Even with gnashing teeth and serrated claws, the ferocious beast hardly disturbs—much less frightens—its haloed captor, Saint Martha. As the reptilian monster pulls at the rope tethered around its neck and spews small flames from its mouth, Martha remains still, almost statuesque. Evidently, what the saint lacks in muscle and might, she makes up in spiritual fortitude as she clutches a wooden cross and a vessel of holy water close to her chest.

This late sixteenth-century watercolor depicts Saint Martha of Bethany in her apocryphal guise: not the pragmatic sister of Mary and Lazarus familiar from the Gospels, but as the tamer of the *tarasca*—a beast that preyed upon villagers in southern France. It belonged to a laywoman, a *mulata* named Inés de Villalobos who lived in New Spain (Mexico) and used it while praying to Saint Martha in an attempt to control her abusive husband. My dissertation investigates the spiritual lives of Afro-descendant women such as Inés in New Spain in the sixteenth century. It assembles evidence from different artistic media and textual genres to ask how African and African diasporic women in the early modern Spanish empire employed visual, material, and performative culture to negotiate the political and religious conditions that subjugated—but did not wholly define—them.

Inés’ watercolor of Saint Martha belonged to an Inquisition dossier, confiscated by the tribunal following her denunciation for calling upon Saint Martha to limit the free will of her husband—an act which fell under the category of superstitious activity or *hechicería*. I argue that, far from singular, Inés’ special affinity for Saint Martha, her use of devotional images, and her ultimate condemnation by the Inquisition form a pattern that recurs among African and African diasporic women across the Spanish empire during the early modern period. Modern scholarship has focused extensively on the intersections of race, gender, and the Inquisition. But the prominence of Martha devotion and images among Afro-descendant women accused of *hechicería* remains understudied.

In part, I contend, this owes to the general absence of art historical study of the African diaspora in New Spain, given the paucity of material and visual traces that survive. But this slim corpus of evidence grows more abundant when we take into account types of evidence often neglected in visual investigations, such as Inquisition records. My work constitutes the first exhaustive study of Saint Martha worship in early modern Spain and New Spain with specific attention paid to its visual and material dimensions. The broader significance of my research is both historical and methodological. I ask how the spread of Renaissance devotional art in an empire stretching from Milan to Manila raised new anxieties among Catholic clergy about the proper use of images in Europe and the Americas. At the same time, in analyzing Saint Martha devotions and visual culture, I position Afro-descendant women in the early modern period as patrons and viewers of art, rather than merely its object.

Methodologically, I ground my research in materials housed in Inquisition archives in Spain and Mexico. Inquisitorial records reveal the types of devotional images people owned, their context, and the ways in which they were used. I read these documents alongside extant images that correspond to descriptions in the Inquisitorial record and that in their iconography, scale, and materiality, provide information not accounted for in texts. I expand my visual corpus by tracing iconographic references for the watercolor back to Renaissance paintings and prints that circulated throughout the early modern Spanish empire. My research also considers visual and textual portrayals of Martha’s monstrous foe, the *tarasca*, which played an important role in public processions across different regions of the Spanish empire.
At present, I have conducted initial archival work in Mexico at the Archivo General de la Nación in the summer of 2019, where I first discovered the Saint Martha watercolor and found 20 additional cases of Saint Martha worship in Inquisitorial records. Unfortunately, the pandemic disrupted preliminary dissertation research intended for 2020. I redirected my efforts, however, in August 2021 with research trips to the Archivo Histórico Nacional, the Archivo de la Villa, and the Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, and in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville. In the course of my work, I identified nearly 80 cases of Saint Martha worship from manuscripts spanning the Spanish empire: in the Iberian Peninsula, the Canary Islands, Cartagena de las Indias (Colombia), and Lima (Peru). Notably, nearly all cases in the Americas involve Afro-descendant women indicating that Saint Martha became an important figure for Afro-Latin American women in particular. I also located a series of watercolors depicting the *tarasca* effigies used for Corpus Christi processions across the seventeenth century housed in the Archivo de la Villa in Madrid.

Given limited time and funds, however, I only documented but not exhaustively studied undigitized Inquisition records concerning Saint Martha in Madrid’s archives, while I have yet to visit other vital repositories in Spain, such as the Archivo de Museo Canario in the Canary Islands. With the assistance of the RSA fellowship, I would be able to conduct one month of research in Madrid and the Canary Islands in the spring of 2022. While there, I would consult archival materials necessary to complete the second chapter of my dissertation, dedicated to the Iberian Peninsula and the Canaries, and useful as comparative evidence for further chapters on the Americas.