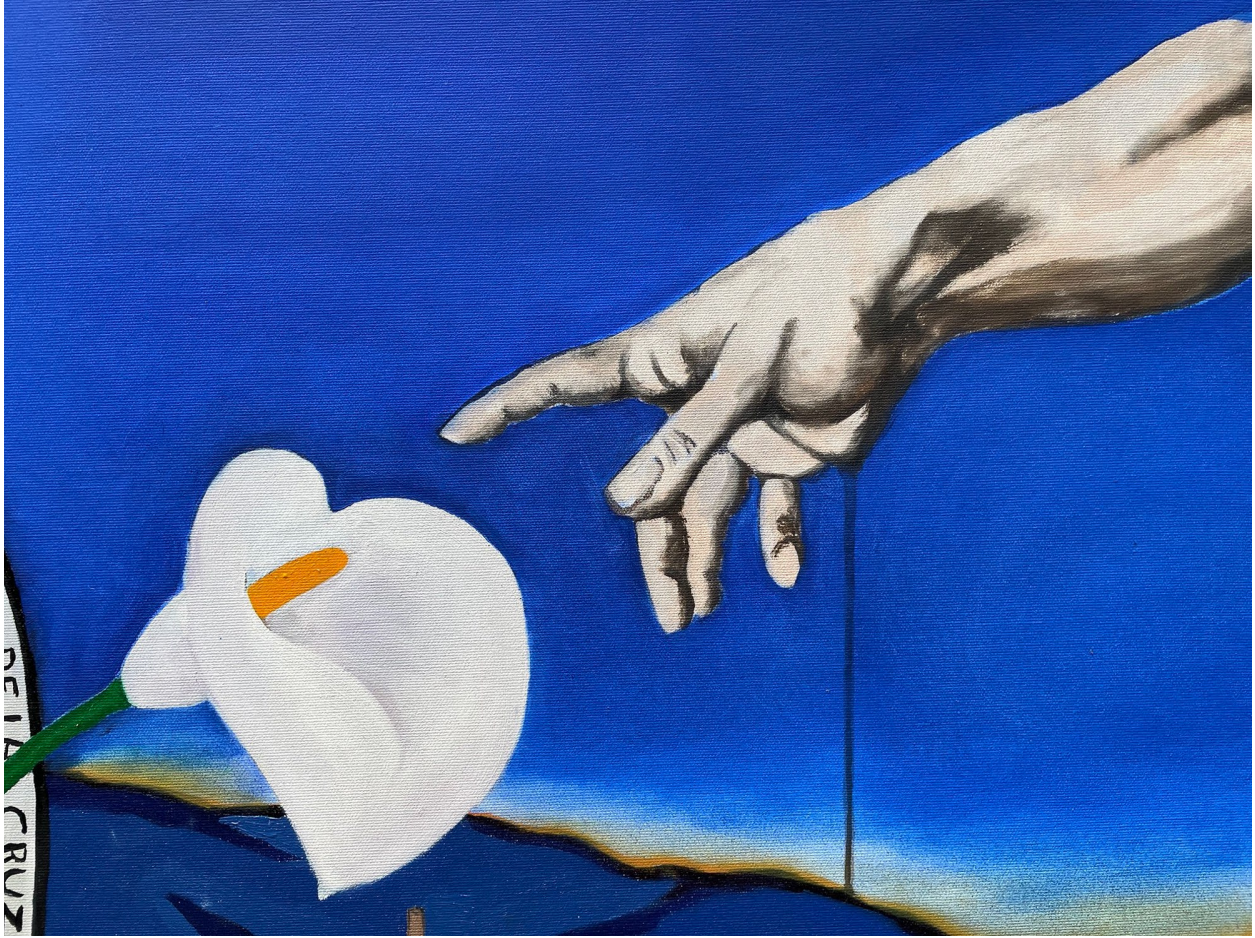


Figure 8: Hand Pointing Toward White Lily.



Figure 9: *The Creation of Adam* Painting by Michelangelo.

*The Table*



The wooden table which assumes a large portion of the painting is ambiguous in its usage; it could be a desk or a kitchen table because of its size and placement void of context clues. I chose to create ambiguity around the table in order to combine the meanings of both domestic and intellectual space. In *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana speaks of the kitchen, a women's space, as a place perfect for thinking: “¿qué podemos saber las mujeres sino filosofías de cocina?” and she continues, “ ...Y yo suelo decir viendo estas cosillas: Si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito” [“What can we women know, save these philosophies of the kitchen? ...I often say, when I make these little observations, ‘Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more’”].<sup>49</sup> As a desk, the table represents Sor Juana’s passion for intellectual pursuit and the space where she created her literature.

### *The Books*

On the desk are a couple of books and a vessel with a writing utensil and some ink. Like the table, I chose to include these objects to signal Sor Juana’s intellectual pursuits. However, I made the books non-specific to leave space for Sor Juana’s abundance of interests. If I had made the books literature, for instance, that would ignore her interest in science and philosophy which are often neglected in Sor Juana scholarship. Additionally, in the Baroque style of Vanitas paintings, having objects strewn about in a portrait reveals characteristics of the person and also points to considerations of vanity. In Sor Juana’s case, the vanity (objects) that the poet pursues are intellectual (books), but even so, she must give up her personal library towards the end of her life for secular reasons.

---

<sup>49</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p.74-75



Figure 10: Instruments of Intellectual Pursuit.

### *The Mirror*

The mirror, which I have also referred to as the engraved frontispiece, comes from a portrait of Sor Juana by Lucas de Valdés from the front of the collection *Segundo tomo de sus obras* (Sevilla, 1692), a collection of Sor Juana's work.<sup>50</sup> The baroque print was created during her lifetime, which appealed to me, however, the original engraving emphasizes the nun's virginal state. Instead of the true engraving, I used a passage from Sor Juana's *Romance*, "*pues sabes tú / que las almas distancia ignoran y sexo*" ["for you know our souls / have no gender

---

<sup>50</sup> Lucas de Valdés, Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, frontispiece, *Segundo tomo de sus obras* (México: Por los Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel de Ribera, 1692).



and know no distance”].<sup>51</sup> I chose to replace the engraving with Sor Juana’s own, intimate, position on gender to bring her voice directly into my work, and have her assert authority over the impositions of the gendered world that show up elsewhere in the piece.



Figure 11: The “Mirror” or Frontispiece.

### *The Bottom Corner*

The bottom right corner of the painting shows a set of hands emerging from flames, holding a raw piece of meat. This part of the painting references Sor Juana’s most famous poem,

---

<sup>51</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p.11



“*Hombres necios,*” and specifically the final line in which she condemns the men of the world to a single metaphor: “*Pues en promesa e instancia / Juntáis diablo, carne y mundo*” [For in your offers and your demands / We have devil, flesh, and world: a man.].<sup>52</sup> It was important to me to include this metaphor because it positions Sor Juana within the gender relations of her time and conveys her qualms through the beauty of literary imagery.



Figure 12: Devil, Flesh, and the World.

### *The Nun*

The “true” Sor Juana is positioned at the edge of the canvas looking onto her own falsified image and the rest of the scene, watching the coming of dawn and by extension the

---

<sup>52</sup> Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. p. 166-167

reign of man. I chose to position Sor Juana's back to the viewer in order to honor the poet's apprehension of being depicted where the portrait transmits the desires of the creator rather than the trueness, or depth, of the sitter. In this way, I wanted my portrait of Sor Juana to develop conceptually rather than literally as I believe it fits the poet's adherence to the rules of the poet's preferred self-fashioning that took place entirely through the written word. Additionally, by placing Sor Juana in the foreground she stands beside the viewer themselves, bridging a gap between the poet and viewers in modernity where they share a vantagepoint.



Figure 13: The Nun, a Representation of Sor Juana.

## Chapter 5: Contribution & Conclusion

My thesis contributes to current discourse in three distinct ways. First, it will add nuance to the discussion of Sor Juana's work within Translation Studies. Specifically, I am engaging with the process of translation through transmediation. Second, it will cultivate new dialogues in Sor Juana studies by synthesizing literary works, history, and visual motifs into a cohesive image that fosters new considerations of the poet. Lastly, and arguably most important, my thesis will contribute to Decolonial Studies, inasmuch as this is a work that transcends the barriers of language to make Sor Juana and her poetry accessible and appealing to a wider and more diverse audience.

### *Translation Studies/Transmediation*

Although my thesis is not a traditional translation, it does translate literary concepts and other written content from the medium of writing to that of visual imagery. The choice to engage with the poet visually connects to "Sor Juana [as] a visual, one could say, empirical, writer with a keen interest in how sight shapes knowledge and experience."<sup>53</sup> By "translating" elements of Sor Juana into a visual medium, my project positions the viewer for a new experience of the poet, revealing knowledge in a different, visual mode. New translations and emerging fields of study have led to a rich and evolving literary afterlife for Sor Juana. Although the original work is unchanging, these developments in scholarship have kept the poet alive in our minds by proposing new ways of seeing, revealing, and re-revealing aspects of the poet's complexity and relevance to the present. To me, the value of my project comes from a new way of seeing which may prompt the discovery of heretofore invisible dimensions of Sor Juana's work.

---

<sup>53</sup> Lyon, J. Vanessa. "My Original, A Woman" Copies, origins, and Sor Juana's iconic portraits. p. 91

*Sor Juana studies*

The “new way of seeing” that my project proposes for Sor Juana is complicated by the countless reproductions and translations that have emerged since the poet’s death more than three hundred years ago. Today, the majority of people learn of Sor Juana and her work through criticism and written scholarship since “literary approaches dominate Sor Juana studies.”<sup>54</sup> If not through scholarly means, popular culture also offers a vantagepoint to engage with Sor Juana’s legacy, however, “popular-culture versions of her image overshadow her writing” and often manipulate her image to fit modern needs and values.<sup>55</sup>

My project contributes to Sor Juana studies, the scholarly investigation of the poet, by bridging the “reality” of scholarship with an appeal to popular representation. In particular, my inquiry captures the truths of Sor Juana’s lived experience and positions her within reach of the visual culture of modernity (i.e. the appeal of “objects of visual, material, and virtual culture”).<sup>56</sup> I accomplish this by basing my inquiry in research, developing imagery from the poet’s literature and context, but employing a visual mode that allows the work to move between popular and scholarly realms. Like the contribution to Translation Studies, the visual quality of my project offers a “new way of seeing” in Sor Juana studies that diverges from the typical literary reception and evades representing of Sor Juana in ways that reduce her to a singular message usually either feminist or nationalist. I am able to avoid the tropes of contemporary representations by maintaining scholarly intentions and an active effort to avoid using Sor Juana as a symbol of any singular thing.

---

<sup>54</sup> Bergmann, Emilie L., and Stacey Schlau. p. xx

<sup>55</sup> Bergmann, Emilie L., and Stacey Schlau. p. xii

<sup>56</sup> Bergmann, Emilie L., and Stacey Schlau. p. xii

## *Decolonial Studies*

My favorite definition of coloniality comes from William & Mary University, which defines it as “the logic, metaphysics, ontology and matrix of power created by the massive processes and aftermath of colonization and settler-colonialism. As an addition to this definition, William & Mary provides a clear objective for decoloniality, an opposition to coloniality, within an academic institution: “to re-learn the knowledge that has been pushed aside, forgotten, buried or discredited by the forces of modernity, settler-colonialism, and racial capitalism... It is a method and paradigm of restoration and reparation... It aspires to restore, elevate, renew, rediscover, and acknowledge and validate the multiplicity of lives, live-experiences, culture and knowledge of indigenous people, people of color, and colonized people as well as to decenter hetero/cis-normativity, gender hierarchies and racial privilege.”<sup>57</sup> For me, this definition illustrates the role academics must play in Decolonial studies. There is power in knowledge, and therefore, accessing knowledge is crucial for decoloniality.

In my exploration of Sor Juana, I noted two primary avenues to accessing knowledge about the poet: one, through scholarship, and the other, by way of popular culture. Each approach affords possibilities and imposes limitations. In terms of decoloniality, elite scholarship poses barriers to learning by necessitating a certain education, thus, confining an in-depth understanding of Sor Juana to the classroom and the written page.

On the other hand, popularizing Sor Juana is a complex intervention that positions certain values above authentic representation. For instance, in “Sor Juana’s ‘Facelift,’” an essay by Iván Escamilla discusses “the transition from one version of the Mexican 200-peso bill to another, the official portrait of Sor Juana shed weight and wrinkles, along with abandoning the sunken eyes

---

<sup>57</sup> “Decoloniality at William & Mary.” College of William & Mary, 2021.



and gaining a more upturned nose.”<sup>58</sup> In other popular representations, Sor Juana appears “sexy” or white.<sup>59</sup> In these cases, the poet symbolizes something else, noticeably far from what she spoke of during her lifetime. To operate in popular culture this way, however, is also to limit the density and complexity of Sor Juana which lives, for the most part, within the exclusive sphere of scholasticism.

Although many popular representations project values of modernity onto Sor Juana, many representations, such as those that position the poet as a symbol of Mexican national pride or feminism, exemplify the poet’s symbolic power in modern consciousness. More than this, popular representations demonstrate a yearning for knowledge and identification with the poet. As an answer to the flaws and strengths in both realms of discourse, my project contributes to Decolonial studies by decentering elite scholasticism through a visual mode, appealing to the accessibility of information found in popular culture representations. In doing so, I hope to make Sor Juana scholarship accessible and appealing to a wider and more diverse audience.

---

<sup>58</sup> Hind, Emily. “Contemporary Mexican Sor Juanas” Artistic, popular, and scholarly. p. 110

<sup>59</sup> Hind, Emily. “Contemporary Mexican Sor Juanas” Artistic, popular, and scholarly. p. 108-109

## Bibliography

Bemberg, Maria Luisa., Lita. Stantic, Antonio Larreta, Assumpta Serna, Dominique Sanda, Héctor Alterio, and Octavio Paz. *Yo, La Peor de Todas = I, the Worst of All*. New York, NY: First Run Features, 1990.

This film, directed by Luisa Bemberg, tells the story of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun from the seventeenth century. The film takes place during Mexico's colonial period and follows Sor Juana on her intellectual path, illustrating her relationship to the Church, Spanish colonial authority, faith, and one Spanish Vicerine with whom Sor Juana shares a passionate exchange. This film is significant to my thesis as an example of Sor Juana's representation in popular culture in the twentieth century.

Bergmann, Emilie, Janet Greenberg, Gwen Kirkpatrick, Francesca Miller, Marta Morello-Frosch, Kathleen Newman, and Mary Louise Pratt. *Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America : Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America*. Reprint 2019. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990.

This essay discusses gender, culture, and politics in the region of Latin America. The book includes a variety of essays related to these topics, especially focusing on women and feminist topics. The essay by Bergmann discusses gender in relation to Sor Juana's masterwork, the *Primero sueño* in which she introduces the concept of "androgyny." The source is related to my thesis by including a discussion of Sor Juana as a gendered writer.

Bergmann, Emilie L., and Stacey Schlau. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This book contains a collection of essays that discuss Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, her life, literature, influences, popular interpretations, and scholarship. The essays are all cited individually in this thesis, so this source refers exclusively to the introduction which serves my project by providing information from the scholars who contributed to the collection, specifically generalized information that encompass knowledge from multiple sources.

Cañeque, Alejandro. "The Empire and Mexico City" Religious, political, and social institutions of a transatlantic enterprise. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This essay offers historical information about Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, exploring multiple facets of her context. The source includes an exploration of Sor Juana's relation to political, social, and religious aspects of her life experience in relation to the Spanish Empire. This source is useful as an in-depth look at Sor Juana's context in Mexico during the colonial period.

Castellanos, Rosario. "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) – En la mirada de otros. Retratos y autorretratos literarios de los siglos XVI a XX." Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://retratosliterarios.colsan.edu.mx/?p=500>.

This article presents Sor Juana's representation in literature from her lived life until the current century. The author focuses on topics of gender and sexuality, discussing how the poet has been depicted by people who are not the poet herself. This article is useful to my thesis by providing a reception history of Sor Juana.

Cruz, Anne J., and Rosilie. Hernandez. *Women's Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016.

This book offers information about women's education and literacy in New Spain. More specifically, it discusses women's education in relation to the Church. This source is useful to my project because it illustrates the impact that political, religious, and social forces had on the development of women's education during Sor Juana's time.

Daniel, Lee A., and Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel. "Saberes Americanos: Subalternidad y Epistemología En Los Escritos de Sor Juana." *Hispania* 85, no. 4 (2002): 857–.

This article provides an analysis of a selection of works by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The authors incorporate epistemology and a discussion of women in Latin America during the seventeenth century in the discussion. In this way, the source is valuable to my thesis by offering a scholarly analysis of Sor Juana's literature through a new lens.

"Decoloniality at William & Mary." College of William & Mary, 2021. <https://www.wm.edu/sites/dhp/decoloniality/index.php>

This website provides a clear definition of decoloniality, coloniality, and the objectives behind the decolonial movement. In particular, this source provides a definition in relation to an academic institution. This source is useful to my thesis as a definition of decoloniality in reference to action within scholarship.

Garrard, Mary D. "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist." *Renaissance quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 556–622.

This article discusses Sofonisba Anguissola, as well as her art and the difficulties she faced being a woman artist during the Renaissance. The source also specifically discusses the reception of her work by male contemporaries who devalued her. This source, although not about Sor Juana, is useful to my thesis by providing more information about the plight of women artists in oppressive, patriarchal situations.

Gómez, Isabel. "Translations of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz" Ideology and interpretation. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This article discusses translations of Sor Juana's literature into English. More specifically, it reveals the difficulties and processes of translation and Sor Juana's translation history. This source is useful to my project as an examination of literary translation and translation ideology in relation to Sor Juana.

Hind, Emily. "Contemporary Mexican Sor Juanas" Artistic, popular, and scholarly. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This source discusses the contemporary representations of Sor Juana primarily within popular culture. In particular, the author compares representations and reflects on how they relate to Sor Juana's lived experience. This source is useful to my thesis in providing information about Sor Juana's popular representation.

Juana Ines de la Cruz, Sister, Amanda Powell, and Electa Arenal. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. Expanded 2nd ed. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009.

This book holds a copy of Sor Juana's famous response to a bishop, called *La Respuesta*, and includes an English translation. Additionally, this source features context and scholarship surrounding *La Respuesta* and Sor Juana's life in general. Overall, this source is useful to my thesis by providing concrete historical context, a selection of Sor Juana's literature, and translations.

Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sister, and Luis Harss. *Sor Juana's Dream*. New York, NY: Lumen Books, 1986.

This book provides a bilingual edition of Sor Juana's poem *Primero sueño*. The author also provides context and analysis for the poem. This source is useful to my thesis as a contribution to the scholarly discussion around the poem.

Kirk, Stephanie. "The gendering of Knowledge in New Spain" Enclosure, women's education, and writing. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This article discusses the relationship between gender and knowledge in New Spain. In particular, this source discusses Sor Juana and the ways in which her intellectual pursuits contributed to the political and social structures of her time. This source is useful in its exploration of Sor Juana's intellectual pursuits as it relates to her context.

Lee, Muna. "A Charming Mexican Lady." *The American Mercury* (1951) 4 (1925): 105–.

This article features early translations of "*Hombres necios*" ("Foolish Men") and "Éste, que ves" by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The title signifies one representation of Sor Juana that exists. This article is useful to my thesis by illustrating one title given to Sor Juana after her death, influencing perceptions within her literary afterlife.

Lopez, Rosalva. "The Devil, Women, and the Body in Seventeenth-Century Puebla Convents." *The Americas (Washington. 1944)* 59, no. 2 (2002): 181–199.

This article offers insight into gender and religion in seventeenth-century Puebla, Mexico. The author provides information about visions of the devil and how those visions reflect the control of women's bodies. This source is useful to the artistic portion of my thesis in its illustration of how the devil was visualized in Mexico during Sor Juana's lifetime.

Lucas de Valdés, Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, frontispiece, Segundo tomo de sus obras (México: Por los Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel de Ribera, 1692).

This portrait of Sor Juana adorns the front of a collection of her literature, Segundo tomo de sus obras (1692). The portrait offers an example of Sor Juana's image from the time when she was alive, holding a pen to signify her dedication to scholarship and intellectual pursuit. This source is useful to my project as it relates to portraiture and the representation of women, specifically the subject Sor Juana.

Luiselli, Alessandra. "PRIMERO SUEÑO" Heresy and knowledge. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017. P.

This article offers an analysis of Sor Juana's famous work, the *Primero sueño*. The source offers insights into specific aspects of the complex poem, providing concrete information about the choices that the poet made. This source is useful to my project as a discussion of the *Primero sueño*.

Lyon, J. Vanessa. "My Original, A Woman" Copies, origins, and Sor Juana's iconic portraits. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This article presents the most significant portraits of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and discusses their importance to Sor Juana's legacy and lasting image. The source also provides an analysis of the portraits, context, and images. This article is useful for my thesis by providing information about representation in regards to Sor Juana and how these representations function in a larger context.

Martínez-San Miguel, Yolanda. *Saberes Americanos : Subalternidad y Epistemología En Los Escritos de Sor Juana*. Pittsburgh, PA: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Universidad de Pittsburgh, 1999.

This book discusses a selection of Sor Juana's writing, situating her work in the context in which she lived. More specifically, the author examines Sor Juana using a postcolonial lens and reflects substantially on both the patriarchy and coloniality. This source is useful to my thesis in its examination of Sor Juana's work in its relationship to various power structures that existed in the seventeenth century and continue to be present today.

Merrim, Stephanie. *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. 1st ed. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999.

This book offers context to Sor Juana's literature, exploring her presence within the realm of early modern women's writing. The author examines Sor Juana's writing in relation to topics of gender, religion, and colonialism. This source is useful to my thesis by offering context to Sor Juana's writing as it pertains to larger trends in women's writing.

Michelangelo. "The Creation of Adam." Ceiling fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. 1508-1512.

This fresco illustrates the creation of Adam, a story from the bible. This is a primary source that holds religious and symbolic significance. While it is not related to Sor Juana, this source is useful to my thesis by means of impactful imagery and religious themes which are widely recognizable.

Nanfity, Jacqueline C. (Jacqueline Clare). *El Sueño : Cartographies of Knowledge and the Self*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

This book approaches Sor Juana's masterpiece, the *Primero sueño*, with attention to the poetic power of the piece. In particular, the author examines the complex creation of space within the poem. This source is useful to my thesis by providing in-depth analysis of one of Sor Juana's most important works of literature.

Powell, Amanda. "Passionate Advocate" Sor Juana, feminisms, and sapphic loves. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This article examines Sor Juana and her writing using a feminist lens. In particular, the author discusses sexuality and the representation of desire in her writing in how she challenges a masculine culture. This source is useful to my thesis by providing analysis of Sor Juana using a gender/sexuality lens.

Rivera, Diego. "The Flower Seller." Painting. Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City, Mexico. 1942.

This painting is a recognizable work by Rivera which depicts a woman holding an enormous bouquet of calla lilies. The painting evokes a feminine connection to nature and often represents aspects of Mexican culture. This source contributes imagery to my thesis that is geographically and culturally relevant.

Tiepolo, Giovanni Battista. "Immaculate Conception." Painting. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. 1767.

This painting presents an image of the Virgin Mary in a scene of immaculate conception and depicts the baroque painting style. Additionally, the primary source includes the

symbol of a snake and a bird. This painting is useful to my thesis by providing religiously significant imagery and symbols that are saturated with meaning.

Wray, Grady C. "Challenging Theological Authority" The Carta atenagórica / Crisis sobre un sermón and the Respuesta a Sor Filotea. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlauf. London ;: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

This article explores Sor Juana's *Carta Atenagórica* and *La Respuesta* in their opposition to theological authority. The author also includes a discussion of gender in relation to these works. This source is useful to my thesis by examining Sor Juana's respuesta and continuing the discussion around gender as a contextual element to Sor Juana's lived experience.