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Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. ix + 496, £60.95, hb.

Since the early 1970s, Asunción Lavrin has published extensively on varied aspects of conventual life in the viceroyalty of New Spain. Having opened the field, she has played a dynamic and central role in its development, and now, at the height of her game, she has taken it in a new direction. In *Brides of Christ*, Lavrin's objective is to put herself in the shoes of a nun from the time that she, or her family, makes the decision to enter a convent, to her novitiate, profession, life and death as a black-veiled nun. While these topics have been given due attention in recent decades, Lavrin's work is the first to give us an all-inclusive view of 'a deeply and strongly rooted feminine religious culture' (p. 351).

Lavrin threads her way into the convent through the maze of qualifications required for a girl to aspire to the religious life. They included a European background and the payment of a dowry, both of which served to ensure the survival of Spanish society and culture in the New World. Women who otherwise might be prey to unequal marriages entered the convent to preserve their honour and that of their family. The author deftly traces the family bonds that joined such large numbers of nuns within the convent walls, but she also pays homage to the deep-seated piety that would move many a young woman to aspire to life in religion, often going against her family's wishes. Lavrin goes on to delve into the novice's experiences during her first year in what was often 'a conflictive and challenging place' (p. 51), and into the meaning of the rites that concluded that first phase of religious life and signified the beginning of a spiritual marriage to Christ the groom. From there she goes on to accentuate sensitively the devotional practices that such a union entailed, particularly that 'romance between the professed and Christ' (p. 90) so typical of Baroque piety. It was a romance that brought not just happiness but also intense suffering, as the nun was bound to imitate, to the best of her capability, the trials undergone by her husband. Using nuns' writings, Lavrin draws a compelling picture of the intense passions involved in this endeavour, passions that could easily mushroom into obsessions and morbid sensuality.

It is a testament to the breadth of this work that the following chapters on the government and daily life of a convent go into as fine a level of detail as that given to spirituality. Many convents in colonial Mexico were bustling cities within cities, composed of hierarchies as complex as they were fragile. Tensions abounded within convent walls and were often reproduced in relations between these female institutions and their male ecclesiastical governors. The independence of convents had been a thorny issue within the Church since the Middle Ages, and in New Spain clerics constantly sought to curtail their autonomy. The conflict came to a crisis in 1774 as lay women, servants and slaves were expelled from the convents and the nuns were ordered to live communally, thereby abolishing a way of life that was central to the colony's Spanish communities.

Having outlined a nun's relationship with her small household of servants and other dependants, her community, her male superiors and finally her divine groom, Lavrin goes on to broaden the picture to include the intense connection between body and soul in colonial spirituality. Hagiographers saw illness as a divine gift: 'a sick body could strengthen the soul and, conversely, spiritual sickness could result from much attention to the body' (p. 180). Likewise, death was the crowning glory of a process of illumination through suffering. The rituals surrounding death were

paramount to the life of a religious institution, and the death and burial of a saintly nun whose physical sufferings had been public knowledge could easily give rise to a cult to her memory within, and without, the convent walls, leading to determined efforts on the part of church men to promote her cause for beatification.

But if the wreckage wrought upon the physical body could thus bring a soul into a state of grace, the body, with its inherent sexuality, could be a formidable hurdle on her path. The vows of enclosure and chastity were of paramount importance to the preservation of religious life, and they were constantly challenged by the traditions that characterised the interactions of convents with the outside world. The frequent visits of men to the convent grilles to engage in so-called *devociones*, or conversations with nuns, as well as the almost daily contact between nuns and their male confessors, could easily spiral out of control, and in some cases – as Lavrin shows through a reading of inquisitorial documents – result in cases of actual seduction.

The great variety of topics introduced in this book is impressive: Lavrin leaves no stone unturned to give the reader a full-bodied impression of the form, colour and fabric of female religious life in colonial Mexico, as seen by those on the inside as well as lay spectators. Based on what must have been an exhaustive process of archival work, as well as a thorough reading of secondary sources, this is a grand synthesis of the state of a field which the author opened only four decades ago. And yet it is groundbreaking in the attention given to the nuances and details of personal lives within the convent, and to the challenges facing a woman undertaking to live a spiritual life within a community very much connected to the material world. Lavrin's concern is not to demonstrate that nuns wielded influence in the world – she takes that as a given, and instead brings us into their lives. One leaves this book with a sense of having spent fruitful time within convent walls observing phenomena otherwise as impenetrable as they are fascinating.

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Yanna Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-Between: Native Intermediaries, Indian Identity, and Local Rule in Colonial Oaxaca* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. xxi + 290, £48.00, £12.99 pb.

In 1700, colonial authorities in the Sierra Alta, Oaxaca, faced a revolt that quickly spread across Indian communities. The origins of the uprising lay in the arrest of several Indian leaders following the killing of two indigenous church officers who had alerted authorities to the existence of a local network of native priests and followers intent on keeping alive old religious practices. As recent studies by scholars such as David Tavares have shown, the event laid bare the fragile foundations of Spanish control in the area as well as the existence of a deep fracture in the native elite over the limits of cultural and political accommodation. Although only one chapter of *The Art of Being In-Between* deals with the Cajonos rebellion, the episode looms large in the author's account of the changing political landscape in which native intermediaries from a Mexican peripheral region operated until the end of the eighteenth century.

Raising questions about autonomy, cooperation and resistance, native intermediaries have enjoyed a special place in the popular, literary and historiographic imagination and have often become, as in the Mexican case, ciphers of things to