

Article

Haunted Monasteries: Troubling Indigenous Erasure in Early Colonial Mexican Architecture

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Abstract: This essay examines the placement and displacement of Nahuatl labor in the architectural history of Mexico's early colonial monasteries. It takes as its point of departure the story of a ghost in the Tlaxcala monastery as told by a Franciscan missionary to analyze the discursive and spatial dimensions of emergent racial ideologies in Mexico's earliest Catholic missions. While the ghost's appearance signals the eruption of unresolved tensions between the missionaries and the Tlaxcalans in a cohabited religious complex, the specter also animates settler colonial domination. Cross-referencing Nahuatl and Franciscan documents reveal the ghost story as a whitewashed tale of monastic ritual life wherein the ghost effaces Indigenous labor at precisely the moments and places missionaries deemed it most threatening. In so doing, this study illuminates how racial ideologies were structured discursively and experientially at the missions and contributes to urgent debates about how the history and preservation of Catholic architecture in Mexico conceals and represses the lived experience of Indigenous peoples. Neither the manuscript nor any parts of its content are currently under consideration or published in another journal.

Keywords: Mexico; missions; labor; race; indigeneity



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1. Introduction

Around 1595, a Franciscan missionary, Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, told one of colonial Mexico's earliest ghost stories in his chronicle, the *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (Mendieta 1997, vol. 2, pp. 140–41).¹ Addressed to fellow Franciscans, the account of the ghostly apparition asserts the reality of purgatory, the intermediate space between Hell and Heaven (Le Goff 1986; Christian 1981; Greenblatt 2013; Chesters 2011, pp. 26–35; Koslofsky 2011, pp. 23–28). The account is brief but the description of the place where the incident occurred—the monastery of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción at Tlaxcala (ca. 1553–89)—is rich in detail (Figures 1 and 2).² Tlaxcala was an influential Nahuatl *altepetl* (city-state) in Central Mexico where the Franciscans founded a mission in 1524 (Figure 3).

Most missionary descriptions from that time and region focus on the Catholic rituals staged by the Nahuas outside in the atrium. But Mendieta takes readers inside the most private rooms and spaces of a Franciscan monastery: the refectory (dining hall), choir enclosure, dormitory, cloister, and even the crypt. Mendieta's account of the monastery shows readers a side of the monastery they could not know unless they had read monastic rule books. At the same time, Mendieta offers readers a type of literary experience of the monastery in which everything is not as the rule books would have it seem.

As I will show, Mendieta's ghost story gives us a way to understand the monastery's built interior and the interactions of the two groups there: the Franciscans and the Indigenous Nahuas. To this end, and with the construction narrative set forth by Alejandra González Leyva (2014) as inspiration, I have made new ground plans of the Tlaxcala monastic complex as it stood at the time of the ghostly apparition. Based on a close reading of Mendieta's account plus on-site analysis of several Franciscan monasteries, these plans reconstruct the protagonists' itinerary through the approximate locations of the rooms described in the narrative prior to renovations that concluded in 1589.

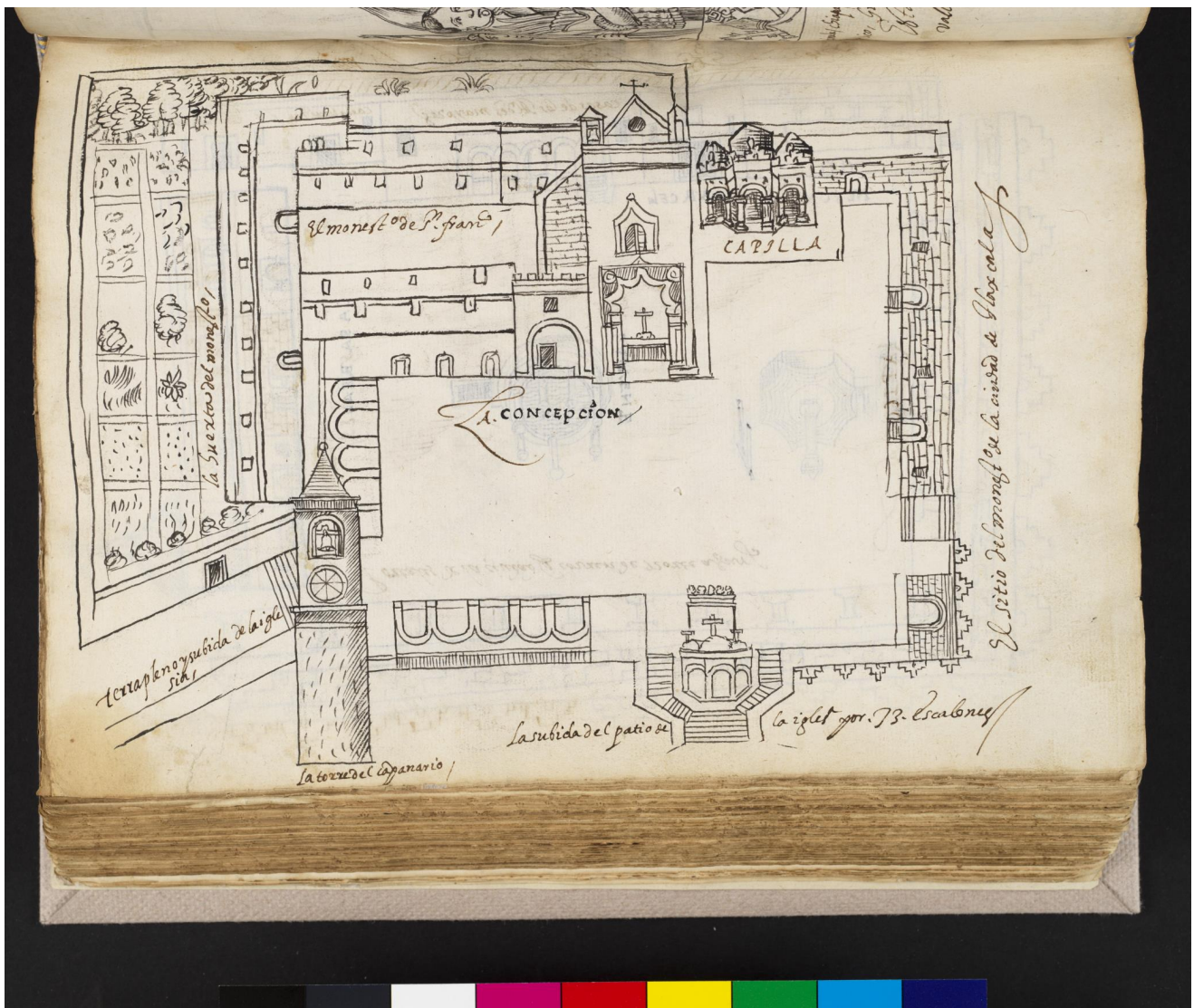


Figure 1. An unnamed Nahua artist's view of the monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala ["El sitio del monestio de la ciudad de Tlaxcala"], ca. 1575–82 from Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala*, Ms. Hunter 242, fol. 245v. Image courtesy of the Glasgow University Library, Scotland. The top is oriented to the east.

Mendieta's story begins on a Friday evening in 1556. It was Lent, the penitential season when Catholics—living and dead—atone for their sins. Outside the Tlaxcala monastery, the atrium teemed with Nahua churchgoers who had come to make their annual confession. But inside the monastery, all was eerily quiet. A lay brother, Fray Miguel, carried a pitcher of water to the refectory (Figure 4a,b). At the opposite end of the refectory was the office, where the monastery's books were kept. There, a mysterious figure entered. Although the strange visitor was dressed like Fray Miguel and the other Franciscan missionaries, in a brown tunic with a hood, the lay brother did not recognize him. Fray Miguel called out to the figure, but there was no answer. In distress, he went to the refectory office to investigate, but nobody was there. The sight of the figure must have been an illusion or trick, he thought. After all, the monastery's three priests should have been, at that hour, hearing confessions in the church (García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, pp. 133–34).³



Figure 2. View from the upper atrium of the monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico. The complex has undergone many changes since the sixteenth century, including the addition of the triple-arched porch (*portería*) in the eighteenth century (photograph by the author).

Fray Miguel's senses were tested again when the ghostly apparition returned after Matins, the service chanted by the friars in the church at midnight. As Fray Miguel knelt in prayer outside the choir enclosure, which originally stood in front of the high altar, he saw the hooded figure approaching, illuminated by the glow of the chancel lamp. Now "face to face," Fray Miguel asked it a question, the answer to which he already knew: "Isn't it you, Brother So-and-So, already dead?"⁴ "Yes, it's me," confirmed the spectral voice as it turned away from the lay brother and toward the tabernacle, the vessel in the high altar that reserved the Eucharist.⁵ "What are you looking for over there, brother?" Fray Miguel asked, as the ghostly figure gazed at the Eucharist—the consecrated wafer that is the body of Christ, and thus the most potent symbol of suffrage, or intercession. The figure mocked: "Well, you do not see what I am looking for?" and vanished.⁶ Suddenly alone in the dark church, Fray Miguel realized he had been visited by a ghost from purgatory. He left the church and went upstairs to the dormitory to report what he had seen and heard to the monastery's highest-ranking member, the father guardian. Fray Miguel described to Fray Francisco de Lintorne the miracle he had witnessed in the choir. He explained that the purgatorial spirit had gestured to the Eucharist, which he understood as a request for the commemorative Masses and prayers that would release it from purgatory and send it to Heaven. Fray Francisco listened skeptically. He insisted the lay brother must have fallen asleep in the choir. Exhausted from the day's work, maybe Fray Miguel was dreaming (MacCormack 1991, p. 43).⁷

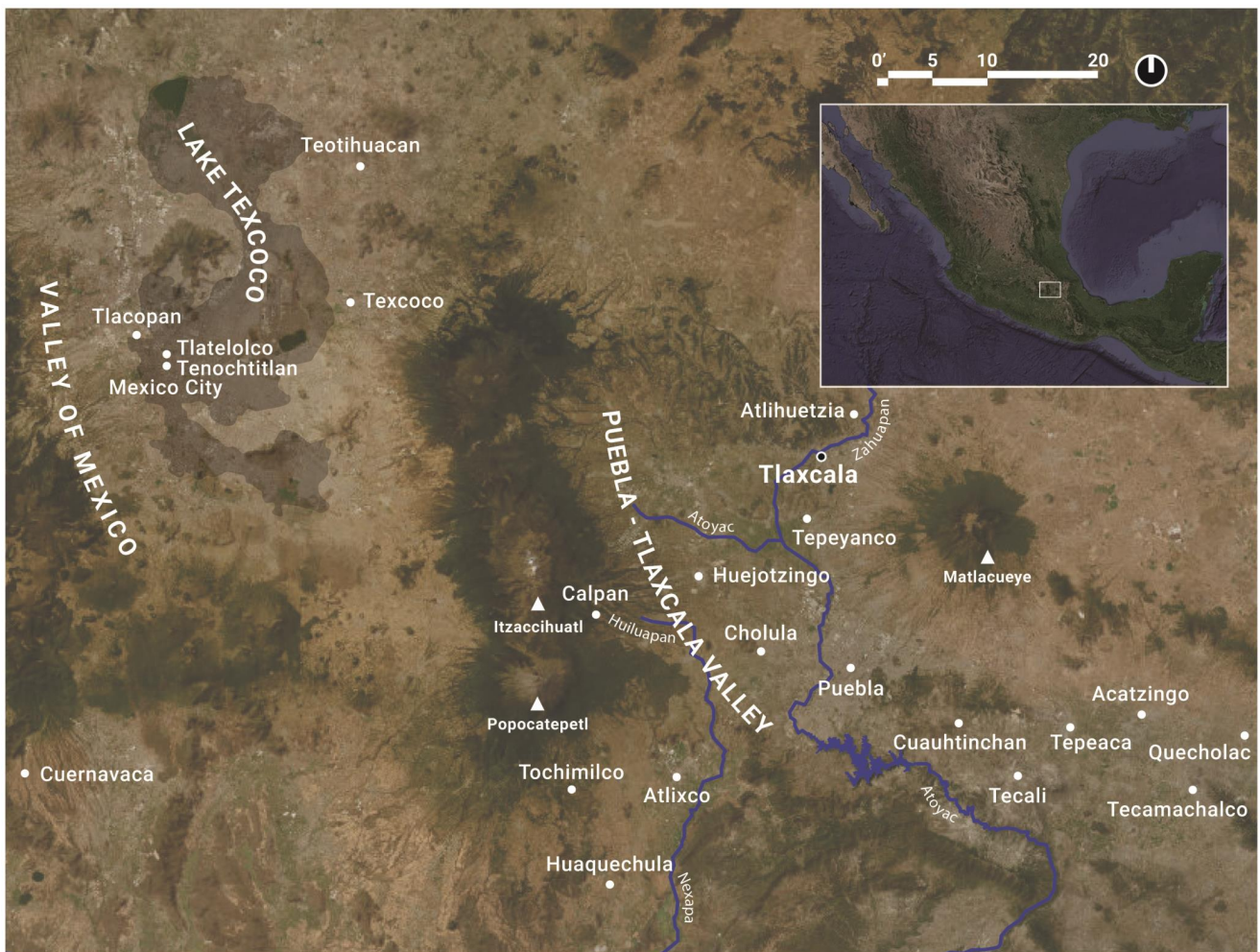


Figure 3. Map of the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley and the Valley of Mexico (source: Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, and the GIS User Community; modified by Diego Irigoyen).

The ghost returned the following night. This time the spirit glided through the cloister's dark walkways as Fray Miguel rang the bell for evening prayers.⁸ That the ghost moved during the sounding of the bells seems to correspond to the belief that tolling bells sped souls through purgation (Greenblatt 2013, pp. 43–44).

The spirit lingered for eight more days before it disappeared. Sometimes it circled the cloister by night; at other moments, Fray Miguel saw it there in broad daylight. Always, the ghost glided in the direction of the church, which it entered through a special doorway (now sealed) on the cloister's south side. Crucially, Mendieta records that the ghost appealed to only Fray Miguel, the illiterate lay brother who was a manual laborer and not a priest.

Even apparitions are deceiving. In Mendieta's account, the ghost of the dead Franciscan is a red herring. The Franciscan author acknowledges that, in real life, Fray Miguel was no stranger to the miraculous (Mendieta 1997, pp. 130–34). Yet, when Mendieta appropriated Fray Miguel's testimony and turned it into a didactic narrative for his chronicle, the ghost became a literary device. In the account, the ghost distracts the reader from the monastery's Nahua occupants, who, like Fray Miguel, were laborers, but instead have been rendered ghostly and invisible through the author's pen.

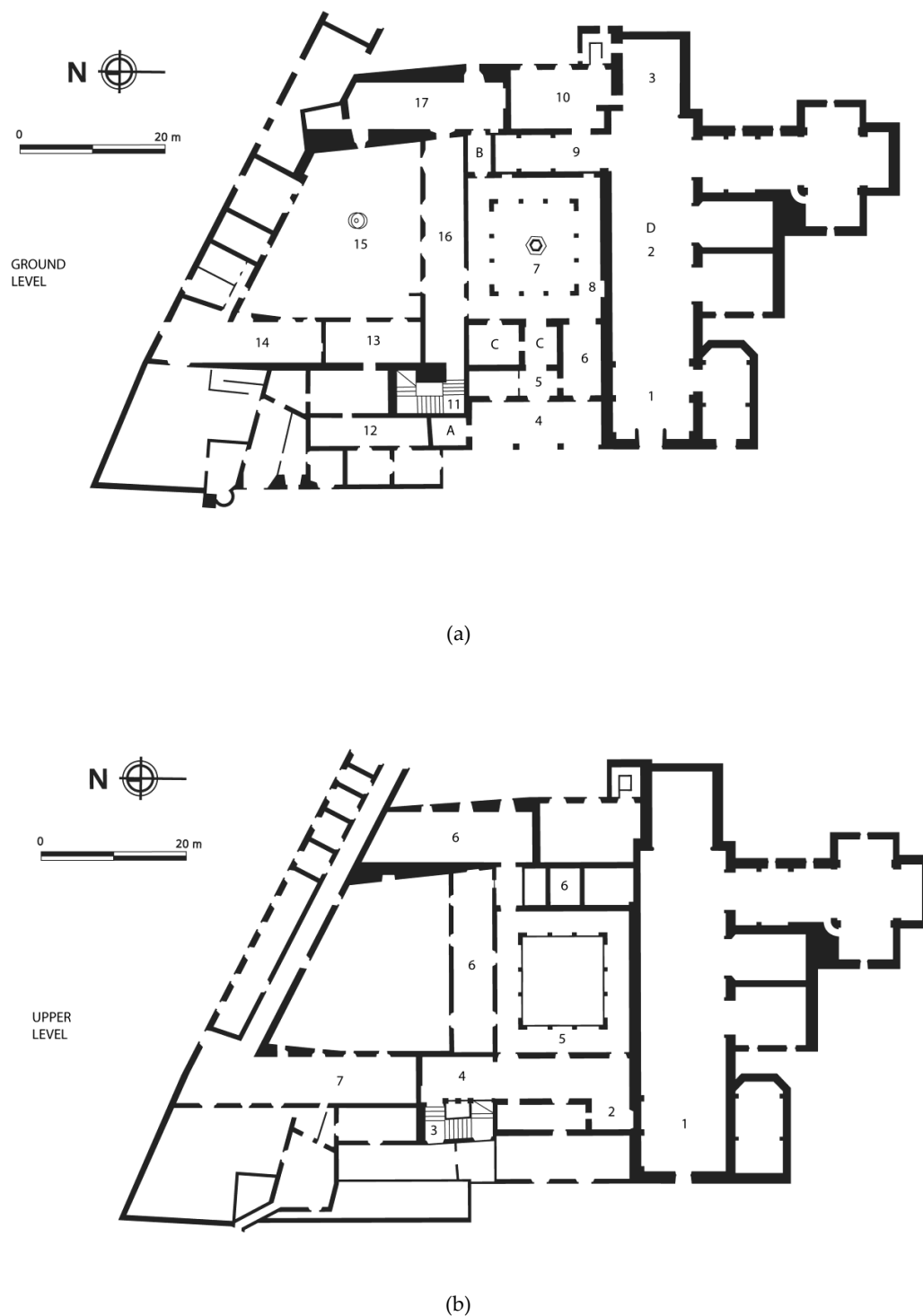


Figure 4. (a). Plan of the ground level of the monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, as it stands today (drawing by Diego Irigoyen, after drawing in Leyva 2014). 1. church sotocoro (narthex); 2. church nave; 3. church presbytery; 4. portería (18th century); 5. monastery entrance; 6. INAH Museum office (former Immaculate Conception chapel); 7. cloister; 8. Porciúncula portal; 9. San Antonio chapel (former refectory); 10. sacristy; 11. staircase; 12. inner courtyard; 13. new refectory; 14. INAH Museum library (former sala general); 15. new cloister; 16. north corridor (sala de profundis?); 17. sala general (kitchens?). A–D mark the hypothetical position of demolished features: A. exterior staircase; B. original staircase; C. original monastery entrance; D. choir enclosure. (b). Plan of the upper level of the monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, as it stands today (drawing by Diego Irigoyen, after drawing in Leyva 2014). 1. church choir loft; 2. choir loft entrance; 3. staircase; 4. mirador terrace; 5. upper cloister; 6. dormitories (?); 7. scriptorium (?).

Mendieta conjures this unnatural vision by appealing to his readership's deep familiarity with the spaces depicted and not depicted in the story. For example, the apparitions do not occur where contemporary readers might expect, such as the places where friars mourned and buried their dead: the *sala de profundis* (the chapter room, where meetings and wakes were held) and the crypt (Lavrin 2014b). Instead, the spectral sightings happen in the refectory, choir enclosure, and cloister. Historically, Franciscans had used these rooms for corporate rituals, but unlike the chapter room and crypt, these were spaces for cross-cultural interaction. Here, a staff of educated Nahua elite men and boys assisted the friars during rituals by reading devotional texts aloud as well as singing liturgical music (García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, pp. 71–74, 134). Thus, Mendieta's main readership would have not only seen but also heard Nahuas daily in the rooms where they worshipped. Surely, this is in part because the author is making a doctrinal argument directed to his Franciscan readership. But within the construction of that argument there is an implicit claim about the conditions of Indigenous in/visibility in the confines of the monastery.

In this article, I read Mendieta's account against the architectural spaces of the Tlaxcala monastery to recover the presence of the Indigenous laborers who have been rendered invisible in the story. Drawing on Franciscan rule books, I follow the ghost of the dead missionary through the rooms and corridors of the Tlaxcala monastery, reimagining the actions and movements of Nahuas and Franciscans within the complex—both as it stood at the time of the incident of the ghost (ca. 1556) and the renovated space Mendieta knew at the time he wrote the ghost story (ca. 1585). I argue that by guiding the reader to the built spaces where Nahuas should be but are not, the character of the ghost orients the reader in a way that makes Nahua bodies and voices difficult to see and hear (Ahmed 2007). As I will show, Franciscans conjured imagined social orders through the spatial arrangement and literary representation of the monasteries. While the plan of the renovated monastery shows physical changes to the building's layout, revealing its "system of spatial relations" (Hillier and Hanson 1984, p. 14), Mendieta's account described the system of relations between Franciscans and Nahuas that the new spatial organization of the Tlaxcala monastery was intended to produce. The literary narrative thus helps us to look beyond the "syntax of the plan," to deduce the monastery's social logic—that is, how the building and its representations produced a racialized colonial order (Hillier and Hanson 1984, p. 2).

Mendieta's account of the ghostly apparition at Tlaxcala offers insight into the role of colonial Catholic architecture in emergent structures of racial segregation in sixteenth-century Mexico. The colonial Spanish obsession with class, gender, and racial hierarchies—the blood purity discourses known as *limpieza de sangre*—had its roots in the Franciscan spatial imaginary. Drawing on the work of Carlos Sempat Assadourian, María Elena Martínez showed the Franciscans were among the first to describe a segregated colonial order. In his letters Mendieta advocated for the creation of dual Christian domains, one comprising so-called 'Old Christians' with verified Catholic ancestry and one consisting of groups deemed by the Franciscans to be nominally Catholic, especially Indigenous peoples (Assadourian 1988, p. 362; Martínez 2008, p. 98).⁹ As Martínez argued, such visions of a bipartite society solidified as the system of dual republics, with a republic of Indians (*república de indios*) and a republic of Spaniards (*república de españoles*). Yet colonial social structures should also be understood on the scale of built space. According to Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, it is through the ways buildings order space that we can "recognize society: that it exists and has a certain form" (Hillier and Hanson 1984, p. 2).

As I will show, the parallel colonial orders Mendieta envisioned in his letters derived in part from the social relations imposed by the arrangement of the monastery's built spaces. By the time he wrote the account, Mendieta had twice served as the father guardian of the Tlaxcala monastery, in 1585 and 1591 (Gibson 1952, pp. 210–13). There he traversed the same passageways as Fray Miguel and proposed radical reforms to physically isolate the Franciscans from the Indigenous people (García Icazbalceta 1892, vol. 4, pp. 234–43; Turley 2016, pp. 140–52). For Franciscans, the monastery was a microcosm of an idealized Christian society, where physical barriers were imagined to articulate religious and social

barriers beyond the cloistered walls. The representation of the Tlaxcala monastery in Mendieta's account, then, offers vital insight into the representation of Indigenous labor in monastic spaces, revealing an understudied aspect of the origins of emergent racialized systems of social and religious differentiation in colonial Mexico.

There is a history of imagining built spaces as devoid of their Indigenous and Black occupants (Derrida 1994; Bergland 2000; Ahmed 2004; Gordon 2008; Cameron 2008). Yet the monuments of colonial settlement also preserve features that imply the presence of groups who were meant to remain unseen (Martin 2020, pp. 65–72). For the early-modern Iberian world, architectural inquiries into the experiences of groups who are less documented in the traditional records have focused on construction histories and construction site labor regimes. These studies have advanced our understanding of the embodied experiences of Black and Indigenous laboring bodies in colonial buildings (Escobar 2021; Fernández González 2021). But less attention has been paid to moments of quotidian labor in architectural interiors (Upton 1984; Martin 2020; Wilson 2020). The case of the monastery at Tlaxcala, a complex that underwent many transformations and offers sources to reflect its changing appearance, illustrates the tension between how missionaries envisioned the monasteries and how they were used and experienced by a broad group of Indigenous workers. Taking up Emilie Cameron's call to interrogate "[t]hose who see and imagine ghosts" (Cameron 2008, p. 390), I show how Franciscans used monasteries and their representations as active agents in producing "the specific, lived experience of ghostliness" (Cameron 2008, p. 389) that continues to haunt the memory of these buildings today.

2. A Haunted Monastery

Few Franciscan missionaries would have been surprised by the return of the dead at the Tlaxcala monastery. Since Europe's medieval period, monasteries had been among the primary settings for tales about apparitions (Le Goff 1986, pp. 177–81).¹⁰ Moreover, the Tlaxcala monastery was an odd place. Built and expanded between 1553 and 1589, with renovations continuing into the twentieth century, the Tlaxcala monastery preserves features that have been the subject of much scholarly debate. Contrary to the Franciscan tradition of locating the monastery block on the warm south side of the church, at Tlaxcala the cloister stands on the church's shadowy north side (Kubler 1948, vol. 2, p. 342). The corridors and rooms are unusually dark. It was the only Franciscan monastery in Mexico to add a second cloister, and it was built in the area typically reserved for the cemetery. Also odd was the doorway that connected the cloister to the church. At Franciscan churches, the doorway on the north side was associated with the mystical life of Saint Francis and, later, the remission of the punishments of purgatory (McAndrew 1965, p. 155; Estrada de Gerlero 2011, p. 234). Normally, it opened onto the atrium and was used by laypersons to enter the church. But at Tlaxcala, it was once the threshold to the choir enclosure, originally located in the church's nave. When Mendieta portrays the ghost gliding over this threshold in search of redemption, he thus alludes to the complex symbolism embedded in the monastery's architectural pathways. But such peculiarities were only one reason the Tlaxcala monastery offered the ideal setting for a ghost story.

Regarded by Franciscans as a New Bethlehem, Tlaxcala was distinctive among Nahua polities for its political independence deriving from its legacy as a society of Indigenous conquistadors and early Catholic converts (Gibson 1952, pp. 158–94; Villella 2016, pp. 89–92). The Tlaxcalans were among several Nahuatl-speaking *altepetl* in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley that had participated in the Spanish invasion of the Mexica (Aztec) capital of Tenochtitlan in 1520–1521 (Gibson 1952; Castañeda de la Paz 2009; Matthew and Oudijk 2007). Yet Tlaxcala was unique in that the Crown awarded it privileges and governmental autonomy for this wartime alliance (Gibson 1952, pp. 158–94). In 1524, the twelve members of the original Franciscan mission established the first monastery, on a hill near Tlaxcala (Gibson 1952, p. 33; García Gutiérrez 2014, pp. 51–52). The site had been donated by one of Tlaxcala's ancestral rulers who saw, in the alliance with the missionaries, a safeguard against the encroachment of Spanish settlers.

By 1529, the monastery had been relocated to its present location. This hill was chosen for its proximity to springs sacred to the Tlaxcalans called *Chalchihuapan*, meaning “the place of precious green stones” (Camargo 1994, p. 55; Zapata y Mendoza 1997, p. 137; Vetancurt 1982, p. 53; García Gutiérrez 2014, p. 53). An ancestral shrine dedicated to a pre-Hispanic fertility goddess stood on the site, and the missionaries wasted no time in destroying it and re-dedicating the hillside to the Virgin Mary. Although the springs were not forgotten by the locals, a small timber-frame friary soon stood on the site adjacent to the pools of sacred, gurgling water.

By the 1529 relocation, Tlaxcala had already witnessed considerable violence. Two years earlier, the Franciscans had executed five Tlaxcalan nobles for idolatry (Gibson 1952, pp. 34–35; Mundy 2014, pp. 518–19). The violent extirpation campaign continued until 1530, and the brutal events left an indelible print on Tlaxcalan political strategies. Yet, as Justyna Olko and Agnieszka Brylak have argued, meting out violence to eradicate Indigenous resistance backfired in the long term (Olko and Brylak 2018, p. 592). Rather than backing down, Tlaxcalan leaders became more involved in the Christianization of the community to prevent Franciscans from infiltrating Indigenous affairs further.

3. Indigenous Insiders

Establishing their institutional presence within the monastery was part of Tlaxcala’s protectionist strategy. From the point of view of Nahua leaders, the secular and religious administration of Franciscan monasteries were inextricably intertwined. Consider, for example, Don Blas Osorio, whose time and movements overlapped with those of the historical Fray Miguel. Osorio became the highest Nahua religious official in Tlaxcala in 1551 when he was elected to the office of *fiscal* of the church (Celestino et al. 1985, p. 56). As a fiscal, Osorio controlled the monastery’s finances, having previously controlled the establishment’s revenue stream while in civil government as the head of the *cabildo* (municipal council). He would now have extensive access to the monastery and its daily rites. The next year, the cabildo elected Osorio to the civil position of *alcalde* (magistrate). According to municipal council records, Fray Miguel was one of the two Franciscans who was present in the town hall to supervise the election of the town’s cabildo (Celestino et al. 1985, p. 123). That year, 1552, a flood inundated the town. Although the hillside monastery was spared, heavy rains caused the Franciscans’ original timber-frame friary to rot (Zapata y Mendoza 1997, p. 152; Celestino et al. 1985, pp. 131–32; Lockhart et al. 1986, p. 52). As part of the council, Osorio signed off on the decision to rebuild the quarters where Fray Miguel and the other friars lived, and he oversaw the construction of a new stone cloister the following year, 1553. Osorio thus wielded authority and influence that cut across colonial regimes, and he regularly crossed the architectural and social barriers that otherwise separated the Nahua townspeople from the Franciscans.

When not holding a position in the cabildo, men such as Osorio carried their credentials into the monastery. A large staff of educated Nahua elites oversaw the complex’s administrative and religious affairs (Lockhart 1992; Hanks 2010; García Gómez and Rodríguez 2017; Truitt 2018). Collectively referred to as the *teopantlaca* (church people) in Nahuatl documents, this corps of elected Nahua officials, cantors, musicians, lectors, and scribes was the primary point of contact between the missionaries and the Nahua congregation (Lockhart 1992, pp. 210–18). Conversely, only a few friars resided at each monastery. According to the ghost story, three ordained priests inhabited the Tlaxcala monastery in 1556. By 1569, there were six priests and one lay brother, but only three of the priests spoke Nahuatl (García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, pp. 20–21; Assadourian 1988, pp. 389–410).

As adherents of the Franciscan Observant reform movement, the missionaries carried out a disciplined lifestyle in emulation of Saint Francis, their founder. Given their low numbers, the Franciscans realized that the success of their spiritual regimen depended on the Nahua auxiliaries who had special access to the monastery and performed the labor of Catholic worship in the complex’s most restricted spaces. Most were accomplished administrators, grammarians, musicians, and singers who were deeply familiar with the

rituals and behavioral codes of Franciscan religion because they had grown up and trained in monastic schools (Townsend 2016, pp. 63–67). That the missionaries relied on elite Nahua labor to carry out their observance challenged the Order's own conception as a self-sufficient and superior community. Yet it also meant that an influential group of Nahuas were positioned to shape and intervene in the establishment's affairs.

4. Spectral Topographies

The comings and goings of these influential Nahuas defined an alternative topography that is rarely expressed outright in missionary art and literature. In approaching the site, the Nahuas met different kinds of spatial barriers that articulated the varying levels of racial and social exclusivity underlying the colonial order. The segregated spatial program had an unexpected consequence. Out of view of the friars, Nahuas would have had the opportunity to renew connections to the site's sacred natural features and form new attachments to the monastery's built spaces on their own terms.

To enter the Tlaxcala monastery, Nahua officials and staff would have first confronted a tiered system of architectural barriers that imposed graduated levels of access designed to segregate groups of people. A pen-and-ink drawing in Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (ca. 1575–1582)—the only sixteenth-century image of the monastery—illustrates this system (see Figure 1). The drawing, oriented to the east, depicts the monastery at Tlaxcala as it stood in the 1580s after a building campaign extended it to the north (Wake 2002, pp. 108–11; Leyva 2014). A spacious atrium with an elongated patio surrounds a church with an attached cloister and gardens, a chapel and a cylindrical bell tower. A lower atrium extends across the base of the hill in front of the open chapel. Built as early as 1537, the open chapel defined one of the vertical levels of access to the site. It stands sentinel between the upper and lower atriums, flanked by a double stairway of seventy-three steps (Camargo 1981, p. 53). Both the stairways and the ramp on the north side of the terrace transformed the formal approach into a ritual of inclusion as one moved away from the lower atrium at the base of the hill and vertically toward the walled upper atrium.

The double atrium arrangement pictured in the drawing is unique; it created a hierarchy of ritual spaces that defined how Nahuas interacted with the site. On the one hand, this tiered arrangement of architectural checkpoints controlled access to the more constricted social and physical space of the upper terrace. On the other hand, the bell tower was a hidden vantage point from which to survey the movement of people through this highly controlled landscape. In this arrangement of exterior spaces, social control was architecturally instantiated by the network of ramps, stairs, and walls that define the Tlaxcala monastery as the center of a complex symbolic topography.

For the Franciscans, by contrast, the architectural pathway through the Tlaxcala monastery formed part of the embodied experience of worship and ministry. Franciscan monastic interiors were carefully designed to reinforce the structured life described in rule books. From the Order's inception, a distinguishing feature of the Franciscans has been ministry as well as contemplation, a model known as the *vita mixta* (Turley 2016, p. 40). Crucially, many early Franciscan missionaries were reformed Observants. As such, they prioritized the renewal of the contemplative aspects of Franciscan identity through solitary prayer and ascetical practices, including fasting, self-mortifying, and silence (García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, pp. 133–34; Gonzaga 1585, f. 17v; Godet-Calogeras 2007; Turley 2016, pp. 48–49, 55).

This spiritual program is visible in the arrangement of the monastery's interior spaces. First, contemplative and corporate rituals were carried out in the rooms found in the deepest part of the complex. At Tlaxcala, this is the east and north flank of the original cloister. Second, the rooms where the Franciscans interacted with the laity were located closer to the atrium on the west flank of the building. These rooms controlled and regulated access to the more intimate rooms of the eastern side. The cloister is situated in the heart of the complex, standing between the monastery's contemplative and active zones. Multiple times each day the Franciscans used the cloister's walkways to move from one side of the

complex to the other, but also to transition between the contemplative and active aspects of their spiritual lives. With hands pressed in prayer and pointed hoods covering their faces, the Franciscans meditated in silence or chanted prayers as they walked along the monastery's corridors counting their steps. As the friars navigated these architectural pathways, their actions and movements thus articulated the spiritual program that defined their internalized religious community.

The intermediary spaces of the Tlaxcala monastery were crucial sites of spatial and spiritual transition. At the time of its completion in 1553, however, there was only one way for the monastery's Nahua staff to access the rooms where they labored, which were located deep within the complex. This route necessarily took the Nahuas through the cloister and put them on an intersecting course with the Franciscans, who would have used the same pathway to access the choir enclosure and rooms on the contemplative side of the complex. Once they arrived in these intimate and shared spaces, the Nahuas and the friars would have positioned themselves in the part of the room appropriate for conducting their respective parts of the ceremony. Whereas a row of tables in the refectory stood between the Nahuas and the friars, the two groups may have stood side-by-side in the stalls of the choir. As a result, both the complex's intervening spaces and private rooms were sites of monastic and colonial interaction. Mendieta's account of the ghostly apparition at Tlaxcala also illustrates this spatial order. The ghost penetrates the rooms and traverses the corridors where the daily itineraries of Nahua and Franciscans had once overlapped. But in the narrative, the Nahuas have been dislocated from the building, leaving no textual trace of the encounters facilitated by the architecture.

By 1589, the monastery building had doubled its footprint by adding a new quadrangle to the north of the original ca. 1553 cloister (Leyva 2014, p. 85; Camargo 1994, p. 211; Ciudad Real 1993, p. 74) (Figure 5).¹¹ At this time, the original refectory and the original choir enclosure were demolished. They were replaced by a new refectory located in the new north quadrangle and the lofted choir over the church's narthex, respectively. Significantly, these features were rebuilt in the shallower spaces of the west flank of the monastery, far removed from where the Franciscans prayed in solitude. The new locations for these key ritual sites also changed how Nahuas navigated the building. On the one hand, the Nahuas' laboring activities were now confined to only the west side of the complex. On the other hand, the construction of new intermediary spaces on the ground floor put the Nahuas on a more circuitous route through the complex. Previously three intermediary spaces had stood between Nahuas and the old refectory; now there were nine spaces between the building's main entrance and the new refectory. These new, segregated passageways thus restricted access to the primary channels through the building and forced the Nahuas to use other access points.

For example, on the west side of the upper floor of the monastery, there is a curious loggia that stands at the top of a modern staircase (Figures 6 and 7). Aptly nicknamed the *mirador* and located at the threshold of the new quadrangle addition, the loggia once opened to the outside, thus revealing to people outside a stretch of the walkway that joined the old cloister (ca. 1553) and the new north quadrangle (after 1564) (Lockhart et al. 1986, p. 64), which could be accessed through a doorway (now sealed). The function of this loggia has puzzled scholars, who have previously considered the building only from the vantage point of the Franciscan priests (Leyva 2014, p. 96). Yet the *mirador* was poorly designed for contemplatives. The Franciscans would have realized that the *mirador* terrace exposed them to the prying eyes of anyone standing below in the monastery's double atrium, thus making the *mirador* too public a place for meditation. Considering the *mirador* from the vantage point of the monastery's Nahua staff, however, hints at another function. I suggest the *mirador* may have connected to a staircase that led to the walled inner courtyard directly in front of the expanded complex. If this was the case, the *mirador* would have been part of an exterior circulation system designed specifically for the use of Nahua workers.

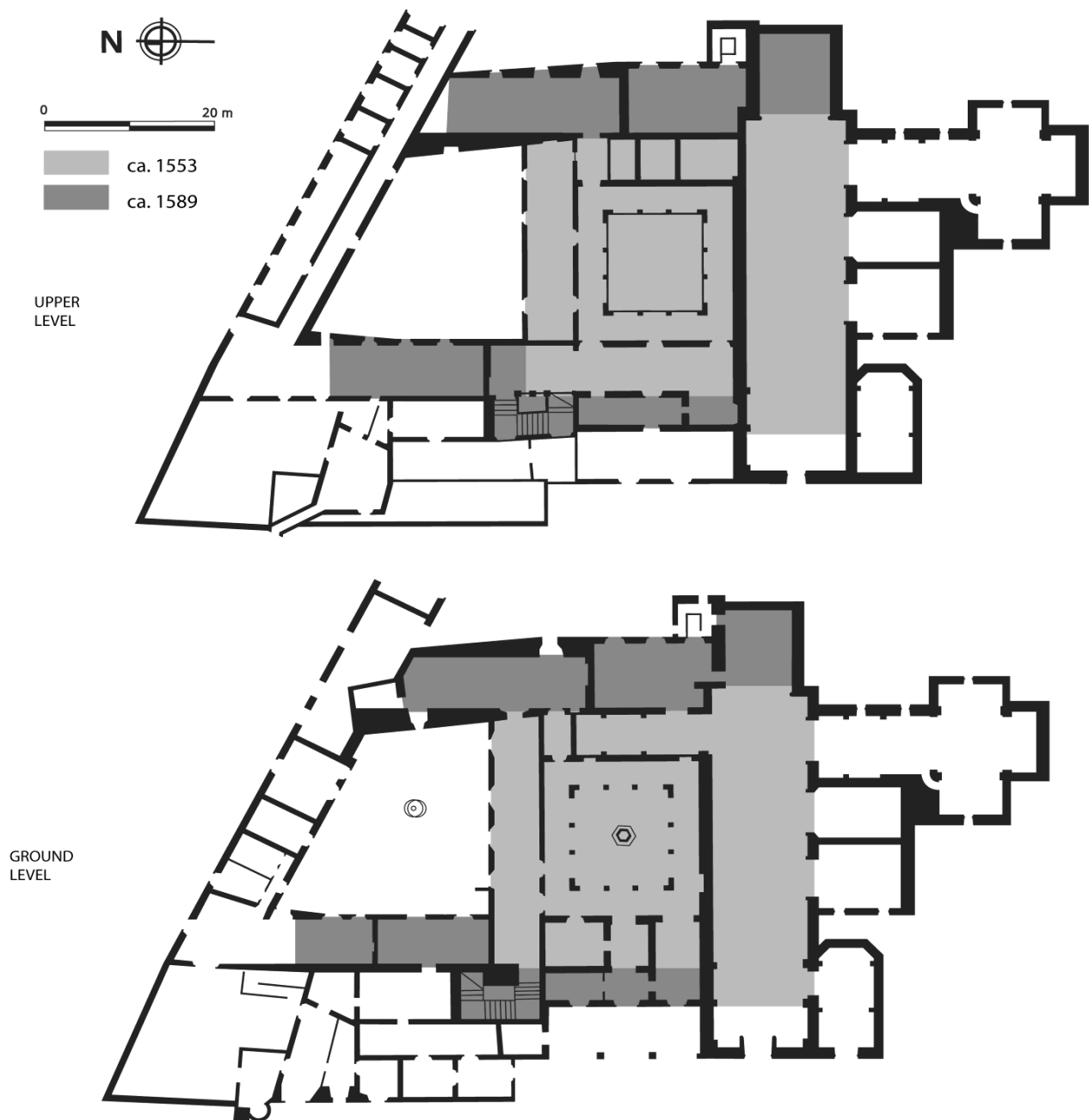


Figure 5. Comparative plans showing the renovations of the original 1553 monastery and church and subsequent renovations undertaken in the sixteenth century. Monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico (drawing by Diego Irigoyen, after drawing in [Leyva 2014](#)).

The mirador terrace is located along what was once a very busy pathway. An exterior circulation system would have eased congestion as people moved along the cloister's narrow walkways en route to the new choir loft or scriptorium. Choir singers, musicians, and other Nahua staff would have used this passage to access the main rooms of the upper cloister and the church's choir loft, thereby bypassing the cloister and the principal staircase that once stood on the opposite side of the complex. Such a straightforward and efficient route between the main spaces of labor on the second floor and the atrium would have separated the monastery's Nahua staff from the private pathway that led Franciscans from the dormitory, traditionally located in the east flank of the upper cloister, to the choir loft, thereby enhancing the isolation of the missionaries in the building.



Figure 6. The mirador terrace of the upper cloister of the monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, after 1564. Today, the mirador stands at the top of a modern staircase leading to the second story, forming part of a fully enclosed structure with a separate roofline (photograph by the author).

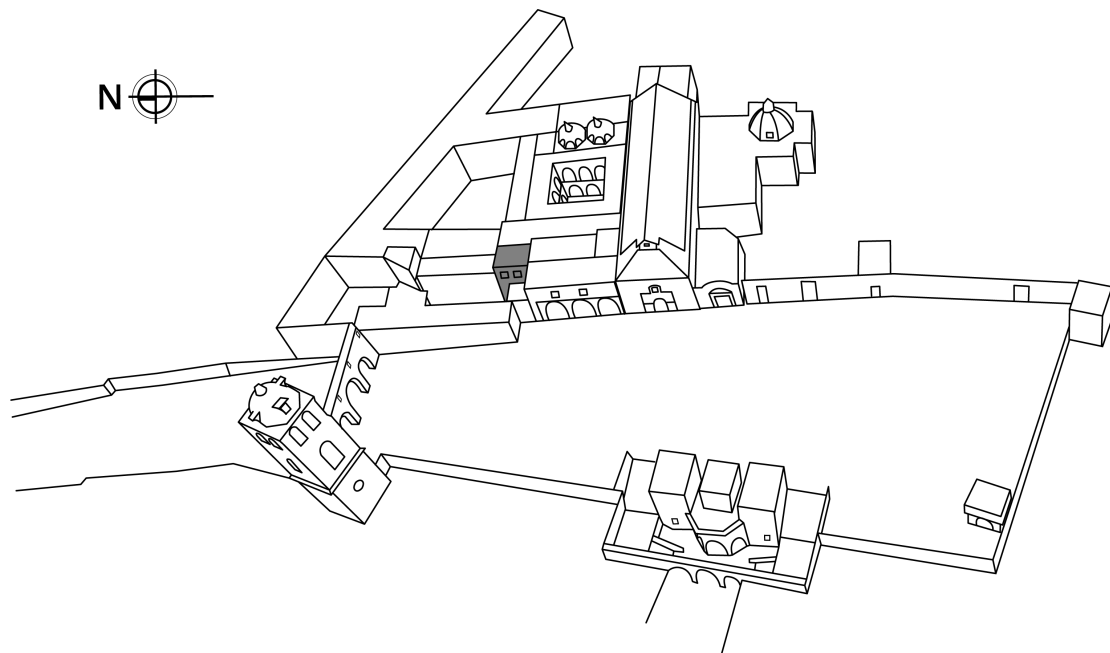


Figure 7. Isometric drawing of the monastic complex of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, as it stands today. To access the choir loft and scriptorium on the second level, Nahuas would have used an exterior staircase in front of the mirador, which is now enclosed by the structure shaded in gray (drawing by Diego Irigoyen).

Exterior staircases were a common feature of Franciscan monasteries in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley (Figure 8) (Esquivel 2020, p. 176). In other monasteries, these staircases were accessed via a separate, inner courtyard on the side of the monastery and attached to the building at the southern corner of the west façade (Figure 9). From here, the staircase connected to a door that opened onto a walkway that ran behind an elevated open chapel. This created an alternative pathway into the building controlled by doorways in the courtyard and upper cloister. At Tlaxcala, the double-cloister complex stands on the north side of the church. The most logical placement of an exterior staircase would have been at the base of the mirador where today there is a stairwell that was built in the eighteenth century, but which might have replaced an earlier feature. This proposed exterior staircase would have been enclosed by a courtyard, consistent with contemporary examples. It also would have served as the main point of access to the new refectory, which had a service door on its west side (now sealed) for the Nahuas to use. In this kind of exterior circulation system, the passage of Nahuas into the complex would have been both highly controlled and out of the view of the Franciscans, making the movements of the Nahuas effectively invisible to the missionaries.



Figure 8. The exterior stairway of the elevated open chapel of the monastic complex of San Martín de Tours, Huaquechula, Mexico, ca. 1569. At least twice per day Nahuas musicians and singers would have entered the courtyard, to the right of the chapel, and then used the exterior staircase to go up to the church's choir loft. The current stairway replaced the original staircase used in colonial times (photograph by the author).



Figure 9. The atrium and elevated open chapel of the monastery of San Martín de Tours, Huaquechula, Mexico, ca. 1569. Nahuas would have used the entrance to the right of the chapel to access the inner courtyard and exterior staircase. A 2017 earthquake damaged the monastery and church (photograph by the author).

5. Walking with the Ghost(s)

Having met the Nahuas who labored in the Tlaxcala monastery, described their comings and goings, and examined the monastery's evolving built spaces, we are now ready to re-read Mendieta's account, where we see that Fray Miguel practices a mode of social erasure as he moves through the Tlaxcala monastery. The story explicitly describes the network of rooms linked by votive services, such as the Office of the Dead (*Officium defunctorum*). Implicitly, the story reveals Franciscan anxieties about the dissolution of the spatial and social barriers that had defined the monastery as an exclusively Franciscan place. By considering the roles of the Nahuas in the Office of the Dead, we can make the Nahuas visible in the story. Lay brothers would have participated only passively in some of these rituals; conversely, Nahuas were highly audible and visible during these rites. Unlike Fray Miguel, Nahuas were vital to the Masses and observances that assuaged the suffering dead (García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, pp. 57–58; Baudot 1990, p. 91; Foley 2007).

5.1. The Refectory

Recall that the story opens with Fray Miguel fetching a jar of water when he sees a mysterious form enter the refectory office through the door next to the *mesa traviesa* (father guardian's table) (Figure 10). Mendieta gives enough information to situate the scene in the context of the canonical hours, which can be reconstructed by cross-referencing the story with Franciscan rulebooks from Mexico and Spain.¹² Franciscans in Mexico prayed

Compline at sunset (*prima noche*), prayed silently for an hour in the choir enclosure after the service, and then retreated to the refectory. Because this was a solemn service, Nahua choir singers would have sung the hymn and responsory of the Night prayer but would have omitted the Alleluia because it was Lent. The Office would have concluded with the monastery's Nahua choir singing the sequence "*Benedicta es, caelorum regina*" (Blessed you are, Queen of Heaven), a sequence typically set in polyphony.¹³ As a lay brother, Fray Miguel would have been present in the church for Compline but would not have entered the choir enclosure. Instead, he would have said his prayers while kneeling outside the choir in the laity's space.



Figure 10. View of a restored Franciscan refectory and refectory office (behind the screen) at San Miguel Arcángel, Huejotzingo, Mexico, ca. 1556. While Tlaxcala's original refectory was destroyed in the seventeenth century to make way for the San Antonio chapel, Huejotzingo's refectory—built in the same decade as the original refectory at Tlaxcala—has been restored and furnished, offering us an idea of how Tlaxcala's refectory may have once looked. In the photograph, the refectory office can be seen through the wood screen in the background, behind the father guardian's table. In this hypothetical arrangement, the lectern used by the Nahua lector is to the table's right (photograph by the author).

Compline marked the end of the liturgical day and would have been celebrated at 6:50 p.m. in March 1556 in Central Mexico.¹⁴ This puts Fray Miguel in the refectory with the water pitcher "en la tarde," or before Compline, and thus when the priests and the Nahua fiscal ministered to the Nahua congregation in the atrium.¹⁵ Because the refectory of the Tlaxcala monastery was originally off the east wing of the old cloister, the room would have already been dark when the ghost appeared.

Refectories are large, rectangular halls with flat ceilings and an office at the far end of the room. On the opposite side, a wall would have run the length of the room's short side to separate the refectory from the stairs that led to the dormitories upstairs. Between meals, refectories were used for penitential rituals. Their function as sites for self-discipline was most intense on the Fridays of Lent, which is when the story begins. On those days, the friars prostrated themselves on the floor to force people entering the room to step over their bodies and practiced self-flagellation (Cargnoni 1995, p. 232; García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, p. 134; Gonzaga 1585, f. 18r-v; Turley 2016, pp. 77–78). This regimen of self-discipline continued through the meals: friars abstained from eating, imbibed harsh substances, and silently meditated on the texts that Nahua lectors read aloud to them during the meal (García Icazbalceta 1941, vol. 2, p. 134). For example, every Friday, the Franciscans would have also listened to the Nahua lectors read aloud the *Rule* (the *Regula Bullata* of 1223), the foundational text of the Order (Roest 2004, p. 123). It was the texts read aloud, rather than food or drink, that offered the friars spiritual sustenance, and the biographies and didactic narratives—such as Mendieta's ghost story—were especially delectable (Roest 2004, p. 123; Rubial García 1996; Lavrin 2014a). Such narratives helped missionaries envision how to live out Franciscan legislation in the reality of mission life in Mexico. Not just a source of knowledge, these narratives created and reinforced collective memories that aligned with Franciscan values and traditions. Significantly, it was the Nahuas who read these texts, giving voice to the saints and priests and the ideals their writings had envisioned. In the account of the ghost, the setting of the narrative's opening scene in the refectory alludes to this edificatory context. It indicates that Mendieta knew the story's penitential themes would resonate viscerally with an audience hearing it in the same setting. The books containing these readings were kept in the office at the opposite end of the hall, which is where the shadowy figure disappeared in the story.

Thus, the image of the refectory inspired by Mendieta's account does not match our understanding of that space or the rituals performed therein. The story's opening scene implies the voices of the Nahuas, who are silenced in the text but would have been the only people that Fray Miguel heard there. A tension exists between the voices of the Nahuas, who were vital to the rites, and Fray Miguel's inability to recognize the voices of those he considered his Others. This tension sets the tone for the next episode, in which Fray Miguel speaks to the ghost in the choir.

5.2. The Choir

As Craig Koslofsky observed in his study of the early modern night, “the association of ghosts with midnight was axiomatic” (2011, p. 238). This was the hour when purgatorial spirits revealed their intentions and could be perceived in embodied ways. The friars meditated on the crucified body of Christ in the choir on Friday nights during Lent and this would have prepared Fray Miguel for this lively exchange with the dead (Figure 11).¹⁶ Franciscans were instructed to use their imaginations during contemplative prayer in order to summon stirring images and elicit powerful, felt emotions (Bennett 2001). Fray Miguel had only recently concluded these exercises when the ghost appeared to him by the glow of the chancel lamp. He saw the figure emerge from the darkness and enter the choir enclosure.

Today, the choir of the Tlaxcala church is located in a gallery above the narthex and accessed from the second floor of the cloister via the western corridor (Figure 12). At the time of the ghostly meeting, however, the choir of the Tlaxcala church was a freestanding structure in the nave. Choir enclosures were reserved for the Franciscan priests, as well as the Indigenous vocalists and musicians who performed during the daily services. A pair of choir stalls (*sillería*), or benches arranged perpendicular to the altar, accommodated a choir of Nahua singers who would have performed plainchant and polyphony alongside the three resident Franciscans (Figure 13). In the mid-sixteenth century, Tlaxcala's choir had between five and twenty adult vocalists (*cuicani*) and at least five professional musicians (*tlapitzque*) who played wind and brass instruments to accompany the choral pieces (Lockhart et al. 1986, pp. 49, 51, 52, 62). A large wooden *facistol* (bookrest) stood in the front center of the

choir for the large choir books used by the choir and donated by the cabildo. An iron or wooden screen (*reja*) would have surrounded the ensemble, obscuring the singers and Franciscans from view while physically separating the main altar in the sanctuary from the congregation gathered in the nave. The story alludes to this now-dismantled choir structure when it explains that Fray Miguel saw the ghost through the *reja de coro* (choir grate), a feature not associated with later choir lofts. Mendieta's ghost story preserves the only textual description of this type of church furnishing. Because the Tlaxcala church lacked a presbytery (an area specific to the officiating clergy) until 1578, the choir structure would have been placed directly in front of the altar at the chancel, which caused the light of the chancel's lamp to illuminate the specter.



Figure 11. Nave of the monastic church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, begun 1553. At the time of the ghostly apparition, the church had a flat east end and a choir enclosure stood at the chancel, between the nave and the high altar. Franciscans and Nahuatl liturgical singers once accessed the choir from the cloister through what is now a sealed door on the north side of the nave. The choir enclosure was dismantled after the choir loft was built in the late sixteenth century (photograph by the author).



Figure 12. View of the sotocoro and choir loft of the monastic church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, built after 1564 and enlarged in the seventeenth century (photograph by the author).

Mendieta returns readers to the choir for the story's climax. On Sunday, Fray Miguel is outside the choir when he sees the ghost cross the nave and enter the choir. Although this episode is the shortest passage of the account, it brims with meaning. On the surface, the episode reminds readers of the expiatory power of Eucharistic adoration. Yet Vespers was the most musically significant Office. On Sundays in the choir, Franciscans and Nahua liturgical singers would have proclaimed the certainty of the soul's salvation. At Vespers, Franciscans in New Spain celebrated a Requiem Mass on behalf of the dead ([García Icazbalceta 1941](#), vol. 2, p. 146).¹⁷ During the service, Nahua singers would have vocalized the Office of the Dead, appealing to God to deliver souls from purgatory. The Latin-texted lessons and responsories of the Office of the Dead draw on the biblical Book of Job ([Knudsen 1993](#), pp. 363–64; [Harper 1991](#), p. 125). The priest assumed the tortured voice of Job in the lessons, initiating a conversation with the choir ([Vicchio 2006](#), pp. 44–59). The Nahua singers would have responded to Job's plight and pessimism by singing doctrinal tenets through the allegories expressed in the responsories. Though not present in the literary narrative, the Nahua choir would have been vital actors in liberating the soul of the dead missionary from purgatory.

In the episode in the choir, Nahua voices become audible to modern ears only when the passage is reread through the lens of Franciscan rulebooks ([García Icazbalceta 1941](#), vol. 2, pp. 145–46; [Medrano 1579](#), f. 53, f. 290; [Gonzaga 1585](#), f. 100v). Given this collective and cross-cultural intercessory action, it is significant that when the spirit later appears

for the last time, it is in the cloister. Yet, once again, the appearance of the ghost stands concurrent with Indigenous disappearance and silence.

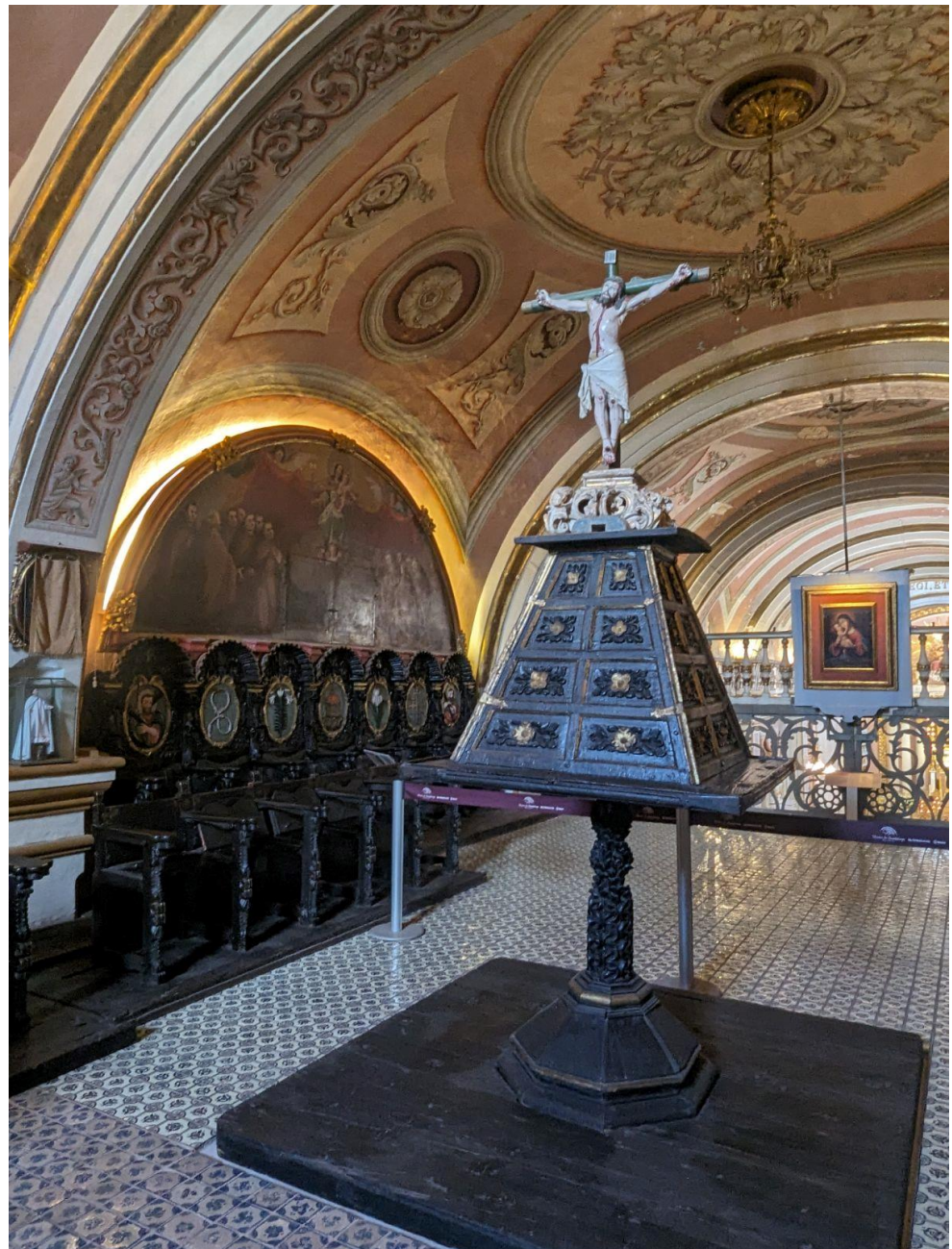


Figure 13. The typical arrangement of choir stalls and a facistol as shown in the restored choir loft of the Colegio de Guadalupe, Zacatecas, Mexico, 17–18th centuries. In monastic churches, Nahua singers would have stood in the choir stalls when they performed but lay brothers were excluded from these richly decorated spaces for liturgical singing (photograph by Cesar Favila, used with permission).

5.3. The Cloister

On Monday morning, three days after the first incident, Fray Miguel sees the ghost gliding through the cloister toward the church (Figure 14). This pattern continues for the next eight days, with the ghost circling the cloister as Fray Miguel carries out his duties. But on the twelfth day of the haunting, the ghost disappears, and the story abruptly ends.



Figure 14. East and south façades of the monastic cloister of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala, Mexico, ca. 1553. The heavy features of the cloister prevented light from penetrating the walkway. The original refectory's doorway (sealed) can be seen on the far left (photograph by the author).

Franciscan cloisters were sites for mediating on behalf of the dead. Every Monday after Mass, the Franciscans and Nahua parishioners circumambulated the cloister and monastery atrium in a procession to pray for souls in purgatory ([García Icazbalceta 1941](#), vol. 2, p. 146; [Gonzaga 1585](#), f. 17r). Whereas the Franciscans in Spain celebrated this commemorative Mass at Prime (sunrise), Novohispanic sources indicate Franciscan missionaries delayed the liturgy until after the celebration of the High Mass at Terce (9 a.m.). This change allowed lay parishioners to join the Franciscans and Nahua liturgical singers in the procession through the monastery. At each station, participants would have paused and knelt in front of a small altar and recited a prayer. Next, the Franciscans and Nahua singers chanted a responsory ([Valadés 2013](#), p. 492; [Wagstaff 2004](#), p. 229). The melodic and harmonic richness of the Office of the Dead responsories contributed to the sacredness of the procession by enhancing the immaterial experience of the liturgy. During these semi-public rituals, the voices of the Nahua singers would have reverberated off the walls of the cloister's narrow walkways, creating a sonic experience that may have been audible beyond the complex's outer walls. Still, the architecture of the cloister kept the singers in the shadows.

The dark walkways of the double-story cloister of the Tlaxcala monastery make a great setting for a ghost story's conclusion. Forming a perfect quadrangle of three bays on each side, the cloister has arcaded loggias that support flat timber roofs, which were restored in the twentieth century. Red basalt columns and capitals inspired by the Doric order support the cloister's round arches and may have been reused from an earlier structure, given their rough style. Although the loggias are the standard length for Franciscan cloisters in the region, measuring approximately twenty feet ([Esquivel 2020](#), p. 74), the spandrels and

column shafts are massive because the weight of the structure is distributed across only three columns on each side of the quadrangle, rather than four or five (Kubler 1948, p. 352). While the heavy architecture of the cloister enhanced the sense of solidity and permanence, these features and the cloister's placement on the north side of the church would have also prevented light from penetrating the cloister walkways. Even the open spaces, such as the loggias, are cold and shadowed at midday. Of course, this was the hour when Nahuas walked and sung in the somber processions that circled the cloister praying for the dead.

6. Conclusions

Early colonial monastic architecture needs to be understood not only in terms of what was there but also in terms of those who have been made to appear invisible and silent. The primary texts that historians have used to analyze the early colonial Mexican monasteries are versions of stories written for the colonizers. Often, the invisibilities and omissions typical of the archive have carried over into scholarship on the monasteries. In these studies, missionaries are the protagonists, and Indigenous people are minor characters with limited roles. Returning to the pivotal encounter in the choir in Mendieta's account, Fray Miguel wanted to know why he had been visited by a ghostly apparition. Yet the questions the friar asks the ghost are the questions we want to pose to the monastery's Indigenous occupants: Who are you? What do you want? Why are you here? How, then, do we turn the questions away from the imagined friars and to the monastery's Nahua workers instead? One possibility is to read the mendicant literary narratives through monastic architectural settings. This approach reveals that the ghostly apparition is both a character in a didactic tale about the social-spiritual architecture of the monasteries and a device that empties the monastery of its Indigenous occupants. Whereas the Franciscans chose to become invisible and disappear as hermits, the Nahuas laboring in the complex were being made ghostly through architectural and literary discourses.

"Haunting," as Avery Gordon asserts, is "the fundamental mode by which disappearance does its dirty nervous work" (Gordon 2008, p. 131). By approaching the Tlaxcala monastery in a phenomenological way and thinking about the embodied experience of the building's Franciscan and Nahua occupants, this article offered a programmatic understanding of the architectural features of a Franciscan monastery that has not been understood or properly contextualized. Two examples of this are the Tlaxcala monastery's double atrium and the mirador. Focusing on the connectivity of Mendieta's account, the material remains alongside the ethereal, and the archival evidence shows there is a meaningful connection between monastic buildings, their representations, and emergent racializing discourses in sixteenth century Mexico. At the same time, this article demonstrated that the architectural features designed to regulate and control cross-cultural interactions are, in fact, crucial evidence of the powerful impression the Nahuas made on the Franciscan missionaries and their beliefs.

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Notes

- ¹ Although Mendieta's chronicle was unpublished until 1870, the manuscript had circulated widely and was a key source for later Franciscan chroniclers (Torquemada 1975, pp. 407–9; Wauchope et al. 2014, pp. 145–46).
- ² Convent and monastery were essentially interchangeable in sixteenth century Central Mexico; I use monastery to reflect the terminology that appears in Nahuatl documents from Tlaxcala. For the early colonial history of Tlaxcala, see, especially, Gibson (1952); Martínez Baracs (2008); Cuadriello (2011). Leyva (2014) traces the stages of the monastery's development.
- ³ For illusions and disbelief in purgatory discourses, see (Greenblatt 2013, pp. 76–77).
- ⁴ “rostro á rostro [. . .] ¿No sois vos Fr. fulano, que es ya defuncto?” in (Mendieta 1997, vol. 2, pp. 140–41). Here, the author uses “so-and-so” or “fulano” to refer to the dead missionary, withholding the identity of the restless spirit to avoid heterodoxy.
- ⁵ “Sí, yo soy” (Mendieta 1997, vol. 2, p. 141).
- ⁶ On the Eucharist as a suffrage for the dead, see (Le Goff 1986, pp. 81, 93).
- ⁷ The episode in the choir also alludes to the tracts on discernment by theologian Jean Gerson, which Timothy Chesters has shown informed Catholic ideas about ghosts and apparitions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (2011, pp. 26–35).
- ⁸ “¿Qué buscáis por acá, hermano? [. . .] ¿Pues no veis lo que busco?” in (Mendieta 1997, vol. 2, p. 141).
- ⁹ Following Martínez, I use race as a shorthand for the complex set of discourses and practices used to classify and differentiate colonial subjects.
- ¹⁰ Encounters with unquiet souls were recorded, circulated, and recopied over the years, generating a corpus of documents that reflect the lived aspects of religion, as historians have shown (Le Goff 1986; Christian 1981).
- ¹¹ Later renovations altered the original layout so that today, the north quadrangle has an irregular plan.
- ¹² To reconstruct the experience of the liturgy, I draw on the following primary sources, listed in chronological order from 1523: (Carrión 1918, pp. 264–27; Gante 1555, f. 136r–161; Cargnoni 1995, pp. 224–28; García Icazbalceta 1941; Medrano 1579; Gonzaga 1585).
- ¹³ Records for the use of plainchant (*canto llano*) and polyphonic (*canto de órgano*) music books in the region's Franciscan monasteries appear as early as 1557 and 1559 (Martínez 1984, pp. 58–59, 77).
- ¹⁴ <https://gml.noaa.gov/grad/solcalc/sunrise.html>, (accessed on 25 December 2019).
- ¹⁵ In Mendieta's chronicle, “en la tarde” is after Vespers (around 2:30 p.m.) but before “prima noche” (sunset).
- ¹⁶ Compline marked the end of the liturgical day, and thus properly speaking, Fray Miguel met the spirit in the choir on Saturday, not Friday.
- ¹⁷ Friars and Nahua cantors may have sung Vespers for the Dead instead of a Requiem Mass.

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