

[Graubart on Delgado, 'Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790'](#)

Discussion published by Jessie Frazier on Thursday, February 21, 2019

The following book review from H-LatAm may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Jessica L. Delgado. *Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790*. Cambridge Latin American Studies Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xiii + 278 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-19940-8.

Reviewed by Karen Graubart (University of Notre Dame) **Published on** H-LatAm (February, 2019) **Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=53166>

Jessica L. Delgado has written a monograph, steeped in deep archival research, that transforms the traditional histories of women and Catholicism in colonial Latin America. Stepping away from the well-trodden paths of analyzing Catholic ideology's constraints on women's bodily and spiritual autonomy or the institutional focus on nuns' cloistered lives, she describes a colonial Catholicism that was dialogically produced by laymen and laywomen in a very local way. This is a complex colonial world whose Catholicism was inherently gendered and racialized but that also required the constant participation of women and non-Spaniards for its legitimacy. Delgado offers a fresh and innovative perspective on colonial religion and gender; her New Spain is alive with women's sacramental action, spiritual anxieties, informal support networks, and secular labor.

Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790 is divided into two distinct sections, seamed together by an integrative introduction and conclusion. Each section finds laywomen—here, any practicing Catholic woman who was not a nun—interacting with the church's institutions through analysis of a different source base. The first part, "Troubling Devotion," works through judicial records of diocesan courts in Toluca, where women sought justice for crimes committed against them, and the Mexico City Inquisition, where they were brought forward as often unwilling witnesses in a variety of cases. The second part, "Places and Practices of Cloister," uses inspection records from the city's institutions of *recogimiento* or enclosure: voluntary schools for mostly elite girls, places of less-voluntary deposit for female criminals and those seeking divorce, and the great convents where laywomen (mostly servants and slaves) well outnumbered nuns. The two parts are also written distinctly, reflecting the archives' limitations and differences. Part 1 is mostly characterized by longer studies of individual women before their interrogators, while part 2 sketches

Citation: Jessie Frazier. *Graubart on Delgado, 'Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790'*. H-Women. 02-21-2019.

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institutional change then brought to life through briefer anecdotes. In both, Delgado uses the technique called (by Inga Clendinnen and William B. Taylor) “exact imagining.”[1] While recognizing the parameters of her sources, she allows for thoughtful speculation tethered to the realm of possibility. She explicitly discusses her methods in her opening and closing chapters but also clarifies throughout whenever speculation comes in.

In brief, part 1 establishes the ways that Catholic ideology and practice shaped a gendered and raced “spiritual status,” an accounting women did (in conversation with confessors and friends) of their personal levels of sin and shame. This interiorization of church teachings was evident in formal and informal conversations, which led some women to reveal that their confessors sexually assaulted them during the performance of sacraments. The two courts—diocesan and inquisitorial—heard complaints of such assaults as well as other types of crimes, placing women’s testimony about their relationship to the sacraments and their confessors at the center of long, painful trials. Delgado carefully interrogates the petitions and complaints women made to diocesan courts for evidence of the ways that networks of comfort and rumor produce a kind of contagious knowledge that became dangerous for the women enmeshed in scandal, even when themselves victimized. Not only did priests sexually assault unprotected women, but they could also withhold sacraments as a way to manipulate them further; going to another priest for confession could reveal the assault and place the woman in the position of having to testify or lose access to the sacrament. Delgado concludes that some women could attempt to use local diocesan courts for restitution or to shape the punishment of men who victimized them, but they were largely unsuccessful. Even worse, when called before the Inquisition, nearly anything they said (or did not say) could place them in danger of heresy or loss of reputation.

Part 2 reveals that this theological framework of sin, guilt, and contagion was the basis for the widespread practice of *recogimiento* or seclusion for the sake of avoiding scandal. While *recogimiento* was the foundation for the ways that women interacted in all aspects of the social world, physical structures were created in order to impose it. Building on the work of Nancy van Deusen in Lima (*Between the Sacred and the Worldly: The Institutional Practice of Recogimiento in Colonial Lima* [2002]), Delgado analyzes the creation of a number of institutions of *recogimiento* for laywomen in Mexico City. These include exclusive schools (*colegios*) for poor, virtuous, and racially pure young women funded and run by the city’s major Catholic confraternities, which served to protect and educate girls until they “took state”: either marrying or professing as nuns. Other institutions took in female criminals (often women who sold sex or illegal alcohol) and incarcerated or reformed them. Some acted as *depósitos*, or spaces where women could be held without scandal until a divorce was decided or she and her husband negotiated her return. And finally, Delgado examines laywomen in the city’s convents, where large numbers of women in slavery, service, or *recogimiento* performed the physical labor that made it possible for professed nuns to live spiritual lives. These three chapters also explore the ways that women could invent their own paths—for example, women who petitioned to leave *colegios* without taking state (thus losing the promised dowry and inviting scandal) or who never left at all, inventing a third way between wife and nun. The archival record here is more coy: administrative reports are short on direct conflict or abuse. But the cumulative effect of this parade of diverse institutions is to expose how many Mexican women were subject to different forms of *recogimiento* over their lifetimes and certainly how commonly they would come into contact with its threat.

Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism is a rich exploration of the ways that women's spiritual status was both policed and engaged in colonial Mexico. While the women Delgado describes were rarely successful at wielding power, they reveal how dependent colonial Catholicism was upon women's spiritual work and their engagement with the sacramental world. The book's methodological openness—Delgado's recognition of the limitations and silences of her archives but her clear intention to explore the world of possibility—is a contribution of its own. And her deep knowledge of the workings of the Inquisition, the archbishop's courts, and religious institutions is extraordinary and complete. This text will be key for historians of religion and of gender for some time to come.

Note

[1]. William B. Taylor, "Inga Clendinnen, Historian (1934-2016)," *Colonial Latin American Review* 25, no. 4 (2016): 537-56.

Citation: Karen Graubart. Review of Delgado, Jessica L., *Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 2019. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53166>