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The “mujeres enamoradas”: Prostitution, Amancebamiento and Marriage in Sixteenth-Century Rio de la Plata

Las "mujeres enamoradas": Prostitución, amancebamiento y matrimonio en el siglo XVI en el Río de la Plata

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Abstract: This article studies the role of the mujeres enamoradas, a category of prostitute during the Spanish conquest of the Rio de la Plata. A long judicial process found in the National Archives of Paraguay describes the attitude of the Spanish elites and their control over Spanish whores. This essay shows how these women were powerful agents in this region and aims to understand the daily life of these invisible actors and women in conquest era society. It examines the complex network between Spanish women and different colonial subjects to understand women's spaces of power in early colonial Rio de la Plata.

Keywords: prostitution; women; marriage; sex; power; Rio de la Plata; conquest.

Resumen: Este artículo estudia el papel de las «mujeres enamoradas» en la conquista del Río de la Plata. Un largo proceso judicial encontrado en el Archivo Nacional de Asunción describe la actitud de las élites españolas y su control sobre las mujeres y en particular las mujeres prostitutas españolas. Este ensayo muestra cómo estas mujeres fueron agentes poderosos en esta región y pretende comprender la vida cotidiana de estos actores invisibles en la sociedad de la era de la conquista. Este trabajo examina la red compleja entre las mujeres españolas y los diferentes temas coloniales para entender los espacios de poder de las mujeres en el periodo colonial temprano del Río de la Plata.

Palabras clave: prostitución; mujeres; matrimonio; sexo, poder; Río de la Plata; conquista.

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Introduction

The Spanish colony settlement in the Rio de la Plata region was marked and transformed by the presence of women from different origins and roles, including noble Spanish women, poor Spanish women, Indigenous women, African and Afrodescent women¹. Luisa de Torres and Ana de Ribera were among the poor and working Spanish women who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of opportunities in the New World. Luisa de Torres, also known as La Torres, joined the Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's expedition in 1540 and settled in the Island of Santa Catalina in 1541 with the Spaniards. Ana de Ribera certainly took away from Spain with the Pedro de Mendoza's expedition in 1535 and help settling the two main cities of the Rio de la Plata: Buenos Aires in 1536 and Asuncion of Paraguay in 1541. In the documentation, Luisa de Torres was targeted by Spanish authorities as a *mujer enamorada*. In 1543, Spanish conquistador Sebastian de Valdivieso mentioned the tragic death of Luisa de Torres, who drowned when the galley she joined to go from Santa Catalina Island to Asuncion sank in the Parana River. Valdivieso requested to have back a blanket, a bed sheet, two shirts, two pillows, two handkerchiefs, and two shirwal trousers that were found in her possession². These were probably part of Luisa de Torres' salary for services performed for Sebastian de Valdivieso on the island. However, Valdivieso himself did not confess that he gave these items to Luisa in exchange for sexual services, but rather explained that Luisa had helped him when he was sick. In the same year, December 1543, Ana de Ribera started a trial against Luis Ramirez for stealing some textiles from her house in Asuncion³. All testimonies in the trial mentioned that Luis Ramirez had taken back with violence a mattress that he had given to her for her *buenos servicios*. Although Ana was not identified in this case

¹ I thank Dr. Hannah Abrahamson for heir insight on previous versions of this article.

² Carta de Sebastian de Valdivieso contra los bienes de Luisa de Torres. Asunción 8 de enero de 1543. Archivo Nacional de Asunción, Sección Nueva Encuadernación (hereafter cited as ANA, SNE), N°307. Folios 106v.

³ Proceso criminal Ana de Ribera contra Luis Ramirez. Asunción 29 de diciembre de 1543. ANA, SNE, N°307. Folios 116r.

as a *mujer enamorada* by the Spanish justice, she was identified as such in another document. Luis Ramirez confessed that he had given the mattress to Ana to be cleaned and stated that it was not a gift neither a salary. The activities of *mujeres enamoradas* in colonial Latin America were related with sexual services but also connected with washerwoman activities such as cleaning cloth, pillows, and mattresses for Spaniards⁴.

Exploring and analyzing the role of women in Latin America during the installation of Spanish society remains a methodological and historiographical challenge for many scholars. Indeed, perhaps the greatest obstacle for historians in initiating a study on women through the Conquest is the lack of primary sources. The absence or scarcity of documents written by and about women in the sixteenth century is undoubtedly the biggest difficulty that academics must deal with. However, women’ agency in the development of colonial societies in Latin America, especially Spanish women, is an existing line of research that has offered many novel results. Since the end of the twentieth century, pioneering works linked women to spirituality and the Church⁵. More recently, research projects have emerged studying women as highly relevant elements directly linked to other colonial institutions such as the *encomienda*.⁶ A correlated topic appears as a transversal axis in all

⁴ This fascinating connection would have to be explored in a future project.

⁵ Burns, *Colonial Habits - Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru*; Van Deusen, *Between the Sacred and the Worldly - The Institutional and Cultural Practice of Recogimiento in Colonial Lima*; Benassy-Berling, *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz - Une Femme de Lettres Exceptionnelle, Mexique XVIIe Siècle*; Delgado, *Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630–1790*; Myscowski, *Amazons, Wives, Nuns, and Witches: Women and the Catholic Church in Colonial Brazil, 1500-1822*.

⁶ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala*; Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest - The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*; Jefferson and Lokken, *Daily Life in Colonial Latin America*; Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America*; Almorza Hidalgo, “No se hace pueblo sin ellas”: *mujeres españolas en el virreinato de Perú : emigración y movilidad social (siglos XVI-XVII)*; Pérez Miguel, «Mujeres ricas y libres» - *Mujer y poder : Inés Muñoz y las encomenderas en el Perú (s. XVI)*.

this historiographical production: women and the colonial representation of their sexuality in the Early Modern period. Some publications had a great impact highlighting the role of sex to understand the portrayal of women in Europe and Latin America during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷ The outputs revolving around the study of prostitution both in Europe and in Latin America can be apprehended separately.⁸

However, historiographically the Rio de la Plata region has been overlooked; if we compare the study of New Spain, Peru and Brazil which have received the majority of scholarly attention on sexuality.⁹ The profound imbalances in the treatment of Spanish American territories have an impact on historical production about women's agency in the construction of early colonial Rio de la Plata society. To fill this gap, this paper studies the relationship between Spanish or mixed-race women and sexuality in the conquest society of Rio de la Plata, focusing on the context of prostitution. First, the agency of women mediated by sexuality in this early colonial society will be pondered, in relation to fear and the Spanish representation of honor. Then, the study will focus on sex and power agencies to understand the realities of some women searching their way up the socio-economic scale through the sex trade. The world of

⁷ Lavrin, "Sexuality in colonial Mexico: A church dilemma"; Lavrin, *Sexuality in Colonial Spanish America*; Loetz, *A New Approach to the History of Violence: "Sexual Assault" and "Sexual Abuse" in Europe, 1500-1850*; Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*.

⁸ García Herrero, "El mundo de la prostitución en las ciudades bajomedievales"; López Beltrán, "Hacia la marginalidad de las mujeres en el reino de Granada (1487-1540)"; Moreno Mengibar and Vázquez García, "Poderes y prostitución en España (siglos xiv-xvii). El caso de Sevilla"; Von Germeten, *Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico*; Drinot, *The Sexual Question – A History of Prostitution in Peru, 1850s-1950s*; Page, *Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany*.

⁹ Maura, "Adelantadas, virreinas y aventureras en los primeros años de la conquista de América"; Langa Pizarro, "Mujeres en la expedición de Pedro de Mendoza"; Langa Pizarro, *Mujeres de armas tomar. De la aparente sumisión a la conquista paraguaya y rioplatense*; Monte de López Moreira, "Mujeres de la Conquista del Paraguay"; Monte de López Moreira, "Mujeres de la Colonia." Añón and Gosselin, "Women 'Cronistas' in Colonial Latin America." Soto Vera, Duarte Sckell, and Taboada Gómez, *Más que gloriosas*.

prostitution in early colonial Rio de la Plata will also be outlined. Finally, through the examination of a criminal case dating from 1542, a portrayal of the *mujeres enamoradas*, will be drawn as archetypal figures of *entre deux*, women who developed defense mechanisms to survive and somehow impose illegitimate power in the eyes of conquest era society. Lopez Beltran defines these *mujeres enamoradas* as follows:

¿Quiénes eran las mujeres enamoradas? En opinión de las autoridades concejiles, las mujeres enamoradas no eran iguales que las putas “que ganavan por las tavernas e bodegones e otras partes”. Es decir, eran mujeres establecidas en la ciudad, bien como vecinas o como moradoras, diferenciándose de las mujeres de la mancebía, que eran “estantes” y desconocidas, cuya vida transcurría de ciudad en ciudad, y de prostíbulo en prostíbulo, frecuentando malas compañías y, en más de un caso, huidas de la justicia de otros lugares por deudoras. En consecuencia, las “mujeres enamoradas”, pese a dedicarse a la prostitución, no carecían de una cierta estima en el vecindario, sobre todo si se tiene en cuenta que su clientela se nutría de hombres casados, a los que les estaba prohibido entrar en las tabernas y mesones de la ciudad. [...] A las “mujeres enamoradas”, dueñas de su sexualidad y de su trabajo, se oponían las mujeres de la mancebía, que carecían de libertad laboral y de cuyo trabajo se beneficiaban rufianes y arrendatarios de la mancebía.¹⁰

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To carry out this essay, I analyze an extensive corpus of documents collected during my examination of several European and Latin American repositories. From documentary corpus and bibliographic material, the article aims to grasp realities of the daily life of Spanish or mixed-race women in sixteenth-century Rio de la Plata.¹¹ This article is dialoguing with a historiographical stream that seeks to analyze women actors as active colonial subjects. This research also responds to a current need to outline the power of women in

¹⁰ López Beltrán, “Hacia la marginalidad de las mujeres en el reino de Granada (1487-1540),” 100–101.

¹¹ This work studies mainly the agency of Spanish women and mestizo. For a study focusing on indigenous women in the province of Río de la Plata and Paraguay during the sixteenth-century, see: Candela, “Las mujeres indígenas en la conquista del Paraguay entre 1541 y 1575.”

the early colonial society in Latin America. It also contributes to extend spatial limits of women's agency integrating the Rio de la Plata to the study of this matter.

Sex, Fear and Honor: Women's Agency in Early Colonial Rio de la Plata

Van Deusen is one of the first scholars to highlight the social condition of women in both Spain and the Viceroyalty of Peru during the sixteenth century, presenting the harsh reality lived by many girls and women:

A partir de 1530 en España, y particularmente en Andalucía, muchas mujeres y niñas fueron abandonadas por el éxodo en masa de maridos [...] que decidieron ir a las Indias. Muchas tuvieron que sostenerse económicamente [...] Algunas mujeres vivían en congregaciones informales en casas privadas; otras, en edificios colindantes con iglesias, en la forma de emparedamientos. Otras bajaron a las calles, aumentando la prostitución en forma notable. Otro tipo de recogimiento, llamado galeras, fue establecido con el fin de controlar ese "elemento marginal" de la sociedad. Entre 1530 y 1570 un número creciente de mujeres escogió vivir en beaterios. El camino de la aventura atrajo a otras mujeres más valientes, que se encaminaron hacia las Indias.¹²

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As Van Deusen depicted, the greatest concerns of women regardless of their social class was surviving in a world wholly shaped by the presence or absence of a male subject. Fathers and husbands were perceived as primary guardians and advocates of wife's and daughter's honor, and any other women dependents.¹³ Bianca Premo highlighted in her book, patriarchs were expected to

¹² Van Deusen, "Los primeros recogimientos para doncellas mestizas en Lima y Cusco, 1550-1580," 257.

¹³ Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America*, 8. Socolow, 8; Premo, *Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Lima*, 70–79.

care for more than female dependents; Males subject have to provide for male children, servants and slaves as well¹⁴.

In Rio de la Plata, and more precisely in the provincial capital Asuncion, several testimonies confirm the dangerous and fragile position experienced not only by women but also by their families. Many women, depending on their social rank, were constantly torn between respecting social codes and legal norms or trespassing conventions within a society where all cards are redistributed. Documents produced along the sixteenth century from Asuncion, make us to understand that many of Spanish and mixed-race women try to reach the ultimate goal: contracting a marriage that can increase the family's wealth or even stabilize their situation.

A letter from Isabel de Guevara to the Queen Juana of Austria written in 1556 describes a peculiar situation in Rio de la Plata:

A esta probinçia del rrio de la plata con el primer governador della Don Pedro de Mendoça avemos venydo çiertas mugeres entre las quales a querido my ventura que fuese yo la una y como la armada llegase al puerto de Buenos Ayres con 1500 hombres y les faltase el bastimento fue tamaña la hambre que acabo de 3 meses murieron los 1000 [...] sino fuera por ellas todos fueran acabados y sino fuera por la honra de los hombres muchas mas cosas escriviera con berdad y los diera a hellos por testigos esta rrelaçion bien creo que la escribiran a Vuestra Alteza mas largamente y por eso sesare.¹⁵

The letter refers to the major expedition led by the first *adelantado* Pedro de Mendoza, which entered the estuary of the Rio de la Plata in 1536. After having suffered several human losses in the first Buenos Aires, it was decided to move the provincial capital from Buenos Aires to Asuncion in 1541. Of the entire Spanish contingent,

¹⁴ Premo, *Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Lima*.

¹⁵ Carta de doña Isabel de Guevara a la reina Juana de Austria en que trata de los trabajos de las mujeres en favor de los hombres y suplica se de repartimiento a su marido Pedro de Esquivel, Asunción 2 de julio de 1556. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Colección de documentos de Indias, 24, N°18.

more than 1000 people died in these first years of conquest, so more than 75% of the members of the expedition.

These words of Isabel de Guevara are truly exceptional insofar as she openly declares to the Queen that men and women roles were exchanged, and she defines herself as the guardian of men honor, refusing to depict the greatest difficulties suffered by male figures. This quote comes to ponder the rigidity of norms in contexts such as the military conquest of Latin American lands during the first moments of colonization, assigning the lead to women in the conquest of this territory. However, Guevara's letter is an exceptional example and is not representative of the norm observed in other documents.¹⁶ Most of the evidence portray a situation of fragility towards relationships between men and women in society. As Socolow points out, women have been perceived through the sixteenth century as weak and easily corrupted and oscillate in a binary position between good and evil. And the Rio de la Plata is no exception to the rule. For example, Pedro de Jara in a letter written in 1560 describes his daughters as "*muchachas de poco saber*" that "*no dezian ni respondian sino lo que les preguntavan*".¹⁷ Luisa Rodrigues' testimony portrays women's perception of themselves: "*Luisa Rodrigues dixo que por ser muger e no tiene ynteligencia de negoçios queria e quyere de su parte y en nonbre de los dichos sus hijos nonbrar e poner un tesorero contador y que nonbrava e nonbro a Fernan Sanchez carpintero*".¹⁸ Testimonies like Luisa Rodrigues

¹⁶ In order to expand the analysis of Guevara's letter, see : Tieffemberg, "Isabel de Guevara o La Construcción Del Yo Femenino"; Marrero Fente, "De Retórica y Derechos: Estrategias de Reclamación En La Carta de Isabel de Guevara"; Quispe Agnoli, "Discursos Coloniales Escritos y Agencias Femeninas: La 'Carta a La Princesa Juana' de Isabel de Guevara."; El Jaber, *Un País Malsano: La Conquista Del Espacio En Las Crónicas Del Río de La Plata: Siglos XVI y XVII*; Añón and Gosselin, "Women 'Cronistas' in Colonial Latin America."

¹⁷ Pedro de Jara pide la condena de Pedro Gallego y Francisco Farel por haber raptado a sus hijas y violarlas. Asunción 12 de agosto de 1560. ANA, SNE, N°302. Folios 7v.

¹⁸ Testamento de Polo Griego. Asunción 13 de junio de 1552. Archivo Nacional de Asunción, Sección Historia (hereafter cited as ANA, SH), Volumen 11, N°6. Folios 38r.

often act to reinforce the norms implemented in this society and can be analyzed as a prescriptive legal formula.

Through their few appearances, Spanish and mixed-race women are usually considered as people of *poco saber*, as shown in these examples. Even though women are victims in criminal proceedings, their gender alone is enough to disqualify them:

Digo que por la declaración de Ana Martynez muger de Cristoval de Velastigui aver paresçer ser menor de veinte años [...] atento que el poder que tiene dado es contra derecho por dos rraçones e la una por la menuridad la otra ninguna muger casada no puede otorgar poder sin licencia de su magestad [...] verdaderamente se presume y da a entender las mujeres en algunas cosas ser variables y antojadisas lo [...] por todo derecho estan retratados los dichos de las mujeres [...] las mujeres sienpre hacen la voluntad de sus maridos e ansi la dicha Maria Rrasquin holgaria de haçer plaçer al dicho su marido en jurar contra el dicho Carballo vuelve a enemistad que con el dicho su marido tenia e tiene el dicho Carvallo.¹⁹

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This quote highlights the fragility of Ana Martinez who is a legal minor and under 25 years old, in front of the judicial apparatus of this colonial Rio de la Plata society. The defenders of the conquistador Domingo Carvallo, accused in this process of having attempted to rape Ana Martinez, build their defense strategy around the disqualification of the victim's testimony because she is a married woman and a minor. As a married woman, Ana Martinez cannot directly press charges against Carvallo and must resort to a legal tutor to represent herself in court. Other attacks try to recuse women's words in general, pointing out in the end that women's statements are inconstant or false.

The case of Ana Martinez highlights the constant danger for women to see their efforts in maintaining her social position and controlling the representation of her honor reduce to nothing. Unfortunately, crimes like Carvallo's were not uncommon. In her book, Vieira

¹⁹ Proceso criminal contra Domingo Carvallo por haber querido violar a Ana Martínez muger de Cristobal Belastegui. En el pago de Itacumbu 1 de septiembre de 1583. Archivo Nacional de Asunción, Sección Civil y Judicial (hereafter cited as ANA, SCJ), Volumen 1676, N°6. Folios 11v.- 49r.

Powers describes rape as representative of the early conquistador mentality.²⁰ Indeed, in this military context of the conquest, assaulting a woman is also regarded as an action of colonization despite the existence of legal norms regulating sexual relationships between men and women, whether Spanish or mixed-race.²¹ Fortunately, Ana Martínez was saved by the intervention of her servants and members of her family. Her mother-in-law, a Guarani woman named just Barbara was particularly helpful, as shown in the trial report: “[Barbara] le dezia al dicho Caraballo: “dexa my nuera que tu tambien tienes muger española como es my nuera”.²² Barbara’s intervention reveals a very close relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. This record is an example of a constant: in documents involving a female victim, it is not uncommon that other women emerge in their surroundings.

Women’s Networks, Honor, and Marriage

As evidenced by Almorza Hidalgo, Spanish women from different social categories did not hesitate to create networks and alliances to avoid relying on tutelary relationships with husbands, fathers, and other male figures.²³ These women’s networks were established in Peru and all around the Indies. In Latin America and Rio de la Plata, gendered constraints within colonial society of these women increased the need for Spanish and mixed-race women to gather together and thus develop real protective structures.

²⁰ As Vieira Powers points out, Indigenous women was undoubtedly the most vulnerable to this sexual violence perpetrated by these men Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest - The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*, 93..

²¹ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala*, 44–45.

²² Proceso criminal contra Domingo Carvallo por haber querido violar a Ana Martínez mujer de Cristobal Belastegui. En el pago de Itacumbu 1 de septiembre de 1583. ANA, SCJ, Volumen 1676, N°6. Folios 21v.

²³ Almorza Hidalgo, “No se hace pueblo sin ellas”: *mujeres españolas en el virreinato de Perú: emigración y movilidad social (siglos XVI-XVII)*, 259–305.

Colonial documentation reveals the existence of such networks through legal records in which groups of women sued men to punish them for their illicit conduct that could tarnish and damage the respectability of the whole group.

The first collective lawsuit is instructed in the city of Asuncion in 1580 by several Spanish women, asking for the punishment of Juan de Villamayor, Juan Garcia de Alamo and Gonzalo Sanches who sang some *coplas* to dishonor women attending the wedding of Catalina de la Cueva.²⁴ Gonzalo Sanches, the official drummer, in his testimony confess the *coplas* :

Las coplas dezian heran estas : Rio del Paraguay la flor de estas tierras armanse bantallas de lindas donzellas u fulana fulana que es muger galana [...] llebaran por capitana que dende sus ventanas regen sus vanderas y a la otra fulana que es de bu[en] [...] a ella llebaremos por leal sargento para dar yntento a sus compañeras. **[Folios 2v.]** Otra copla dezia otra fulana llevar la cruz por montes y valles dando a ellas y rogando al buen Jesus bueluales a sus tierras.²⁵

The complainants are all women of higher rank, and some are even related to each other as Magdalena de Frias and her daughter Mariana de Frias. One of these woman declared that if her husband would be there, these mens would not have sing these *coplas*. Another example of women's honor defence during the absence of their husbands. This trial proved a success for these women as the singers and musicians (guittarist and drummer) were sentenced to one month of exile on the river.

The second example is a legal case dealing with another attack on the honor of women. The conquistador Cristobal de Arzamendia was accused of having deceived several women of the same family

²⁴ Auto cabeza de proceso criminal para la averiguación de unos mozos que cantaron unos versos infamatorios contra personas honradas. Asunción, 26 de noviembre de 1580. ANA, SCJ, Volumen 1676, N°1, Folios 1r.-2v.

²⁵ Idem, Folios 2r.-2v.

with false marriage proposals.²⁶ He was also accused of taking advantage of them by accepting gifts and sleeping with them to seal the promise of marriage. This record shows how the institution of marriage is not a slight issue but a pillar of Spanish society.²⁷ Also, this case highlights the importance of verbal marriage agreements. This document indicates the high priority in the political agenda of the Spanish justice to sentence this behavior with great rigor. Arzamendia was sentenced to death by garrote in 1567:

Visto el presente proçeso criminal que por parte de la justicia real contra todo y trato contra el dicho Cristoval de Arçamendia y los delitos por el cometidor prinçipalmente las cautelas y manos que con el sacramento del matrimonyo y palabras del a tenydo para engañar y burlar a las mugeres que poco saben y lo demas que verse y mirar se devya a que me refiero es. Fallo que el dicho Cristoval de Arçamendia essiva y mereçedor de muerte por lo que por su espontanea confision tiene confesado. En consequençia de lo qual que le devo de condenar y condeno a que sea arrimado a un palo de la casa donde agora esta e con una querda a la garganta le sea dado un garrote hasta tanto que naturalmente muera.²⁸

This verdict was rare enough to be noted. Judicial sources of the sixteenth century report very few executions, despite dealing with several serious crimes.

When it comes to defending honor, the voice of a women group seems to carry more weight than one person. These cases could highlight the determination of the conquest society to protect some Spanish or mixed-race women, mainly from the higher society. However, most Spanish women did not belong to the aristocracy and faced numerous challenges: poverty, widowhood, violence...What happened when these women were alone in this world?

²⁶ Proceso criminal a Cristobal de Arzamendia para engañar a las mujeres. Asunción, noviembre de 1567. ANA, SNE, volumen 298, Folios 84r.-84v.

²⁷ Few also points out that the main feature of the marriage is to control women Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala*, 44–45..

²⁸ Proceso criminal para engañar a las mujeres. Asunción noviembre de 1567. ANA, SNE, Volumen 298, Folios 84r. - 84v.

A will dated in 1552 is giving us some insights.²⁹ Nine women are mentioned, forming an interesting web: La Martinez, la Arunz, Ana de Araujo, Isabel Gonzalez housed orphan girls at their house, daughters of deceased conquistadors. The document did not offer much information about name and age of these girls, but only their father's names: Alonso Muñoz, Bastian Alfonso, and Sebastian Alonso. We can assume that these little girls were all mixed-race orphans, since the names of Indigenous mothers are absent in documents relating to the official recognition of descendant. Two of these four women appear without first names. What is the reason for this lack of personal identification? Did it mean anything to these sixteenth-century women living in the city of Asuncion? If we refer to Vieira Powers, we can find some keys to understand both the loss of the first name and the reception of the orphan girls.³⁰ As she mentioned, the orphans, as the poorest and most vulnerable women in this society, are often forced into prostitution to survive. The lack of the first name for "La Martinez" and "La Arunz" may indicate a person living on the margins of society, not truly considered honorable. Thus, this document can possibly refer to orphan girls joining the prostitution network. Nonetheless, as in other parts of Colonial Latin America, this record is marked by women solidarity that strives to protect themselves, from parentless girls to widowed women.

However, as Martha Few notes, historians need to qualify these testimonies of protection and defense of women in colonial Latin America society.³¹ In fact, women were mostly regarded as subordinate agents within a society deeply marked by patriarchy and suffered all kinds of physical and moral violence such as systematic control of their sexuality.

²⁹ Testamento de Polo Griego. Asunción 13 de junio de 1552. ANA, SH, Volumen 11, N°6. Folios 42r.-51r.

³⁰ Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest - The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*, 136.

³¹ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala*, 44–45.

Amancebamiento and Prostitution in Sixteenth-Century Rio de la Plata

As we saw, the honor, power, and social status of women in colonial Latin America are linked to sexual control by men. However, the Spanish Crown did not encourage the first colonizers to travel with their wives and daughters. Nevertheless, women were not forbidden to travel and take part in the Conquest, as Isabel de Guevara argues in her letter. Among these women boarded for the Rio de la Plata, some of them were accused of having illegitimate relationships with Spaniards and committing adultery, in a search to escape the yoke of colonial rules.

Many women who appear without a baptism name can be related to the world of prostitution, a world not so marginal in this Conquest society.³² Several documents attest to the presence of a sex trade since the installation of the colony in the Rio de la Plata, the earliest reference dating from 1542. Other records relate to the emergence of an early consolidation of prostitution in this Latin American region.

A letter³³ produced in 1559 relates the transatlantic journey of the Governor Jaime Rasquin, newly appointed by the King Philip II of Spain. In this archive, we can estimate the relationship between prostitution and power. Indeed, Jaime Rasquin, as many governors before him, did not hesitate to leave the metropolis with Spanish prostitutes to cross the Atlantic Ocean. According to this letter, sex workers came from different places in Spain or came back to Latin America: Galicia, Seville, and Rio de la Plata. However, this testimony tends to qualify the presumed precarious situation of these women. On the boat returning to America, Jaime Rasquin throws the bishop's nephews out of his chamber and replaces them with the three women. Therefore, they escape from the violence of

³² Von Germeten, *Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico*, 25–26.

³³ Verdadera relación de lo que sucedió al gobernador Jaime Rasquin en el viaje que intentó para el Río de la Plata en el año de 1559 años hecha por Alonso Gomez de Santoyo alférez del maestro de Campo don Juan de Villandranda. Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Patronato (hereafter cited as AGI, Patronato), 29, R. 12.

other men, and share the governor's table and the comfort of his cabin/quarters. Likewise, these women that we could regard as the most vulnerable of this society could reach positions privileged situation in the colonial Latin American society. This is even more striking for this Indigenous woman, one of the lowest colonial casta categories of the time. In 1553, the Spanish conquistador, Juan Rodriguez Escobar sent a letter to the Cabildo of Asuncion asking for closing a street next to his house. One of the powerfull argument he used in his petition was that Indigenous women were performing *deshonestidades*. My hypothesis here is that some Spaniards organized the prostitution of Indigenous women in the city of Asuncion and maybe settled a public house or a tavern in this specific street which was considered also as dangerous and filthy³⁴. These documents are confirming that Spaniards organized and settled prostitution networks in the first phase of the Spanish colonization of the Rio de la Plata, Island of Santa Catalina and the city of Asuncion, where Indigenous, Spanish, and mixed-race women were targeted to perform this role.

Between 1564 and 1576, a judicial information involving the acting governor Felipe de Caceres gives us insights into the world of prostitution.³⁵ Caceres is accused of embezzling the tithe to gamble, buy Indigenous servants, and pay prostitutes. Where Rasquin is practicing the exchange of services, the Caceres case clearly illustrates a world of prostitution based on a monetary exchange.

³⁴ « Juan Rodriguez de Escobar conquistador en esta provincia dize que el con lyçençya de la justicia e de comun consentimiento de sus vezinos comarcanos serro una callejuela que esta junto a su casa a cabsa que por pasar dos arroyos por ella e tener malos pasos e peligrosas por noche e de dia [...] es provechoso serrarse que estar abyerta por los peligrosos pasos e por las ynmondiciãs e cosas y edyoneas que en ella se echaban y por las deshonestidades que alli pasavan con yndias en prejuizio de munchas personas. Tengan por bien de aprovar la dicha lyçençia que por la justicia me fue dada e se haga merced de la dicha calleja» Carta de Juan Rodríguez de Escobar sobre el cierre de una calle junto a su casa. Asunción, 27 de noviembre de 1553 – 21 de marzo de 1555. ANA, SNE, volumen 308, Folio 13r.

³⁵ Información sobre Felipe de Cáceres. Asunción entre 1564 y 1576. Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Audiencia de Charcas (hereafter cited as AGI, Charcas), leg. 33.

However, the three women protected by Rasquin are described as "putas", but the women paid by Caceres are called *enamoradas*, implying different categories among prostitutes. If both Rasquin and Caceres are criticized for their behavior, prostitution cannot necessarily be perceived as a sin by the sixteenth century society³⁶. Caceres is also accused of "amancebamiento", i.e., concubinage. This allegation opens a related issue of the sex and power relationship.

Doña Maria de Lujan: an Example of a Transgressive Woman

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One Spanish woman surfaces in the documentation as an exceptional sample to appreciate the agency of women colonial subjects and above all to apprehend the strong link between sex and power in the Rio de la Plata during the sixteenth century.³⁷ Doña Maria de Lujan was a remarkable example of a transgressive woman, appearing in several documents written in 1542, 1563, 1571, 1573, and 1575.

Maria de Lujan emerges very early in the documentation of the Rio de la Plata. In 1542, just one year after the creation of the council in Asuncion, she appears in a criminal case as "la Luxan".³⁸ In this document, her rank in this colonial society is indicated by the fact

³⁶ Von Germeten, *Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico*, 21–22.

³⁷ As many historians who attempt to reconstruct personal trajectories of women in the Early Modern period, we can point out that this task reveals to be very arduous. Some recent studies showed that, despite the difficulty this research may represent, results are extremely important to understand the agency of Spanish, mixed-race, indigenous and Afro-descendant women, see Almorza Hidalgo, "*No se hace pueblo sin ellas*": *mujeres españolas en el virreinato de Perú: emigración y movilidad social (siglos XVI-XVII)*; Pérez Miguel, «*Mujeres ricas y libres*» - *Mujer y poder: Inés Muñoz y las encomenderas en el Perú (s. XVI)*..

³⁸ Causa criminal que siguió Juan Pavón debido a un acto de Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, en la Asunción 1542, contra Francisco López. Asunción, 14 septiembre de 1542. Archivo Nacional de Asunción, Archivo Histórico de la República de Paraguay (hereafter cited as ANA, AHRP), 1, 1, 32. Folios 2v.

that she can sell a garment to Francisco Lopez, the lieutenant of the governor. In these times of extreme precarity, it is necessary to emphasize on the high social position of Lujan, possessing so much that she can easily share her dresses. However, her name does not bear any distinguishing marks, as the *Doña*, proof of a higher social category. Instead, the absence of her first name reminds us of the women housing orphans mentioned in Polo Griego's will in 1563. Interestingly, she is also named in this document, but this time as "Doña Maria de Lujan", in debt to the Griego family for a carpentry work at her house.³⁹

Lujan appears again in a letter⁴⁰ written by Bishop de la Torre in 1573. In this missive from the bishop, Maria is identified as a woman who owns several Indigenous women deported, as legal slaves basing on the Just War Spanish legal theory, from different regions to Asuncion. Lujan is the only woman mentioned in this letter and is thus presented as an actor of the foreground conquest. The fact that Doña Maria de Lujan could house several Indigenous women in her home also rings the bell of the possible existence of a prostitution network, concerning Spanish, mixed-race and Indigenous women.

Ultimately, Maria de Lujan is mentioned in one of the most important trials in Asuncion during the sixteenth century: an open struggle between the first bishop of Rio de la Plata, Pedro Fernandez de la Torre, and the Lieutenant Governor Felipe de Caceres. To sum up the episode, the responsible of the Church arrested Felipe de Caceres on Sunday Mass with weapons hidden in the cathedral and jailed the interim provincial ruler. Caceres is quickly released, and criminal proceedings are initiated against the bishop and all the people who helped him. During this trial⁴¹, Maria is accused of having an illegitimate relationship with one of the main sheriffs of the bishop: Diego de la Torre. Diego is using his sexual relationship with

³⁹ Testamento de Polo Griego. Asunción 13 de junio de 1552. ANA, SH, Volumen 11, N°6. Folios 42r.-51r.

⁴⁰ Carta del obispo fray Pedro Fernández de la Torre. Asunción 23 de abril de 1573. ANA, SNE, Volumen 307, N°76. Folio 37v.

⁴¹ Información sumaria contra Alonso de Segovia por conspirar contra Diego de la Torre. Asunción 15 de noviembre de 1571. ANA, SCJ, Volumen 1435, N°4. Folio 36r.

Maria as his alibi, revealing that he was sleeping with her by the time of the attack. Maria de Lujan appears as a woman “amancebada” maintaining illegitimate sexual relations with a figure of power close to the bishop. A list of disclaimers dated 1575 follows the record. In this list of transactions made during the year 1575, two of them concern trade between Diego de la Torre and Doña Maria de Lujan, which opens the possibility of paid sex.⁴²

Through her name, her contacts and her behavior, Doña Maria de Lujan could easily be linked to the world of prostitution. However, she is never categorized as *puta* or *mujer enamorada* maybe because her high social position. Since her arrival in the New World, she seems to be maintaining a high standard of living, possessing garments, a house, and a contingent of Indigenous servants. Nevertheless, she is never depending on a tutelar male figure and openly received her lovers at her home without ever being prosecuted. The case of Lujan draws a parallel sex market to the world of controlled prostitution organized around brothels and headed by pimps⁴³. The case of Maria de Lujan reveals that prostitution can also be a private matter. However, the line between private and public practice of prostitution is not impermeable, and a category of sex workers oscillates between these two worlds: the *mujeres enamoradas*.

The *mujeres enamoradas*, Archetypal Woman Figures of an *entre deux*

In her work, Beltran successfully reaches the challenge of grasping this nebulous world of the *mujeres enamoradas* in Spain, and more particularly in sixteenth-century Andalusia⁴⁴. In Rio de la Plata, we can observe a clear typology of the *mujeres enamoradas*, women who somehow seem to escape both social norms and religious

⁴² Lista de las cosas como de lienzo como de hierro y clavos que se han puesto en la cámara y de otras cosas y de lo que se ha gastado. Asunción 3 de diciembre de 1575. ANA, Sección Historia, Volumen 44, N°1, folio 54r.

⁴³ López Beltrán, “Hacia la marginalidad de las mujeres en el reino de Granada (1487-1540),” 100.

⁴⁴ López Beltrán, 100–101.

codes to find an economic stability, a sexual freedom, and above all, a promotion to a higher socioeconomic status in the society. In Golden Age Spain, obsessed with identifying people by categories based on the social, ethnic, cultural, and religious aspect, there is an obvious separation between the prostitutes who labor and must live in the *mancebías*, entire quarters of the Spanish cities dedicated to the sex trade, and the *mujeres enamoradas* who can live among the *vecinos* and could even beneficiate of a certain social esteem. Therefore, we understand this category of women *meretrices* was the most accepted by the Spanish society, and therefore by the colonial societies settled in America.

In our study area, the *mujeres enamoradas* appear for the first time in two documents dated 1542 and 1544. However, their presence in the region goes back much earlier. In fact, several testimonies suggest that they accompanied the first expeditions to the Rio de la Plata.

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First, the judicial trial of 1544 refers to events that took place between 1536 and 1541 in the fort of Buenos Aires. The priest Luis de Miranda and other churchmen were accused of having sexual relations with *mujeres enamoradas*. One witness even said that the priest was caught dancing naked with these women:

oyo dezir publicamente en el Puerto de Buenos Ayres veyendo este testigo de la Ysla de Santa Catalyna que el dicho Luys de Myranda y otros clerigos estando baillando de noche en una casa con çiertas mugeres enamoradas atapo la puerta con un manteo porque no se pudiesen ver por entre las puertas e le cortaron por de fuera de la puerta çierta parte del manteo.⁴⁵

The presence of *mujeres enamoradas* is thus attested in the very first moments of the installation of a colony on the Rio de la Plata. Two Spanish expeditions took place between 1536 and 1541: the one led by Pedro de Mendoza in 1536 and the one led by Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca in 1541. The first expedition, one of the most

⁴⁵ Información sobre los conciertos que tenían hechos para soltar al gobernador Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. Asunción 30 agosto 1544. Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Justicia (hereafter cited as AGI, Justicia) 1131, Pieza 4. Folios 250r.

important of the sixteenth century with more than 1,500 people, led to the foundation of Buenos Aires in 1536. It is therefore likely that several *mujeres enamoradas* accompanied the eleven ships that sailed to the Rio de la Plata and took up residence in Buenos Aires in 1536.

The judicial trial of 1542, which we will study deeply later, refers to events that occurred in 1541 on the Island of Santa Catalina. Francisco Lopez, lieutenant of the governor, is accused of living in concubinage with Beatriz Hernandez, a *mujer enamorada* then present on the island. The protagonists of this judicial case accompanied the expedition of Cabeza de Vaca, which left Spain in 1540. Some testimonies even affirm that Hernandez embarked for the Rio de la Plata on the same ship of Francisco Lopez from the Canary Islands or Cape Verde.

The presence of *mujeres enamoradas* in major and earliest expeditions whose mission was to establish new colonies on South America testifies the importance of their role since the settlement of Conquest society. In addition, the study of the trial of Francisco Lopez allows us to draw an unexpected portrait of these women of the shadows.

The *mujeres enamoradas* during the Government of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca

This criminal case of 1542 was intended to condemn a major protagonist of the period, the conquistador Francisco Lopez, considered as the second of the expedition of Cabeza de Vaca to the Rio de la Plata⁴⁶. Across the trial, the objective set by the accuser Juan Pavon de Badajoz is to prove the guilt of Francisco Lopez concerning public sins: the concealment and confiscation of women sex workers for society. Throughout this record, the testimonies describe the relationships maintained by Lopez with these women. This criminal case also questions the effects of Lopez's behavior on

⁴⁶ Through the analysis of the testimonies, we managed to recreate part of the world of prostitution and the field of action of the *mujeres enamoradas* in the aforementioned years, between 1541 and 1542.

society, demonstrating the existence of a reproduction scheme, or a pattern in the condemnable practices by other members of his household: a brother-in-law named Lope Ramos and his servant Julian Lopez. Six *mujeres enamoradas* are mentioned in the document: Beatriz Hernandez, La Torres, Mari Lopez, Francisca de Gamboa, Ana de Ribera and Juana de Salazar. This extensive judicial record produces the most accurate and descriptive portrait of prostitution in early colonial Rio de la Plata.

First, this document informs us about the type of relationship maintained between these different women. A certain form of solidarity seems to have been established between them in the Rio de la Plata. For example, we learn that Francisca de Gamboa played the matchmaker between Ana de Ribera and Lope Ramos, the brother-in-law of the main accused. It is therefore possible to see a certain mutual aid between the women of this group, and Francisca de Gamboa do not hesitate to use her influence with the lieutenant to offer a situation to some of her peers. This solidarity also asserts itself when these women are in turmoil. On the Island of Santa Catalina, Cabeza de Vaca ordered the placement of Beatriz Hernandez at Doña Ana's house to prevent her from living openly in concubinage with Francisco Lopez. Similarly, after being threatened by Lopez and Lope Ramos in Asuncion, Juana de Salazar took refuge in the house of Ines de Villafranca. However, the reception of the *mujeres enamoradas* does not always seem disinterested. In fact, Doña Ana, in exchange for her protection, took advantage of Beatriz Hernandez's position and received food and servants from Lopez. The social practice of *mujeres enamoradas* also benefits women outside this category.

This sex trade was undoubtedly a business for other actors of the early colonial Rio de la Plata society. Maria de Lujan took advantage of the relationship between Beatriz Hernandez and Francisco Lopez to sell one of her clothes to the lieutenant. Considering the rarity of these objects in the area, it is very likely that the amount of this transaction was very high. Is it possible that Lujan and Hernandez have arranged beneficial financial transactions ? It may well be that a practice of women solidarity or sorority is in place between the

mujeres enamoradas and other women who gravitate around them without being defined as agents of prostitution.

This image of sisterhood must be qualified, however, by the existence of antagonistic behaviors. Indeed, the document highlights a fierce spirit of competition between the *mujeres enamoradas*. On the Island of Santa Catalina, La Torres is established as the concubine of Lope Ramos, both living in the house that Francisco Lopez, himself accompanied by Beatriz Hernandez. If we consider to the situation seen before, we could easily imagine a solidary relationship between the two women, just like Francisca de Gamboa and Ana de Ribera in Asuncion. However, this is not the case. It turns out that La Torres does not hesitate to have sexual relations with Francisco Lopez and tries to oust Beatriz Hernandez as Lopez' concubine. A competition rages between these women to reach the most influential and profitable situation.

This trade of domestic sex is also fed by intermediaries. In Asuncion, Francisco de Guadalupe and Ana Gomez are identified as the *alcahuetes* of Francisca de Gamboa. These intermediaries play a fundamental role in the development of the private practice of prostitution, ensuring clients for the *mujeres enamoradas* ⁴⁷.

These different examples attest to the presence of a solid and developed prostitution network since the first moments of the Rio de la Plata Conquest. Both internal and external agents participated in the growth of these practices, involving representatives of the crown up to the highest ranks.

The participation of the most powerful men of the time had a definite influence on the development of the domestic sex trade. The frequentation of these elite men allowed the *mujeres enamoradas* to acquire certain privileges. In Santa Catalina, La Torres owns a house donated by Lope Ramos. In Santa Catalina, as in Asuncion, Francisco Lopez used his influence to expel landlords from their homes and to offer them to his concubines. It was not uncommon for these women to obtain servants and private guards as a reward

⁴⁷ Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest - The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*, 137.

for their services. Clothing is also a very popular means of payment. This payment can be done in different ways: the *mujeres enamoradas* can directly receive a dress or pieces of fabric to make their own clothes. Those who obtain a coveted position with the governor's lieutenant can obtain a lot of jewelry as payment. We can definitely assume that *mujeres enamoradas* were more financially stable and wealthier than others married women.

In the Rio de la Plata, the existence of networks and practices of prostitution that seem to be well established suggest that these women may have been directly transported from Spain to America as *mujeres enamoradas*. Can we know more about the origin of these women? Two cases can give us some information about their lives before crossing the Atlantic. One witness describes the situation of Beatriz Hernandez before her journey. Before being invited by Lopez to join the expedition, she is described as *desnuda*, i.e. devoid of any sign of wealth or mark of power. The case of Juana de Salazar seems equally explicit. On several occasions, she is described as a *Doña puta sucia*: she publicly insults the lieutenant, shouts in the street, and goes as far as hitting Francisco Lopez. These clues lead us to situate these women in a popular environment before their arrival in the Rio de la Plata. It is also probable that these women could have practiced prostitution in public houses of Spain like the *mancebias*. Like many passengers before them, the journey to America was certainly a way to seek to improve their condition.

It is easy to imagine that the public display of a man like the second of the province with a woman like Beatriz Hernandez could have been a shock for the colonial society of the time. This is, in fact, the core of the accusation. Francisco Lopez is charged of *amancebamiento publico*, living in concubinage with different *mujeres enamoradas* since the crossing of the Atlantic to Asuncion. Beatriz Hernandez and Francisca de Gamboa share completely the life of the lieutenant. All testimonies agree to define that these women officially reside in Lopez's house, sleep in his bed, and eat at his table. Some even state that they act in public as a married couple and publicly demonstrate their mutual affection by kissing in the street. These women are substitutes for Lopez's wife, staid in Spain

with their children. Beatriz Hernandez is even caught doing the lieutenant's laundry, thus fully occupying a place of housewife.

This public display is accompanied by obvious ostentation and the trial presents us with an untenable situation for colonial society. We have seen that these women accumulate various objects, including dresses and jewelry. The latter, social markers per excellence, allow these prostitutes to be transformed into noble and honorable women. Vieira Powers points out in her study that several royal decrees were issued defining the obligation for prostitutes to be identified at first glance by the rest of society by wearing distinctive clothing⁴⁸. The situation in the Rio de la Plata creates confusion between colonial and social categories, and it becomes impossible to distinguish a noble woman from a prostitute in the streets of Asuncion.

This exceptional document from 1542 presents us with the terrains of possibility for women identified as *mujeres enamoradas*. The clandestine exercise of their profession that defined them in Spain was no longer appropriate in the Rio de la Plata. The displacement in America redraws this colonial category. The distance from the metropolitan control allows these Spanish women to expose themselves. The close relationship between these women and men of power allows them to be agents of their social repositioning in the colonial hierarchy.

Final Considerations

In the Rio de la Plata, the *mujeres enamoradas* seem to escape the Spanish definition of their category. Some of them even managed to overturn the existing order. Francisca de Gamboa, concubine of Lopez in Asuncion, not only receive the gifts of the lieutenant. She cultivates their relationship by giving Lopez gifts herself: a bed, a pillow, a blanket, and a sow. With this gesture, Francisca imposes herself in Lopez's home by occupying and redesigning the lieutenant's private space. Thus, by restructuring the bedroom, she tends to take the ascendancy over Lopez and reverses the power

⁴⁸ Vieira Powers, 140–41.

relationship between client and prostitute. Moreover, a witness affirms that Gamboa, like Lopez, is already married and has left her husband in Spain. The figure of Maria de Lujan also participates in this scrambling of tracks. While everything suggests that this woman received payment for sex and managed prostitutes, she is never described as a *mujer enamorada*. Both cases of Francisca and Maria complicate the definition of this social category by placing these women of the margins at the center of the colonial society, agents of their social ascension, in search of a better life in the Indies.

In the context of historical studies on colonial Latin America, the document relating to the trial of Francisco Lopez remains an exceptional witness. The literature dealing with prostitution in the early days of the Conquest notes the scarcity of primary sources informing on the subject. However, there are records that indicate the presence of an organized prostitution system (brothels and public houses) as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century in the Caribbean and in New Spain ⁴⁹. Nevertheless, none of these works testify to the presence of *mujeres enamoradas* in the documentary corpus concerning these spaces. The documents produced in the Rio de la Plata, then, seem to be the only ones to have recorded the transfer of this Spanish category to the New World as well as the redefinition of these contours. The illustration of the agency of *mujeres enamoradas* or generally women prostitutes invites us to a new reading of the colonial society in Latin America. Too often forgotten or not considered as actors in the Conquest, these women managed to occupy an important space of power using transgressive practices. Other research lines, dealing with the lowest socioeconomic categories, remain open to apprehend the complexity of the colonial world in the Rio de la Plata.

⁴⁹ Von Germeten, *Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico*, 25–26.

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