

UCLA
CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Exploring Sexuality, Religiousity, and Desire in Colonial Mexico

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4r7234d1>

Author

Tortorici, Zeb

Publication Date

2008-02-01



Exploring Sexuality, Religiosity, and Desire in Colonial Mexico

by Zeb Tortorici

On January 23, 1621, a Spanish priest and commissary of the Holy Office of the Mexican Inquisition in Querétaro came forth to denounce the twenty-year-old Agustina Ruiz, a woman who had, according to him, never completed the confession that she had begun with him on the eve of Pascua de Reyes (Feast of the Three Kings) a few weeks earlier. He told the Inquisition that Ruiz had begun to confess her sins to him in the church of the Carmelite convent of Saint Theresa, asking for mercy and forgiveness, and then declared that since the age of eleven she had carnally sinned with herself nearly every day by repeatedly committing the act of pollution (*polución*)—masturbation. Most unsettling to the priest, however, was not the act of masturbation itself but rather the vivid, obscene, and sacrilegious descriptions that went alongside her masturbatory fantasies. According to the priest's denunciation, Ruiz confessed that she had spoken "dishonest words" with Saint Nicolas of Tolentino, Saint Diego, and even Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and that they

had carnally communicated with her in a variety of sexual positions: "They join themselves with her [Ruiz] in different ways, with her underneath them, and from the side, and her on top of them, and also with her lying face-down while they conjoin themselves with her through both of her dishonest parts," meaning both vaginally and anally.¹ Given that the primary aim of the Mexican Inquisition—established in 1569 by royal decree of Phillip II of Spain and founded in 1571—was to extirpate heresy, it is no surprise that the Mexican Inquisition would take a strong interest in Ruiz. She was eventually sentenced to spend three years in a convent in Mexico City.

This is merely the beginning of a unique and richly detailed Inquisition case in which the issues of female sexuality, autoeroticism, and religiosity merge through the experiences of one young woman charged with a variety of heretical sins relating to her visions, her actions, and her body. My doctoral dissertation, "*Contra Natura: Sin, Crime, and the Regulation of 'Unnatural' Sexuality in Colonial Mexico, 1600-1800*," offers a close reading of this and other criminal and Inqui-

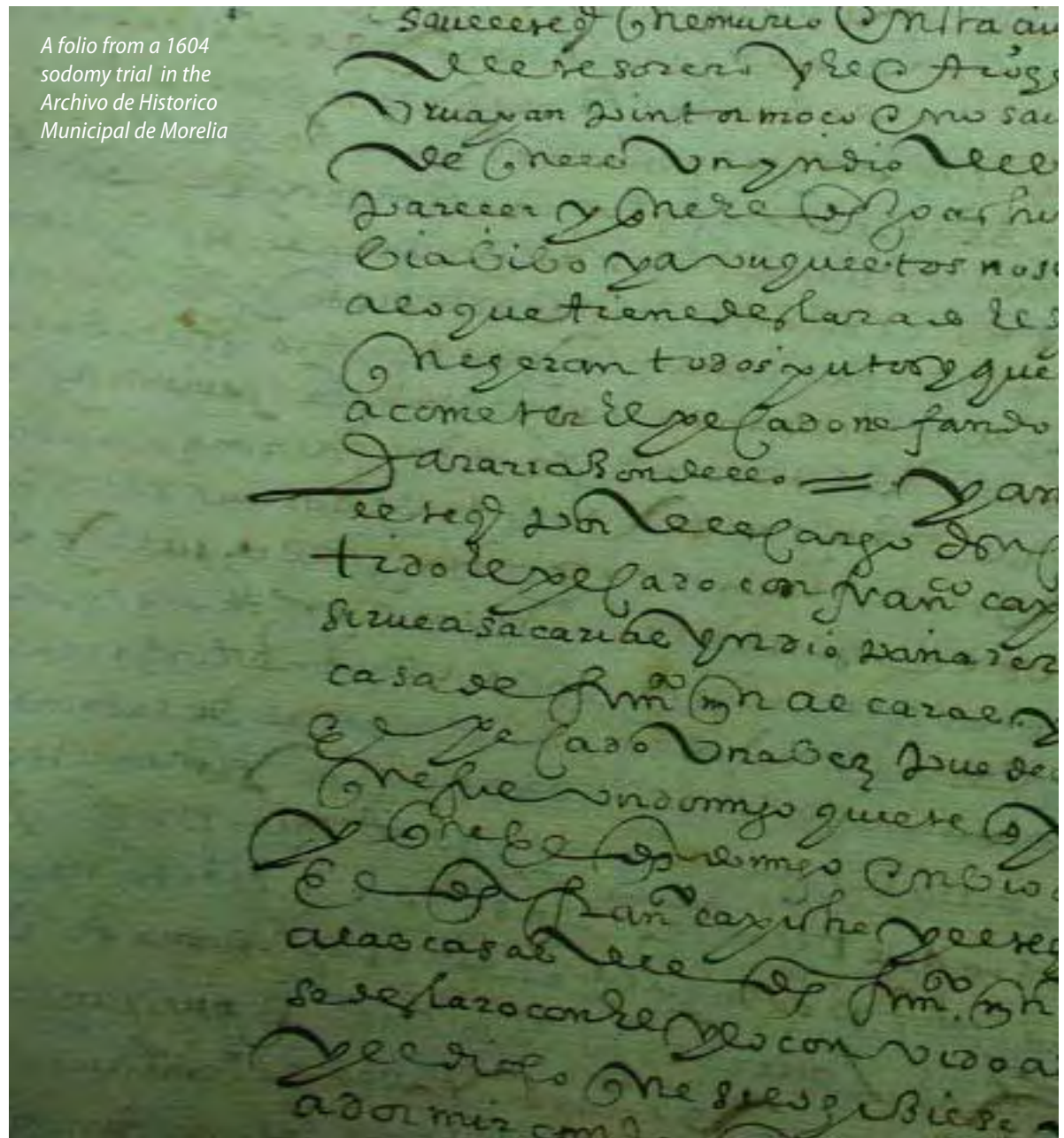
sition trials in order to examine the everyday experiences of women and men alongside the unstable character of repression, local levels of tolerance, changing notions of heresy and criminality, erotic expressions of religiosity, and the boundaries between humans and animals. I am primarily concerned with the Spanish colonial regulation of those sexual practices deemed "unnatural" in the Bible and by the early Church Fathers like Saint Augustine and medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas. As early as the fifth century, for example, Saint Augustine had deemed unnatural and sinful those sexual acts that did not take place in a "vessel fit for procreation."² Regarding sodomy, bestiality, masturbation, and seemingly unnatural sexual positions between men and women—all classified as



*Saint Nicolas
of Tolentino*

“vices against nature” within the category of *luxuria*—Aquinas in his thirteenth-century *Summa theologiae* wrote: “Just as the order of right reason is from man, so the order of nature is from God himself. And so in sins against nature, in which the very order of nature is violated, an injury is done to God himself, the orderer of nature.”³

With the introduction of Catholicism to Mexico following the Spanish invasion in 1519, the terminology relating to the “unnatural” was incorporated into colonial Mexican theological lexicon. From the onset of colonization, the term *contra natura* (against nature) was regularly used in Mexican criminal and Inquisition cases to refer to a variety of sins and crimes including sodomy, bestiality, masturbation, and the sexual solicitation of male penitents by priests. My research focusing on these topics in the colonial Mexican context is based on unpublished primary documents from the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City, various state judicial and historical archives in Michoacán, Oaxaca, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Guadalajara, and Texcoco, the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, the Huntington Library, national archives in



Costa Rica, Peru, and Colombia (for comparative research), and the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville, Spain. Ultimately, this research aims to historicize desire and offer a more nuanced understanding of the everyday thoughts and behaviors of those who lived in colonial Mexico as well as the meanings they attributed to such acts. By turning desire into a category of historical analysis, historians can better understand the reasons upon which people based some mundane yet important decisions about their bodies and their lives. Many women and men, including Agustina Ruiz, fervently desired spiritual salvation alongside an intense love for Jesus, the saints, and the Virgin Mary. They desired other men and women on physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual planes. For the women and men of colonial Mexico, desire—broadly defined by its everyday sexual, spiritual, corporal, and emotional materializations—was omnipresent. Desire manifested itself through hunger, thirst, lust, and carnality but also through the equally common forms of devotion, rapture, and religiosity. More often than one might expect, the desires in these spiritual arenas functioned symbiotically and constantly

influenced the decisions, acts, and beliefs of individuals who were often merely trying to live with conflicting desires, church teachings, and daily pressures.

This was clearly the case with Ruiz, who, when the commissary of the Inquisition made his formal charge against her in 1621, was then a twenty-year-old unmarried woman living with her son, Francisco, seven years of age, in the house of Alonso de Garibaldi and his wife, María Meneque. During her first testimony, taken on 6 February 1621, Ruiz, like so many other women and men who were brought before the Holy Office of the Inquisition, started out by saying that she had no idea why she was being interrogated. She said that she knew nothing when asked if she or anyone close to her had said, done, or committed anything that appeared to be against the Holy Catholic faith or evangelical law of the church. Only when she was asked more specifically about the conversations with her confessor a few weeks earlier did she admit to having told him about touching herself and having had “bad thoughts and bad images” of Jesus, the Virgin, and saints for years. They first asked Ruiz if it was true that she had

Desire manifested itself through hunger, thirst, lust, and carnality but also through the equally common forms of devotion, rapture, and religiosity. More often than one might expect, the desires in these spiritual arenas functioned symbiotically and constantly influenced the decisions, acts, and beliefs of individuals who were often merely trying to live with conflicting desires, church teachings, and daily pressures.

Her eroticization of Jesus, the Virgin, and the saints was much more than a sexual manifestation of her spiritual piety. Ruiz's visions were likely a complex psychological defense by someone, raised in an intensely religious society, who had been severely—emotionally and physically—traumatized.

touched herself since the age of eleven. To this she replied quite candidly that “since the age of eleven until six months ago she committed the sin [of pollution] with her hand by touching her dishonest parts and believed that she was carnally communicating with the saints, Jesus, and the Virgin. These acts took place more or less three times a day for the last nine years.” What is clear throughout Ruiz’s first testimony is the intense level of religiosity and devotion with which she imbued her acts and visions. Ruiz framed her relationships with the saints, Jesus, and the Virgin in terms of divine sanction and gratitude toward her and confessed that “they showed that they were thankful to her with the words they spoke to her—dishonest and amorous words that corresponded to those used to describe the dishonest parts of men and women.” Both amorous and “dishonest” in nature, the words spoken to Ruiz by her divine visitors signal the intense love and devotion that they had for her and that she had for them.

Despite the fact that her confessor, who initially denounced her, came to regard her merely as “an attractive yet luxurious and vainglorious girl” who had failed to promptly

confess her sins to him, the Inquisition was still fully responsible for uncovering the level of heresy involved in her sins. On April 22, 1621, it was decided that Ruiz be sent to Mexico City for imprisonment in the official jails of the Inquisition. While her son, Francisco, remained in Querétaro, Ruiz was sent to Mexico City and was allowed to bring only white clothing and, if she had any money, one hundred pesos to cover the costs of transport and food while in prison. It was here in the prisons of the Inquisition that she recounted her final declaration, where she discussed how and when her erotic visions began. Her earliest eroticization of the saints began with an intense devotion to and desire for religious iconography. It is here that we are given an important key—the role of trauma—to better understanding her visions and mystical experiences. Her earliest experiences, as she told the inquisitors, occurred shortly after the unexpected and violent death of her husband-to-be, Diego Sánchez Solano, in a fire while she was pregnant with her son. In search of solace, she went to visit a neighbor who had a painting of Saint Nicolas of Tolentino mounted on a small altar. Ruiz said that the painting

was so beautiful that she fell intensely and instantly in love with the saint. In her third confession she related that, “with this image [in mind], she went to her house and that same night, lying in bed while she began to touch her shameful parts in order to pollute herself, she saw an image of San Nicolas that reminded her of the said [sexual] act, and, in effect, she consummated this act as if she were really sinning with him.”

Ruiz then related how for several days after this vision she had similar visions of and experiences with Saint Diego, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary. The very next morning, while she was still lying in bed, she again began to touch herself and think about the image of Saint Nicolas. She then saw him suddenly “enter through the door of the house, donning his priest’s attire, which was full of resplendent stars.” He came close to her bed, touched her face with his hand, and told her many “tender endearments and flatteries.” He then got on the bed, lifted his clothes, placed himself on top of her, and had “carnal access” with her. She related how the next night Jesus appeared to her in a similar manner, telling her that he had “a great desire to see her and

enjoy her,” after which she had sex with him. On the third night after Sánchez Solano’s death, she consummated the sexual act with Saint Diego and, on the fourth night, with the Virgin Mary. Given that these visions began with her desire to find solace in that painting of Saint Nicolas, all of Ruiz’s visions perhaps make the most sense if seen as a form of dissociation from her everyday reality and the traumas of her childhood and adolescence. The document can merely hint at the painful experiences of a young girl whose parents died when she was young, who had to move around between Puebla, Mexico City, San Luis Potosí, and Querétaro, who got pregnant around age twelve (most probably through coercion of some sort), and who survived the tragic death of her child’s father while she was still pregnant with her son. Her eroticization of Jesus, the Virgin, and the saints was much more than a sexual manifestation of her spiritual piety. Ruiz’s visions were likely a complex psychological defense by someone, raised in an intensely religious society, who had been severely—emotionally and physically—traumatized. Agustina Ruiz’s radical reinterpretation of church discourse, that Jesus, Mary, and the

saints loved her, was a manifestation of her desire to be loved and an unconscious attempt to come to terms with an extreme sense of abandonment caused by the deaths of those she was close to.

Agustina Ruiz was eventually sentenced to be a recluse for three years in the Convent of the Conception of Nuns in Mexico City—a seemingly ironic punishment for someone whose crime was to sexualize the very religious iconography that would be ubiquitous and unavoidable in a convent. In addition, she was forced to see a medical doctor of the Inquisition in order to determine whether or not she was pregnant (she was not) and was ordered to be taken to the house of the archbishop of Querétaro in order to receive the sacrament of confirmation. This case ultimately depicts a woman who largely saw herself as a devout Catholic and who never sought to contravene religious dogma overtly. The thoughts, actions, and desires of Agustina Ruiz show how sexuality, erotic visions, and physical desire often merged with religious devotion in this woman’s constant spiritual desire for salvation and affection. More importantly, through this singular case we are

offered an extremely rare glimpse—through an extended discussion of female autoeroticism and Ruiz’s accompanying fantasies—into the multiplicity of desire and the wide range of erotic comportment in colonial Mexico. In an effort to deal with intense trauma, loneliness, and health problems, Agustina Ruiz gave meaning to her life through her reinterpretation of religious discourse and found at least some form of solace and comfort that the Inquisition could only see as threatening and heretical—yet worthy of being recorded in salacious detail. While we can never know what happened to her throughout the rest of her life, we can only hope that even after her inquisitorial imprisonment and the three years that she spent in a Mexico City convent away from her son—or perhaps because of it, Agustina Ruiz never looked at Jesus, the Virgin, and the saints in quite the same way that Christian theological discourse and the Holy Office of the Inquisition intended.



Zeb Tortorici is a Ph.D. candidate in the UCLA Department of History working on his dissertation entitled “Contra Natura: Sin, Crime, and the Regulation

of ‘Unnatural’ Sexuality in Colonial Mexico, 1600–1800.” He has published articles in *Ethnohistory*, the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, and a collection entitled *Queer Youth Cultures* (SUNY Series, *Interruptions: Border Testimony(ies) and Critical Discourse(s)*). Tortorici is currently co-editing *Centering Animals: Writing Animals into Latin American History* with Professor Martha Few, University of Arizona.

NOTES

1. Bancroft Library MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 2. All quotes hereafter come from this document. I explore this case in greater detail in “Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire: Connecting Sexuality and Religiosity in Colonial Mexico” in *Journal of the History*

of *Sexuality* 16:3 (University of Texas Press, September 2007). I am grateful to the UCLA History Department, Graduate Division, the Center for the Study of Women, the LGBTS department, and UC-MEXUS for the funding that has made my research possible. Lastly, odd as it may seem, I thank Agustina Ruiz for unknowingly sharing her story.

2. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1986): 15.
3. Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, 1997): 146.