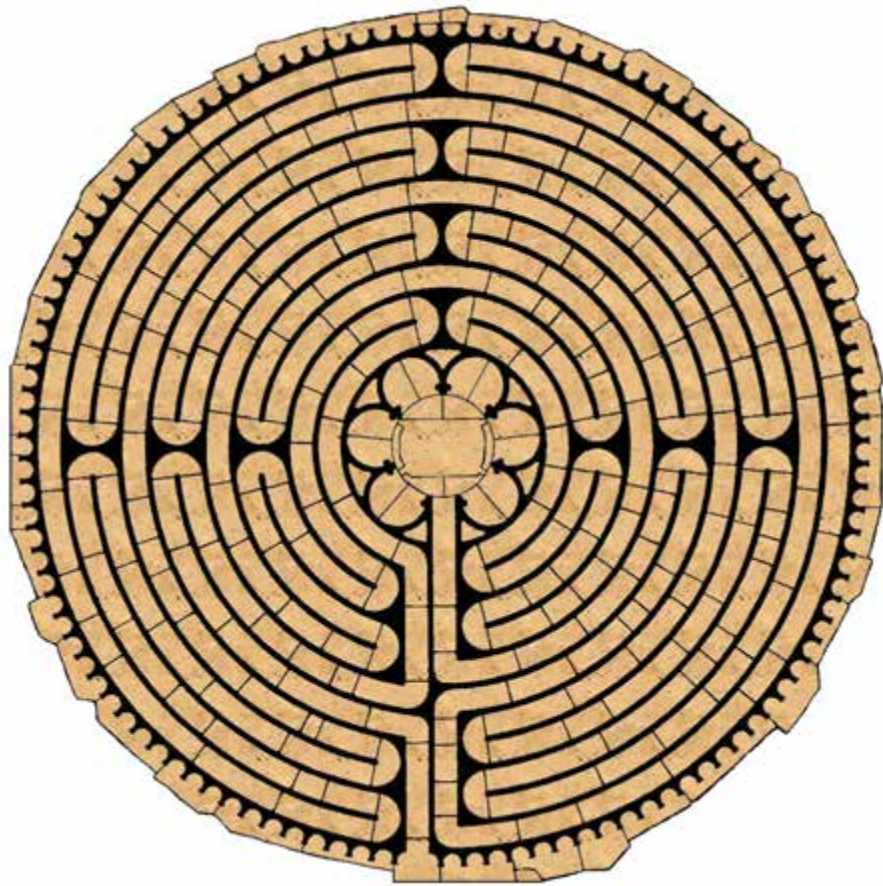


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*Daniel Holcombe*  
Georgia College & State University

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Special Issue: Early Modernity in Arizona State University

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Sor Juana's birth and the Mexican racial imaginary:  
The enigmas of her family, putative "sisters" and  
other blind spots in criticism

Emil Volek  
Arizona State University, Tempe

Until today, serious doubts persist about the date of birth of the Mexican icon Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695): whether it was indeed 1651, as has been held traditionally, or 1648, as recent sketchy documents have suggested to some. It would seem that, beyond the question of accuracy, the three years difference should only minimally affect the grand picture of her lifetime; what rather strikes one then is that the consequences in the Mexican milieu (and from there onward) are not minor and may puzzle foreigners.

The apparently long forgotten legacy of the "Wars of the Reform" of the late 1850s left the Mexican society split into two still irreconciled parts: on one side, the victors, the radical liberal anticlerical intelligentsia and its followers (aiming originally at the riches accumulated over the centuries by the Church in a country devastated by fraternal wars after Independence), and, on the other side, the defeated, the Catholics (both the Church hierarchy and the people deeply steeped in Baroque culture). This split and the effort of the minority in power since then to keep in check the majority, even attempting—under most diverse banners—to eradicate Catholic religion as such from the Anahuac region, has led to repeated bouts of social violence (as in the 1870s), to gross manipulation of the first democratic elections held after the fall of Porfirio Díaz (in 1911) and to open civil war (the "Cristiada" in the 1920s, the "Mexican Holocaust," still covered up by the leftist intelligentsia as an alleged part of the socially justified Revolution that had ended formally a decade earlier). Yet "past epochs never vanish completely, and blood still drips from all their wounds," as young Paz commented in his *Labyrinth of Solitude*.

This long history of "unfinished business" for both sides has left deep scars on the civil society, carefully hidden to the outside. So, to prove that Catholics have erred (or lied!) in something is still a cherished triumph and, in absence of proof, even an assumption of some such misdeed has

also worked wonders. The war continues, and the struggle around an icon such as Sor Juana (her birth, her life and works) is just one more strategic piece on the “battlefield of ideas” for the soul of the nation.

Let us outline how all this brouhaha around the Tenth Muse and her birth has originated and developed over time (complementary details may be found in Sabat de Rivers, 2001, and Volek, 2016:24-30).

In his “Approbation” sanctioning the publication of *Fama y obras posthumas* (1700; Alatorre 239-49) by Sor Juana’s young admirer and defender Castorena y Ursúa, father Diego Calleja vows to give us a “true notice” (*noticia cierta*) about her life and puts together the first biography of the nun. Taking his information from many sources, he includes people who knew her at different times and relies heavily on the autobiographical part of *la Respuesta* as well as on his private correspondence with her that apparently spanned over a decade. His only personal contribution, beside the attempt at criticism that has long marred our understanding of *El sueño* (The dream), would seem to be the rhetorical embellishment—in a heavy-handed Baroque style—of the narrative of her life ending in the search for God. He delights in the details of measurements of space and time. We are put vividly in the geography of Juana’s awe-inspiring birthplace. A marvel like her would not deserve less.

He tells us that Sor Juana was born as a legitimate child on Friday, November 12, 1651, in a room called “cell,” which undoubtedly predestined her for monastical aspirations. Her father was a Basque Pedro Manuel de Asbaje, married to Isabel Ramírez de Santillana, of Spanish origin. And then he follows paraphrasing the autobiography section of *la Respuesta*: being three years old, the little Juana cheats in order to learn to read and soon after also to write, and, before being eight years old, she composes a dramatic poem (*loa*) for a religious occasion (and is rewarded with a book). Having reached the limit of what she could have learned at the barren countryside, she begins to implore her parents to send her to Mexico City to continue her studies. After initial resistance, they bring her there to live with her grandpa, who had a few books on the shelf, and later she also benefited from some twenty lessons in Latin by the master Martín de Olivas. Her fame then took her to the viceregal Palace of the Marquis de Mancera, where the Vicereine became very fond of her. Amazed by this prodigy, one day the Marquis invited forty professors from the University as well as some known *tertulios* (socialites) to examine the scope of her

knowledge; everybody was carried away by this young girl that was not yet seventeen years old, as the Marquis recalls over three decades later.

To make the long story short, “Twenty-seven years she lived in religion” to die completely surrendered to God. Summing up her life, father Calleja counts “forty-four years, five months, five days and five hours” that this singular (*rara*) woman illuminated our times. This was then the usual elaborate homage formula summing up the life of somebody important, especially for sainthood. We know that in Baroque times the rhetoric reigned supreme and mathematics may have been just an embellishment subordinated to awe and symmetry. However, the consequences of this aesthetic “cutting corners” in the first posthumous fame accounting could not be exaggerated.

Father Calleja’s narrative held water for three centuries, in spite of a few apparently minute errors: in Mexico City Juana came to live with her relatives (her aunt Maria, wedded in 1636 to the rich Juan de Mata; her grandpa had died in Chalco in 1655); and Calleja’s mathematics, fond of symmetries and repeating numbers, were a bit off, as well as the weekday, because November 12 fell in 1651 on Sunday. Sor Juana was forty-three and half years old when she died.

Other than that, everything else looked plausible in the proposed storyline. Eight years of age would put Juana’s arrival to Mexico City to about 1660. The Manceras came to the Viceroyalty in late Fall of 1664; the Marquise would organize her court by the beginning of 1665. By that time, Juana would be little past thirteen. This is corroborated by Juan de Oviedo, apologist of father Núñez de Miranda, confessor of the viceroys and later of Sor Juana. Oviedo says that she was very young (*de poca edad*) when she came to the Palace and refers to her as “aquella niña” (that little girl; Alatorre 374-75). Another confirmation came out more recently in the “Tulane letters,” discovered and edited by Hortensia Calvo and Beatriz Colombi (2015). The Marquise de la Laguna writes to her cousin, Duchess of Aveiro, in December of 1682, that Juana came to the Palace at about fourteen (*que sería de catorce años*; 178). This information must have come directly from her talks with Sor Juana.

The next turning point in Juana’s life would come with her fifteen years birthday: the famous *quinceañera* landmark when girls become young women, can marry, opt for religious life or ... well, not much else was available to a decent woman at that time. That would be November 1666.

When her decision to follow the religious path is taken after long deliberations and prodding by father Núñez, legal and economic preparations followed (beyond all kinds of documents attesting to good social standing, the new prospective nun had also to bring in quite a big endowment<sup>1</sup>). At the time Juana —now “Juana Inés de la Cruz”— enters the Carmelitas convent as a novice, in August 1667, she would be close to sixteen: nothing exceptional in that (for that misrepresented episode see Volek 2016:35-38). This timing is corroborated again by Juan de Oviedo. He says that father Núñez was so alarmed by the young Juana as the center of attention of the mundane society, that he wanted to get her out of the “world” as soon as possible (Alatorre 375). Would he have waited for three more years? And sometime before entering the convent, she would be examined by the forty “wise” men. The Marquis’s long memory situates her to the range of “adolescent girl” (15 to 17 years old).

Everything in this biographic string of events fits in nicely and unproblematically; until it is challenged point by point, twisted and unraveled. The logic propelling this process is fascinating.

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In preparation for the grand anniversary in 1951, a new edition of Sor Juana’s works by Fondo de Cultura Económica was entrusted to father Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, recognized editor of Mexican colonial poetry (the amateurish secular competition was simply not up to the task). The occasion also prompted renewed search for documents. A distant relative of the nun, Guillermo Ramírez España, published, in 1947, *La familia de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Documentos inéditos*. And two years later, Enrique A. Cervantes complemented that collection with *Testamento de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y otros documentos*. Yet none of them offered the cherished prize: the birth certificate of Juana Ramírez, as the future Sor Juana was called “in the world” before taking the veil.

The surprising illegitimacy of Juana, revealed in the Testament of her mother (Ramírez España 17), changed how possible certificate might look: no mother’s name, the child’s Christian name (many times only “María”), a note “hija de la Iglesia” (born out of wedlock) and the godparents’ names. Yet no “Juana” was to be found in the San Vicente



Ferrer de Chimalhuacán's baptism registry in the folios corresponding to 1651.

On the other hand, the fruitless search at the parish that included Nepantla, Sor Juana's birth settlement, had also uncovered something intriguing. Sometime before 1947, Alberto Salceda and Ramírez España stumbled on the name "Inés," "hija de la Iglesia," baptized on December 2, 1648. The name of the mother was not signed in and as the godparents of the baby figured Miguel and Beatriz Ramírez, the brother and the sister of Isabel, Juana's mother. The presence of close family members pointed to something happening "in the family." "Inés" did not fit the bill neatly, since it was part of Sor Juana's religious name assumed decades later. But the coincidence was striking. This uncanny find was baffling and potentially embarrassing in view of all the festive preparations for 1951.

The cat had to get out of the bag eventually. After the celebrations were safely over, in February of 1952, Salceda published a long-prepared report on his investigations: after having considered all possible circumstances known to him at that time, he concluded that "close to moral certainty" the document probably was the certificate of baptism of Sor Juana. All the hell broke out. Let us pause now: How could he err so grievously? How come he did not see the clues before his eyes?

We need to understand that the illegitimacy and the imprecise nature of the document searched for have opened the door for all kinds of conjectures. Salceda's thought process seems to have run like this: members of the Ramírez family resided in the parish; many of them participated as godparents at baptisms (Isabel, Juana's mother, several times between 1645 and 1652, including baptisms of Indians); in 1651, no record of any Juana exists in the register. All this has made the find of "Inés, hija de la Iglesia," baptized in December 1648, more plausible, especially since the date of baptism correlates perfectly with the November 12 birthday. Salceda is unfazed by the fact that no record is found in Chimalhuacán on the other five siblings and half-siblings of Sor Juana either. If it is Sor Juana, it must be where the documents are or should be.

Now, what to do with "1651" and with "Juana"? An analysis of all possible circumstances follows in Salceda's mind (12ff). First comes the unlucky mathematician father Calleja. In the best Baroque ways, he tried to determine the exact time Sor Juana "illuminated our world," and was wrong on two accounts (her age and the weekday of her birth). There is no other

independent information on her birth, because all the biographers of the time repeat what Calleja had to say. Therefore, perhaps memory might be at fault, and so more apparent little inconsistencies are added to the account. Even Santa Teresa is brought into comparison. Maybe neither Sor Juana remembered that well years and months. Or was it the “feminine vanity” that made her take off a couple of years?

From this point on, blinded by the intriguing find, an avalanche of “adjustments” and “suppositions” creeps into Salceda’s account. In one statement made on June 2, 1683 (Ramírez España 70-71), Sor Juana declares that she is “more than thirty years old” (*declaró ser de más de treinta años*). If born in 1651, she would be thirty-one and about half years old at that time. Salceda thinks that “more than thirty” puts her closer to 1648 (being almost thirty five). When the Marquis de Mancera remembers, decades later, that by the time of her “exam” by forty “wise men” she was not more than seventeen years old (meaning that she was a very young girl), he takes it that she *was* exactly seventeen. For all the “normal precocity of women” and especially in view of her own marvelous precociousness, as he muses, it is not imaginable that Juana would be examined when she was just passed fifteen... How could she be so esteemed by the Vicerine at such a tender age? Her self-image as Leonor in *Los empeños de una casa* (1683) also would seem to demand more time for achieving so much fame. Then comes the experience of “sweetness and bitterness of human love” that definitely needs time to develop, although it is not clear whether her poetry is really autobiographical. The venerable Menéndez y Pelayo comes in handy to opine. And so, step by step, the argument for 1648 is made: “if we add three more years to her age, everything will be much more easy, logical and credible,” Salceda finally convinces himself (25).

Now only “Inés” stands in the way. Salceda gives us an important clue and then twists it: on November 12 that seems safe to keep as her birthday, Juana would have been born the day of San Juan de la Paz; that is why she was called “Juana,” eventually (Salceda 25). Since “Inés” was popular in her family, she could have easily been called “Juana Inés” before Sor Juana Inés... Then comes the final touch to seal the deal: maybe that is why her mother called her “Inés” at baptism, and later, because of the saint’s day, “Juana” was added. And the possible *Certificate of Baptism* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born!

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This surprising confession of errors, coming from the Catholic side, was welcome news for those critics who had tried for decades —without much luck— to chip away from the traditionalists’ image of Sor Juana as an exemplary nun that ended her life in the search for God; they brushed aside all doubts: 1648 was it. And more: if she, “after all a woman,” could take away some years, or, worse, if father Calleja had something to hide, then the figure of Sor Juana was open for “remake” in a serious way. Now everything in and about her became suspect, errors in reading were carefully harnessed (Volek 2021), and a saint was slowly turned into a potential heretic. The search for ever new indictments was on, ballooning out of all proportions. Where documentary support did not show up, imagination stepped in.

This strand of “snowballing” interpretations was consolidated by the *magnus opus* of Octavio Paz in 1982; in its turn, his *trampas de la fe* (traps of faith) opened the gates for all kinds of free-wheeling literary and cinematic fantasies. The anniversary of Sor Juana’s death in 1995 became the climax of her imaginary effigy forged by Paz, only to begin unraveling shortly after. This process continues to this day, because it is hard for some schools and critics to give up on ingrained inventions. Today, the *bible* of “sorjuanismo,” as his book became to be considered then, looks rather as a compendium of all possible modernizing prejudices and *trampas* (although Paz himself, occasionally, after leading readers on a wild chase and working up their imagination, closes off slyly “maybe it was not so”).

The anniversary of 1995 also prompted more search for documents. In its December issue, the respectable weekly *Proceso* published sensationalist information on some new documents discovered by Augusto Vallejo. Rummaging through the archives, he found a new father for Sor Juana and figured out the birth of her older sister that would exclude Juana’s coming to the world in 1648. Stark light would be thrown on the family’s dirty linen.

In the banns of Josefa María (normally considered Juana’s older sister), from 1662 (in 2005, Vallejo will correct the year to 1664), we see a strange name figuring as her father: some Cristóbal de Vargas. Vallejo assumes that it was him who was the biological father of the first three girls born out of wedlock with Isabel Ramírez: Josefa, Juana and María. The

alleged father who figured in all other documents, Pedro de Asbaje (Azuaje) y Vargas Machuca, would be just a myth<sup>2</sup>. Since Sor Juana, being illegitimate, could not use the real name of her father, she just made up some play on words, mixing in the name of her grandpa, in order to declare herself legitimate. These are bold assumptions and Vallejo's account is marred by serious errors in detail. He stumbled on the document by 1986 and kept it secret for a good occasion (he was not alone, but that is another story).

Vallejo also managed to dig up some scoop on Cristóbal de Vargas. He was a merchant from Mexico City, operating mule train around the country. That is how his path crossed with Nepantla and Isabel (and probably many other women). He was forced to marry once back in 1629, and remarried in 1647; he died in 1666, without mentioning his second marriage. Was it for not harming the growing reputation of Juana, at that time already living at the viceregal palace?

Returning to Josefa María, in Archivo General de la Nación Vallejo also found her declaration from 1693 at the occasion of the marriage of her daughter María de Villena: she declares to be of forty-four years of age and signs surprisingly as "Josepha María de Azuaje" (*Proceso* 59). This would put her birth to 1649, and her name would indicate that she was born the day of Saint José, celebrated on March 19. This would exclude "Juana-Inés" from December of 1648.

I would add, that the birth year of Josefa María is corroborated by her own marriage in 1664 in Amecameca (Ramírez España 66). Girls became marriageable at fifteen at that time. The only enigma is the banns in one church (Sagrario Metropolitano in Mexico City) and the ceremony in another (in Amecameca); maybe just announcements at the bridegroom's place and the wedding at the bride's.

Vallejo's discoveries prompted a careful reconsideration of the debate by Georgina Sabat de Rivers (2001). She accepts the birth date of Josefa María, which would confirm her as the older sister mentioned in *la Respuesta* (1691) and would eliminate 1648 as Juana's possible birth year. As far as Cristóbal de Vargas is concerned, he seems well documented as the biological father of Josefa, but it would be excessive to eliminate Pedro de Azuaje as some non-existent fiction; with all probability, he was the father of Juana and the youngest sister María, and later the family embraced him as the father of all three. Georgina Sabat assumes that, because of his trade,

Vargas was not Basque; for her, this would reinforce the existence of Pedro de Azuaje. Whether this assumption is correct remains to be confirmed.

Vallejo returned to the issue later (in 2005) and, in the aftermath of the tequila-effect, he recanted and turned his discoveries on the head. He adds and clarifies some details, but gets lost in suppositions he himself terms as “temerarias” (rash, reckless). He discovers yet another “María,” baptized in Chimalhuacán on September 10, 1646, whose godfather was somebody from Ozumba village unrelated to the family (2005:385, note 8). This obliges him to reshuffle the whole deck: he assumes that this is indeed Juana’s sister and that “María” who has been always considered the youngest (by the order in her mother’s Testament), is now the oldest; and if Josefa María stays in place, Juana’s birthday in 1648 needs to be shifted: perhaps to May, taking clue from the jocose portrait of Lisarda in one of Sor Juana’s literary parodies. Then it rained and the two-hour journey to baptism was not possible until December. Cristóbal de Vargas disappears completely and Pedro de Azuaje is fully rehabilitated. How the former is erased from the document is not told.

In my book *La mujer que quiso ser amada por Dios* [The Woman who wanted to be loved by God, 2016], written a bit later, I set out to review, one by one, the principal tenets of “sorjuanista” criticism, and found many wanting. In the case of the birth question, I concluded that 1651 made better fit for Sor Juana’s psychological profile and overall historical record (24-30). Following Georgina Sabat, I accepted Cristóbal de Vargas as the father of Josefa María, the oldest of the three sisters. This initial faux pas would explain better the life-story of Juana’s mother, unwed single woman who partnered over time with three different males without marrying any.

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In 2016, my good friend Guillermo Schmidhuber, who had made himself known for several finds in archives, surprised us with a more detailed and diverse documentary information on both the paternal and maternal families of Sor Juana, that greatly expands on Ramírez España’s and Cervantes’ collections (unfortunately, he did not crosscheck his discoveries with them nor with Salceda). His and Martha Peña Doria’s compilation of documents and facsimiles is a rich trove of information,

some very interesting, some intriguing, and some even offering new and unintended clues.

Schmidhuber rejects offhand the initial discovery by Vallejo regarding Cristóbal de Vargas (although his name lurks out unabashed on the facsimile reproduced by him; Schmidhuber 60). He comments: “There is an error in writing father’s name, Cristóbal de Vargas, unpardonable distraction of the scribe.” However, let us pause here: if the scribe is being told “Pedro de Azuaje y Vargas Machuca,” how would he write down “Cristóbal de Vargas”? That would be *some* distraction<sup>3</sup>. Besides, there are three marks on the banns; they were publicly read three times and perhaps posted. Would nobody notice? Detail is not my friend’s forte.

As Schmidhuber documents, at the beginning of the 17th century, both family lines moved from Canary Islands to Mexico almost simultaneously. On the maternal side, Juana’s grandpa Pedro Ramírez de Santillana comes over to Mexico in 1604 to marry and settle with his wife Beatriz in the province of Chalco. We know from other sources (Testaments of the grandpa and of Juana’s mother Isabel, in Ramírez España 3-11 and 12-21) that the couple will bear over the next three decades eleven or twelve children. By 1655, when grandpa dies, all girls except Isabel were married, while only two out of the seven boys were in wedlock (one would be married later; Salceda 7). It is striking that only *one* registered baptism is to be found for any of them in the Chimalhuacán parish, namely for the daughter Beatriz, b. 1633 (probably the tenth in line). The almost total lack of baptismal records is surprising in this family line living in the countryside.

On Juana’s paternal side, the Azuajes, we find that in 1598 her great-grandma requested permission to move to Mexico to join her rich brother, together with her impoverished daughter whose husband had just died and left her with two sons, Pedro (10 years old) and Francisco (7 years old) (Schmidhuber 19ff). Consequently, Pedro de Asuaje would be over sixty when he takes up Isabel Ramírez as his mistress around 1650. Francisco would become Dominican friar and since 1642 would serve at a monastery in Amecameca, close to Nepantla (he will be the mysterious friar H. or F. Azuaje in Salceda 11).

The fact that Juana’s father was practically of the same age as her maternal grandfather is at least surprising. It cannot but give new life to Augusto Vallejo’s original finding: Isabel, a “disgraced” young woman,

would become mistress of an old bachelor and would have two daughters with him out of wedlock: Juana, in 1651, and María, sometime later. Then he dies and she takes up a young bachelor Diego Ruiz Lozano and has another three kids out of wedlock with him; Lozano subsequently marries another woman in a childless marriage (in his Testament he recognizes his children with Isabel and so “legitimizes” them). None of these children have baptismal records found in Chimalhuacán (and nobody has ever wondered about that).

In 1667, the question of Juana’s legitimacy becomes important, because it is a requirement for her religious career. We have some more documents from February 1669, when Juana was about to profess at the *jerónima’s* convent. Her mother is gifting her a young mulatto girl as her personal slave servant, and in that sworn statement she declares herself “widow of Pedro de Asbaje y Vargas” and Juana “my legitimate daughter and of the said my husband” (Cervantes 18). And Juana, now Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, also in a separate sworn statement, declares herself “legitimate daughter” of the same (16). Something must have happened for both to become “legitimate.” Perhaps a testament that has not been found yet, some declaration of intent or perhaps marriage *in articulo mortis*, since dead or dying bachelors are less inclined to run away from their responsibilities... Or some other unfathomable legalizing procedure the Baroque times of mushrooming bureaucracy was so fond of for Sor Juana to be born “illegitimate” but become ultimately “legit.”

Now the brew becomes even denser, because to our already known “Inés” (from December 2, 1648), Schmidhuber (36-40) adds two more “sisters” found in the Chimalhuacán parish register around that time: “María” (baptized on July 23, 1651) and “Isabel” (baptized on February 11, 1652). All three are “hijas de la Iglesia” and the family members of the Ramírez’ family have served as godparents to all of them. What is surprising is to see Juana’s mother as godmother to “Isabel” (39). To be godmother to her own illegitimate child, would be a bit strange: something seems amiss here. Also, “María” and “Isabel” appear to be too close to each other, unless we unduly extend the time between their births and baptisms. If we add to the mix Josefa (born on March 19, 1649) and Juana (November 12, whichever year we choose), we find the field a bit too crowded for one single mother. And there is still the “María” Vallejo found baptized in 1646.

Yet Schmidhuber's book also offers some unintended clues. After the spot-focus on "Inés," we get the facsimile of the whole page where births are registered (38). Schmidhuber comments:

Este folio completo de la partida de bautismo de "Inés" ayuda a comprender que el microcosmos en que vivió Juana Inés en sus primeros años era altamente indígena, por el número pequeño de bautismos registrados para "criollos" y, contrariamente, el número grande para indígenas (no existen mestizos); algunas partidas de bautismo están escritas en náhuatl, y el sacerdote firmante apunta si el infante es "español" o sin ninguna indicación si fuera indio. (38)

[This complete folio of the register of baptism of "Inés" helps us to understand that the microcosm in which Juana lived in her first years was highly indigenous, because of the small number of baptisms registered for "creoles" and, to the contrary, the great number of them for Indians (there are no *mestizos*); some entries are written in nahuatl, and the priest signing the document annotates if the baby is "Spanish" or leaves it without indication if it is Indian.]

Looking at the facsimile, something is missing in Schmidhuber's explanation. Yet, for us, all the pieces of the "jigsaw-puzzle" that we have been assembling here are now about to fall into place. Finally, we have the answer to the most important question about the document as presented: we can see that the Chimalhuacán registry did not separate white creole's births into a "Spaniards Book," because there were only very few of them there, and instead registered *all* births. Among the entries in the register for "Inés," "María" and "Isabel," only "María" from 1651 is marked as "Spanish"; the same annotation we find for the aunt Beatriz and her children (57-58). In Salceda the entries in the facsimiles selected are marked "Spanish" even if the written information is transparent in that sense, and also state clearly "Indian" in other cases of the same kind (9-11). The business of "castas" (racial taxonomies) was at the top of importance in the epoch of the omnipresent vigilance over the "pureza de sangre" (the privilege of being certified as good old Catholic). If Indians' children are registered in nahuatl or clearly marked as "Indian" and only "María" is "Spanish," what about "Inés" and "Isabel," or "María" from 1646?



The mystery dissipates when we remember reading in the grandfather's and mother's Testaments published in Ramírez España how many slaves (blacks and mulattoes) the family had at the time of their passing. While the Indians were "free" (at least on paper) and may have lived close by, the slaves were a *part of the household*. It would only behoove good Christians to take care of their babies for the sake of salvation. This would also explain the mystery of so much godparenting in the family. And the bunch of bachelors on hand may have even helped in some other ways.

In the mother's donation document from 1669 that has been before our eyes all these years, we read:

siempre he tenido intención ... de darle a Juana Ramírez de Asbaje, mi hija legítima y del dicho mi esposo..., ... una mulata, mi esclava, nombrada Juana de San José, hija de Francisca de Jesús, mulata, asimismo mi esclava ... sirviéndole; ...le hago gracia y donación pura ... de la dicha mulata, que será de edad de diez y seis años, poco más o menos, nacida y criada en mi casa... (Cervantes 18)

[I have always had the intention ... to give to Juana Ramírez de Asbaje, my legitimate daughter and of the said my husband..., ... the mulatto girl, my slave, named Juana de San José, daughter of Francisca de Jesús, mulatto woman, also my slave ... to serve her... I am doing her this pure favor and donation ... of the said mulatto girl, of about sixteen years of age, or a bit more or less, born and raised in my household...]

Let us pause over these names: Juana de San José, Francisca de Jesús, sumptuous names given at baptism, covering up wretched reality. Crosschecking may also help us to figure out several generations of slaves in the family. In grandpa's Testament of 1655 (Ramírez España 7-8), among a number of blacks of both sexes, only María is listed as "wife" of another black man. A mulatto woman Francisca is mentioned, thirty-five years old, and her four children "born in my household": among them, María, eight years old (would correspond to Vallejo's María of 1646); Beatriz, six years old (missed in the registry), donated at fifteen to Josefa at her wedding in 1664, mother of María and Francisca (Isabel's Testament 17); enumeration of some furniture follows. It is not clear whether

Francisca de Jesús, although also a mulatto woman, appearing in the gifting document of 1669, is the same Francisca, since her daughter gifted to Sor Juana, must have been born in 1652/1653, and is not listed in the grandpa's Testament<sup>4</sup>. Isabel's Testament mentions only bare proper names, Francisca as the mother of Juana, donated to Sor Juana, and her three male brothers born between 1659 and 1663 (Diego, twenty-eight, Manuel, twenty-six, and Francisco, twenty-four years old in 1687; Ramírez España 20). Plenty of souls to be baptized and saved. We also note that blacks and mulatto slaves were rigorously differentiated, being separate castes. On the other hand, both were legal non-entities and were part of the household as pieces of furniture. How would their birth certificates look like, not being Spanish nor Indian, and practically all out of wedlock? The blank space at their name speaks volumes.

As we can see in Schmidhuber (57ff), among Juana's mother's married siblings, Beatriz herself and her children were baptized in Chimalhuacán; so was the son of her brother Diego and those of her sister Inés, all dutifully marked as Spaniards. María as we noted moved to Mexico City with Juan de Mata. If Juana's mother Isabel did not go to Chimalhuacán parish with her own babies to be baptized, as it is apparent by the lack of any record on her six kids born out of wedlock, where did she go? Schmidhuber has located the father's younger brother Francisco serving in Amecameca; but as Méndez Plancarte informs us about the registry of baptisms in Amecameca, "the book of 'Spaniards' is missing there for those years" (OC 1:lii). We have mentioned Josefa María, married in Amecameca in 1664 (dutifully registered there in the "Book of Spanish Marriages"; Ramírez España 66). In view of the void, the search has moved obsessively, again and again, to "where the documents are." Why Juana's mother did not go to Chimalhuacán with her babies we can only guess.

While with all probability we will never have Juana's baptismal record in our hands, I think that we can now at least safely unburden her of all those proposed "sisters" (or half-sisters?), actually black and mulatto babies born in the family's household in those years, that are crowding her out of the beginning of her existence. However, the unveiled misreading (missed-reading) of the documents would now also seem to be creating a kind of poetic justice in that modern readers of those documents whose signs they did not fully understand have unwittingly projected on her the

shadows of those blanked “unbeings,” erased and forgotten by history. These shadows are now taking on life of their own.

Sor Juana herself, with her all-encompassing (truly *catholic*) genius, did not need any such call of attention: she knew the world around her surprisingly well for an apparently bookish person. Growing in a family among kids of slaves and with Indians nearby, she assimilated by osmosis all the languages and dialects around. Especially her early sets of *villancicos* (kind of Christmas carols, collected in OC 2) are stunning not only for the mastery of and play on most diverse languages cohabiting in the New Spain Babylonian heteroglossia, but also for what she manages to tell in those religious celebrations. In the first set (Asunción, 1676), the Virgin, modeled on the Mexican creole Virgin of Guadalupe, as a queen of all races, celebrated by black slaves in their special dialect and by Indians in their native nahuatl, stops her ascent to heaven to watch with comprehension the two slaves who complain to her about their hard lot in “obrajes” (hard labor factories). A kind of miracle perhaps? In the second (Concepción, 1676), a black slave says: “Although we are blacks, we are whites because devout souls are white and not black” (OC 2:27). The third set (San Pedro Nolasco, 1677, on the founder of the Order of the Virgin of Mercy) is even more explicit: a black slave brought from Puerto Rico complains that the alleged redeemers from the Order of Mercy do not save him from the “obraje,” perhaps because they are whites and do not like blacks; yet, “que aunque neglo, gente somo” (although we are blacks, we are human beings, OC 2:40). The saving turn in this delicate situation comes when the slave realizes that all these doubts may be just diabolic temptations: while just bodies suffer, the souls are freed. The explosive accusation is dissolved. Even so, the editor father Méndez Plancarte leaves this passage, so hard to understand in black slave dialect, without translation into standard Spanish and without commentary. What did the original audience take from it? Hard to say. For a change, the reader can find a surprisingly good commentary in the old-fashioned Ezequiel Chávez (121-129).

The debate around Sor Juana’s birth has shown several things: how the single-minded focus on the nun has distorted the record; how the initial lofty but poor mathematics of father Calleja has triggered the phantasmal chase of shadows and how the late discovery of her illegitimacy has complicated the search; how the amateurish sleuths have missed the clues

in their chase for proof, looking for documents where these should be no matter what; how the chasm between the liberal intelligentsia and the Catholics, suspect of anything and everything imaginable, has worked to derail so many things in real understanding of Sor Juana; and how Mexico's racial apprehension fixated on *mestizaje*, and therefore focusing only on whites and Indians and their miscegenation, has missed perhaps all too comfortably the other painful part of their country's heritage and has created a convenient blind spot. It would seem that even in Mexico *black lives matter*.

Once the traditional default narrative of father Calleja, full of little imprecisions here and there, is challenged and declared wrong if not intentionally deceptive, the search for truth in the maze of archives and in their voids becomes a task of completing a perplexing jigsaw-puzzle: selecting and carefully comparing titbits of data from most diverse and unlikely sources, crosschecking information and putting together an image in spite of the empty figure in the very center. Yet we have learned quite a bit in that process.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> However big, this was less than a dowry; no wonder that many families “parked” in convents their “extra” girls they could not marry; this led to a very special monastic life in the creoles’ convents, as Thomas Gage attests to.

<sup>2</sup> The fact is that, at that time, beyond his alleged Basque origin (Calleja, 1700), nothing more was known about him; it would be Guillermo Schmidhuber (in 2016) who will shed more light on both the paternal and maternal lines of Juana’s family.

<sup>3</sup> The staple explanation from the secular court that Catholic priests and scribes lived drunk all the time is impressive in its simplicity, yet is hardly convincing.

<sup>4</sup> The Testament states that Francisca “serves at present time to Juan González, my son-in-law” (Ramírez España 8). It could be that her daughter Juana de San José was born (and baptized) in another household and therefore is not accounted for here.

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