Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire: Connecting Sexuality and Religiosity in Colonial Mexico

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On 23 January 1621 a Spanish priest and commissary of the Mexican Holy Office of the Inquisition in Querétaro, Fray Manuel de Santo Thomas, came forth to denounce the twenty-year-old Agustina Ruiz, 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 Santa 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 San Nicolas de Tolentino, San 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 facedown while they conjoin themselves with her through both of her dishonest parts [ambas partes deshonestas],” meaning both vaginally and anally.¹ Given that the

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¹Bancroft Library (cited hereafter as BANC) MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 2: “considera que se juntan con ella de diferentes maneras estando ella debajo dellos y de lado y puesta encima

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primary aim of the Holy Office 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, who was eventually sentenced to spend three years in a Mexico City convent.²

What most perturbed this priest and local judge of the Inquisition was Ruiz’s declaration that at times when she attended mass and saw the Eucharist being raised, she would see Jesus Christ with his genitals exposed, feel sexually excited—experiencing “carnal alteration” (alteración carnal)—because of this sight, and would sin with herself right there in the church: a heretical profanation of the sacraments. She also alluded to having sinned in a similar manner with the image of the Virgin Mary in mind.³

This is merely the beginning of a unique and richly detailed Inquisition case in which the issues of female sexuality 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. Any close reading of this case, however, should be placed within a proper historiographical framework. In her influential essay, “Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma,” Asunción Lavrin examines the gap between the proper types of sexual behavior described in treatises of moral theology and confessional manuals and the quotidian and transgressive behaviors of the population at large. Discussing the large number of criminal and Inquisition cases dealing with sexuality, Lavrin asserts: “These cases were either self-confessions or denunciations of breaches of the ecclesiastical norms, and they represent the reality of daily life for those who failed to practice fully the teachings of the

dellos y tambien estando ella boca abaxo y ellos encima teniendo junta con ella por ambas partes deshonestas della.” (In this article I rely on direct archival transcriptions and seventeenth-century Spanish orthography to preserve a document’s original linguistic flavor. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.)

²The history and establishment of the Inquisition in Mexico is of course more complex and must be discussed in conjunction with the earlier Spanish Inquisition. While the Spanish Inquisition did not come into existence until 1478, the institution goes back much further in history. In the fifteenth century the Holy Office of the Inquisition was conceived of as an important political tool that would aid the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in their political unification of the Iberian kingdoms. Eventually, Spain boasted sixteen tribunals. In contrast, the Spanish overseas possessions—though geographically vastly larger than the Iberian peninsula—only had three tribunals: in Mexico City, Lima, and Cartagena. See Richard Greenleaf, The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969) and Solange Alberro, Inquisición y sociedad en México, 1571–1700 (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultural Económica, 1988).

³BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 2: “y q quando está oyendo missa y vee alçar la hostia se le representa q vee al Jesu Xpo con su cosa defuera y q desto tiene ella enconces alteración carnal y peca alli consigo el peccado q he dicho haciendo qª q está en el acto carnal con Jesu Xpo. Y que avia tambien peccado de la mesma manera haziendo qª que estava con la Virgen Maria.”
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Lavrin’s discussion of this undeniable disjunction offers valuable insight into colonial Mexican society. Especially interesting, however, is that many whose actions and sexual behaviors did fall short of church teachings often envisioned themselves as good Christians and veritably thought that their actions did little or nothing to challenge church dogma. By situating sexuality and religiosity as not necessarily antagonistic, historians have opened up other ways to think about sexuality and its complex relationship to religion and spiritual devotion.

As the Inquisition case of Agustina Ruiz demonstrates, sexuality and religiosity were by no means inherently opposed to one another. They often reinforced one another, as religious imagery and iconography, the partaking of the sacraments, penance, and spiritual devotion were at times eroticized and sexualized by women and men. While in comparison to cases dealing with male sexuality it is difficult to locate detailed discussions of female sexuality in Mexican archives, this is one of a number of cases that shed light on the larger historical reality of female experience in colonial Mexico. Many historians of colonial Mexico, including Lavrin, Ruth Behar, Lee Penyak, Jacqueline Holler, Laura Lewis, and Nora Jaffary, have begun to reframe the questions and issues surrounding supposedly deviant female sexuality through an examination of mysticism, witchcraft, and other criminal and heretical acts.

While cases regarding overtly “deviant” female sexuality are scarce, Jacqueline Holler examines the trial of a prurient Mexico City beata (a devout woman who wore religious dress and lived in pious retirement, abstaining from public diversions) and local holy woman Marina de San Miguel, who was accused of and imprisoned for heresy in 1598. While her main crimes were prophesying and the heresy of alunbradismo (claiming to have been personally and spiritually illuminated by the Holy Spirit without the involvement of the church), she was also implicated for having erotic visions, committing the sin of pollution, and having had sexual relations with male priests as well as with another holy woman. According to Marina de San Miguel, she and the other woman ordinarily “kissed and hugged and [Marina] put her hands on the breasts and . . . she came to pollution ten or twelve times, twice in the church.”

Through Holler’s analysis of the life and experiences of Marina de San Miguel as reconstructed through her testimonies, we see some of the potential links between desire, religious

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5 Jacqueline Holler, “More Sins than the Queen of England: Marina de San Miguel before the Mexican Inquisition,” in Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World, ed. Mary E. Giles (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 224. The case analyzed by Holler is AGN, Inq. 210, exp. 3, fols. 307–430: “de hordinario quando se vian se bessavan y abraçavan, y esta la metia las manos en los pechos y . . . vino esta en polucion diez o doze vezes las dos dellas en la iglesia.”
vocation, and sexual misconduct. Nora Jaffary discusses a similar case, that of Ana Rodríguez de Castro y Aramburu, who used her menstrual blood to fake stigmata, did with another woman “what a man can do in this manner with a woman and, giving her kisses during the night,” put the Eucharist in her own “private parts.”

Regarding the regulation of female sexuality in the later colonial period, Lee Penyak has located one 1796 criminal case in which a mestiza woman was sentenced to six years of seclusion for masturbation and other “dishonesties.” For the period between 1750 and 1850 he has also located one case of a cross-dressed female who was rumored to be inclined toward women as well as another case in which one woman denounced another woman for attempting to persuade her to engage in sexual relations. Based on these cases and on the sexual nature of questions in the confessional guides, Penyak concludes that while punishments for women varied widely, “criminal magistrates did prosecute women who committed deviant sexual acts.” While some women were clearly punished for their overtly wayward sexual acts, men more frequently became targets of criminal magistrates and Inquisition authorities for sexual sins and crimes. Given the extent to which these and other cases shed light on what is otherwise difficult to access (the range of female desire and erotic comportment), the work of these historians helps place women’s sexuality in its proper historical context.

Ruth Behar and Laura Lewis similarly use Inquisition cases and denunciations of female witchcraft, often sexual in nature, to look critically at how the Inquisition both regulated and ignored the religiously “superstitious” activities of Spanish, indigenous, mestiza, mulata, and casta women in colonial Mexico. While Behar and Lewis both use cases that deal with sexual witchcraft, aphrodisiacs, and potions used to repel or enchant specific individuals, they differ fundamentally in their interpretations of these acts. In her “Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women’s Powers” Behar articulates the ways in which, through certain types of witchcraft, including spells placed on food, “female power operated on the most private level of all, that of sexual relationships.” While Behar sees female sexual witchcraft as an empowering act of resistance, Lewis, in dialogue with historians like Behar and Irene Silverblatt, argues that to frame witchcraft as an act of

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8Penyak, “Criminal Sexuality,” 290.


resistance for women is, at best, severely misguided. Lewis asserts: “These kinds of arguments risk replicating colonial ideologies, making women and non-Spanish castes essentially different from men and Spaniards.” While it might be unnecessary or even undesirable to negate fully the presence of agency in women’s witchcraft, erotic visions, and sexual relationships, Lewis’s caveat is an important one that should be applied to other criminal and Inquisition cases—including that of Agustina Ruiz—that deal with female sexuality from the colonial period.

The question of agency is also interesting given that many cultural historians have, in a sense, fetishized agency among the historical subjects about whom they write. While many historians have idealized and overemphasized “agency” and “acts of resistance” on the parts of their historical subjects, Lewis argues the other side of this debate. A large part of the theoretical problem in understanding historical realities are the conceptual categories and frameworks that historians use to reconstruct the past ideologically. The importance of Lewis’s critique lies in her questioning the applicability of “agency” and “resistance” to the everyday realities of colonial Mexican women and men. The presentist overemphasis on agency necessarily obscures some of the more complex dynamics of the dialogue between the church, colonial authorities, and colonial subjects. That said, we cannot deny that many women and men, while clearly enmeshed unequally in colonial discourse, made decisions that significantly altered their realities. For Agustina Ruiz, deciding to confess her visions, desires, and actions to her confessor one day in 1621 was one of many decisions she made that significantly changed many aspects of her life and how her life would be remembered in the books of the Inquisition.

By turning to desire as a category of historical analysis, historians might better understand the reasons upon which people based their everyday decisions. In terms of historicizing desire, however, desire need not be sexual in nature. Many pious women in colonial Mexico were simultaneously subjects of their own desire and objects of the desires of others. 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. Whether or not women had “agency” through their desiring—or even how to define and apply that contemporary concept—is not my concern here. Rather, I aim to explicate how 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

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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. Like many Inquisition cases, this one permits a partial reconstruction of the life history of Ruiz. She was born in the city of Puebla to a bricklayer named Alonso Bernal and his wife, Catalina de la Trinidad, who lived and died in that city. After her parents’ deaths the young Ruiz lived with a neighbor in Puebla until she was “tricked” into going to Mexico City by a certain Diego Sánchez Solano, the eventual father of her son, Francisco. According to her testimony, after three years in Mexico City—still a virgin and an unmarried young woman (doncella)—Sánchez Solano convinced her that they should get married, after which they engaged in sexual relations and she became pregnant. As was common in Mexico of the time, the two never did marry and lived together in the state of concubinage. It was only after the unexpected death of Sánchez Solano—a significant event that will be told in more detail—that she moved to San Luis de Potosí for three years before ending up in Querétaro.

In the course of her trial Ruiz related how, two months earlier, her “brother,” Cristóbal Felipe (it later turns out that he might have been a lover whom she later planned to marry rather than her brother), had sent her and her son from San Luis Potosí to the home of Alonso de Garibaldi and his wife, María Meneque, in Querétaro, where they were to remain until he came for them. While Agustina Ruiz was not placed in an official recogimiento (a house where women were confined and separated from the influence of the outside world), her involuntary placement in this house by a close male relative had a similar function—to punish and protect. As Nancy van Deusen argues, while the early-sixteenth-century recogimientos were used in colonial Mexico and Peru to educate and Hispanize the daughters of indigenous nobility, after 1580 colonial officials became more concerned with regulating “wayward and unstable” women by simultaneously punishing and protecting them through confinement in recogimientos and depósitos (another type of house where the women would be “protected”).

12BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 32.
13Ibid.: “que vino a este lugar que la envío aquí un hermano de San Luis llamado Xpobal Felipe porque estubiese en casa del dho Alonso de Garibaldi hasta que viniese por ella.” The city of Querétaro is approximately 200 kilometers northwest of Mexico City.
14Nancy E. Van Deusen, Between the Sacred and the Worldly: The Institutional and Cultural Practice of Recogimiento in Colonial Lima (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001). Van Deusen argues that as the migration of Spanish women to colonial Peru increased, their growing presence was perceived as a threat to the colonial order, and, as a result, “the meanings and application of the term ‘recogimiento’ shifted once again to include and define a new group of sexually and morally deviant women” (53).
in the late sixteenth century, the placement of divorced women, prostitutes, women involved in marital disputes, and women accused of bigamy, adultery, or concubinage became much more common. In colonial Mexico and Peru, as in Spain, the recogimiento was based ultimately on the firmly held belief in female vulnerability and predisposition to sexual deviance and lasciviousness. It comes as no surprise, then, that the young and unwed Agustina Ruiz, like so many other “wayward” women who were forced behind the walls of recogimientos, was “deposited” by Cristóbal Felipe in the care of another household. This placement likely served simultaneously to punish, protect, and separate her from the outside world and its sinful influences, to which she had already showed herself to be especially vulnerable.

As stated earlier, Agustina Ruiz was formally denounced to the Inquisition by her confessor in part because she failed to finish her initial confession on the eve of Pascua de Reyes and be absolved of her sins. Because it was already late in the day when Ruiz started her confession and her confessor deemed it necessary to ask her a number of other questions, he asked her to return the next day to continue the confession. Ruiz did return but left the church before her confessor, Fray Manuel de Santo Thomas, could even see her. After many days passed without her return, the priest sent for her at the house of Garibaldi. She entered the confessional, he said that he merely desired the best for her soul, and she replied that she felt somewhat faint because of fasting and would return that same day after she ate something at two o’clock. When she failed to return the priest denounced her to the Inquisition, which quickly took matters into its own hands.

During her first testimony, taken on 6 February 1621, Ruiz, like so many other women and men who were brought before the Holy Office, started out by saying that she had no idea why she was being questioned by the Inquisition. She said that she knew nothing when she was 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 between her and 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. In this first confession she denied ever having told her confessor that she saw Jesus with his genitals exposed during the consecration of the Eucharist, though this is something she later admitted, and she denied that she ever masturbated in the church but instead always did so at home in the comfort of her bed.

It is here that the questions of the inquisitors turned more specifically toward the acts of masturbation and the accompanying fantasies for a more detailed and intimate examination of Agustina Ruiz. They first asked Ruiz if it was true that she had touched herself since the age of eleven. To this she replied quite graphically 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 realizing 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.”¹⁵ The inquisitors then asked Ruiz if she had ever used any “instruments” (instrumentos) aside from her hand in order to stimulate herself. She denied having ever used anything except her hands and then, in response to other questions posed to her, stated that no one saw her or heard her while in the act of pollution, nor had she told anyone aside from her confessor of her visions and actions. They also asked if the dishonest words that she exchanged with Jesus, Mary, and the saints were words used to name the dishonest parts of the man and the woman and used to describe the physical act of a man and a woman having sex. While Ruiz admitted to all of these accusations, she asserted that she had stopped touching herself six months earlier, though she never mentioned why.

One of the most unique aspects of this case is its explicit reference to female masturbation and corresponding fantasies. In broaching the issue of masturbation among women in colonial Mexico, Lavrin asserts that in theological discourse “masturbation, always described as a masculine problem, deeply concerned the church.”¹⁶ While Lavrin’s statement is generally true, this case demonstrates that masturbation was not described solely as a masculine problem. More importantly, masturbation mostly did not concern the church on any practical or enforceable level. Even in Europe during the later Middle Ages, when theologians began to more closely associate masturbation with the “sins against nature” of sodomy and bestiality, “it was decidedly the most innocent of the bunch and in fact received far less attention in the succeeding ages than its essential wickedness would lead us to expect.”¹⁷ Masturbation played a minor role in the hierarchical drama of sexual sins. One of the few places for the colonial Latin American and early modern European contexts to look for direct references to masturbation are the confessional manuals. The increased importance of the confessional manuals is linked directly to Counter-Reformation Catholicism after the Council of Trent (1545–63), which sought to reemphasize the central role of the sacraments in the everyday lives of Catholics. Partaking in penance and the act of confessing the insinuations of the flesh—one’s thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, and movements of the body—was deemed an important part of salvation.

The 1634 Confessionario Mayor, written in Spanish and Nahuatl by Franciscan friar Bartolomé de Alva, is one of many confessional books from early Mexico that deal with the intimate matters that the Catholic hierarchy

¹⁵BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 4: “desde la dha edad de onze años hasta abra los dhos seis meses ha usado el dicho pecado de cumplir con la mano tocandose en sus partes deshonestas haciendo q" que estaba con los dhos santos Xo y la Virgen y que complia con ellos carnalm e y ellos con ella y que esto ha sido tres veces poco mas o menos cada dia en todo el dicho tiempo.”


wished to regulate. It is also merely one of many bilingual manuals for priests to follow when hearing the confessions of the indigenous populations in Mexico. This text is obviously not a guide to what individual women and men were actually doing in private, but it clearly demonstrates the church’s concerns with the broad sweep of sexual conduct. Specific topics that are broached include abortion, midwifery, witchcraft, incest, masturbation, sodomy, adultery, rape, bestiality, menstruation, and prostitution. Regarding women, a few of the many concerns of Bartolomé de Alva are recorded through the following questions:

Here is what the women will be asked. Were you menstruating sometime when your husband or some other man had sexual relations with you? Did you repeatedly feel your body, thinking of a man, and wanting him to sin with you? Did you do it to yourself with your hands, bringing to a conclusion your lust? When your husband was drunk: did he have sex with you where you are a woman, or sometimes did he do the disgusting sin to you [anal sex]? Did you restrain him? Were you responsible for dirty words with which you provoked and excited women? When you cohabited with some woman: did you show and reveal what was bad in front of those who had not yet seen the sin? Did you ever pimp for someone? On account of you, did they know themselves through sin, you yourself provoking a woman for whom you had summoned someone? Did you know the failings of your mother or your father, your children and your relatives, your household dependents, that they were cohabiting, and you did not restrain them? When they were drunk and intoxicated in your home, there committing before you sins unworthy of doing: didn’t you restrain them? Did you just look at them?18

While in the confessional guides there was a clear preoccupation with the supposedly dangerous and polluting nature of female sexuality, in reality neither criminal courts nor the Holy Office of the Inquisition—unless some potential heresy was involved—worried much about regulating the manifestations of female sexuality, which included masturbation and same-sex sexual activities between women. This rare window into the act of female masturbation and its accompanying desires and fantasies is partly what makes the case of Agustina Ruiz so unique. Inquisitors themselves expressed a great deal of surprise and asserted that they were not accustomed to hearing any woman go into so much intimate detail in her testimonies.19


19BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 36: “Fue le dicho q se le hace saver q em este Sto no se acostumbra aprender a ninguna persona sin bastante informacion de aver dicho o hecho visto hacer o decir o cometer a otras personas alguna cosa q sea o parezca ser contra na Sto fie catholica ley ehebangelica.”
Ultimately, during Ruiz’s first declaration inquisitors asked her some twenty-one questions about her actions and beliefs surrounding her masturbatory experiences. While the initial denunciation of Agustina Ruiz by Fray Manuel de Santo Thomas and her own confession corroborate for the most part, at this point in the document there are many still-unanswered questions regarding what Ruiz actually did and what she believed, due in part to the ambiguity and semantic slippage around the words Ruiz used to describe her visions. Throughout her testimonies she continually used the phrase hacer cuenta, meaning “to realize” or “to recall,” in reference to her recognition of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. In one of many examples, she stated that she “recalled that she was with [i.e., engaged in the carnal act with] the said saints, Christ, and the Virgin” [haciendo q que estaba con los dhos santos X“ y la Virgen]. Much like Benedetta Carlini, the “lesbian” nun, visionary, and mystic in Renaissance Italy described by Judith C. Brown, Ruiz was “living as a believer in a profoundly religious society, [and] she did not question the reality of the visions.”

Did Ruiz merely fantasize that Jesus, Mary, and the saints came to her to exchange lewd words, kisses, and embraces? Or did she believe that they had actually appeared to her and had had tangible contact with her? Ruiz used identical language to describe many of the acts that took place between her and the religious figures and often went into such detail that, at certain moments, there was both confusion and ambiguity between physical reality, fantasy, and imagination. 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.

In her second declaration, taken only shortly after the first, we begin to see some of the intense pressures and fears that Ruiz must have felt once she realized that her case was not going to be taken lightly by the inquisitors. Ruiz strangely and suddenly—especially after going into so much detail with her confessor and in her first declaration to the Inquisition—retracted all of her previous testimony and alleged to be suffering from a certain mal de corazón, or “illness of the heart.” Given that the ubiquitous mal de corazón in the early modern Spanish world could refer to a variety of

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21BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 3: “se le mostraban agradecidos con palabras que la decían deshonestas y amorosas correspondientes a las que ella decía nombrando ellos las partes deshonestas del hombre y de la muger.”
physical, spiritual, and emotional maladies, including vertigo, swooning, spasms, heart troubles, loss of consciousness, apoplexy, and melancholy, it is difficult to determine exactly what Ruiz suffered.\textsuperscript{22} It is unmistakable, however, that Ruiz unsuccessfully tried to convince the inquisitors that due to her malady she did not remember anything that she had said in her first declaration. Inquisitors obviously remained skeptical of her professed mal de corazón, and shortly after this second testimony Ruiz, described in some detail as a woman “small in body and skinny, with brown skin, . . . with a small birthmark above her right eyebrow,” was taken out of the home of Alonso de Garibaldi and María Meneque and placed in the care of Andrés de Montoro, the head of the textile factory, who put her in a presumably more trustworthy home.\textsuperscript{23} There, “in the good company of women,” she would not be allowed to leave or to speak with any man unless given permission by the commissary of the Inquisition. To some extent the official treatment of Ruiz and the decisions made about where to place her were influenced by factors such as local gossip that were outside of her immediate testimony. A woman named Ana Nuñez who was interviewed in the course of the trial spoke of Ruiz’s “dishonesties” (deshonestidades) and referred to an incident she’d heard about from another woman in which Ruiz was seen in public by a number of women allowing an unidentified man to put his hand up her skirt.\textsuperscript{24}

It was after this relocation of Ruiz that a third confession was taken from her on 1 April 1621. This confession—subsequently and repeatedly referred to by Ruiz herself as her “true confession”—not only confirmed much of her first confession but went into far greater detail than any previous confession, including that given to the confessor, Fray Manuel de Santo Thomas, months earlier. In what is only a small segment of this confession, Ruiz asserted that the saints, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin appeared to her in the following manner:

They came to her with their dishonest parts physically excited. Each of them explained how they wanted to see her both loved and desired, and for this reason they came down from heaven to earth. As they hugged and kissed her, their passions became inflamed, and they began to exchange dishonest words similar to those a man speaks to his wife in the act of carnal copulation. And with regard to the Virgin who came to her in her bed to hug and kiss her, they would sit with their dishonest parts rubbing against each other. Of all the rest, it was Jesus who gave her the most in terms of dishonest words and acts. For Jesus told her that he had made her so beautiful and gracious, much to


\textsuperscript{23}BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 5v.

\textsuperscript{24}BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 10.
his liking, so that she would be his whore [*puta*] and so that he could enjoy himself with her.\(^{25}\)

It was immediately following this statement that inquisitors found it necessary to explain to her that “it is a Catholic truth that the saints in heaven, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin do not sin, cannot sin, and could not have come down from heaven to earth in order to do and say the things that she [Ruiz] has confessed that they said and did. Instead, it was the devil.”\(^{26}\)

According to the logic of the inquisitors, it must have been the devil, who, taking the physical form of Jesus, Mary, and the saints, had tricked Ruiz into believing what she did, for, as Jacqueline Holler tells us, “demonically inspired sexual activity by women, however serious and suggestive of a pact with the devil, would not have surprised a sixteenth-century inquisitor.”\(^{27}\)

Immediately after hearing this explanation by the inquisitors, she admitted her guilt and formally acknowledged that all along the devil had tricked her: “Her soul was in a state of error and had offended God, the saints, and the Virgin with the moral turpitude and lewdness . . . and she asks Him [God] for forgiveness.”\(^{28}\)

Ruiz then pleaded for mercy from the inquisitors.

Yet throughout her testimony and before accepting the inquisitors’ interpretations of her fantasies Ruiz painted a picture of sincere and even singular devotion. A large part of this devotion was clearly Ruiz’s relationship with the Virgin Mary. Given her fantasies, visions, and imaginings with the Virgin, in which they hugged, kissed, and rubbed their “dishonest parts” against one another, this case also broaches the topic of same-sex physical and spiritual desire between women. In colonial Latin American archival sources, references to same-sex sexuality between women are, at best, exceedingly rare. For the colonial Latin American historiography, Ligia Bellini’s *A coisa obscura: Mulher, sodomia, e Inquisição no Brasil colonial* is the only full-length study of same-sex sexual acts between women. While this study makes a valuable contribution to colonial Latin American

\(^{25}\) BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 12: “venian ellos con sus partes deshonestas alteradas y cada un la significava q agora decida de verse amada y deseada della venian desde el cielo a la tierra a cumplirle su deseo pero depues abraçandola y besandola se encendian mas en sus amores y tenian los demas astas y palabras deshonestas como actualmente los tiene un hombre con una muger teniendo copula carnal con ella, y q con la virgin avia besarse y abraçarse en la cama y asentarse la una a la otra sus partes deshonestas y q de los demas Jesu Xpo era el q mas se señalava en regalarla y regalarse con ella con los dihos actos y copula deshonestas y obras y palabras deshonestas, y q le dezia el, que la avia criado tal como era hermosa y graciosa y a su gusto para q fuese su puta y para gozarla y para gozarse con ella y q el era su puto y su rufian.”

\(^{26}\) BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 13: “es verdad catholica q los santos del cielo y Jesu Xpo y la Virgin Maria no pecan ni pueden peccar ni aver venido del cielo a la tierra hazer y dezir lo q esta declarante ha confesado q la han hecho y dicho, y q avia sido el demonio.”

\(^{27}\) Holler, “More Sins,” 223.

\(^{28}\) BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 13: “en su alma de aver estado errada y aver ofendido a dios y a los santos y a la virgen con las torpezas y suziedades y ha dho pasar ofensas contra su dios y s” y le pide perdon.”
historiography, it uses a mere ten Inquisition cases to trace fragments of the lives of twenty-nine women in late-sixteenth-century Brazil who were prosecuted for *sodomia foeminarum* (sexual relations between women that included anal or vaginal insertion of objects). Many of these young girls were clearly not cognizant of the gravity of their crimes and often interpreted their own actions as sexual games. While seriously questioning the extent to which any of these sodomy cases can or should be seen as part of a larger history of homosexuality, Bellini concludes that what all these women have in common is that “they put into practice what they desired in certain moments,” and because of it they became targets of the Inquisition.³⁹ Perhaps this was also Ruiz’s mistake.

An important component of Ruiz’s expression of her devotion is its simultaneous sacralization and vulgarization. When speaking of her fantasized experiences with Jesus in her third confession, she stated that “before having carnal copulation, Jesus would have her and tell her, ‘I put you in my soul.’ To this she would reply, ‘My eyes, your cock [el carajo], I [want to] put your cock [el carajazo] in me.’ And Jesus asked, ‘Where will you put it?’ And she responded, ‘In my pussy [por el coño], which is yours.’ Jesus then asked her what he would do to her then. To this she responded, ‘Fuck me, you are fucking me *[me hoder, me estas hodiendo]*.’”³⁰ According to Ruiz, Jesus then told her that he was having sex with her because “you are my soul and my life and the one whom I love above all else, besides, you have a tasty and delicious pussy *[un coño sabroso y gostoso]* just for me.”³¹

The use of the Spanish verb *meter*—to put or place one thing inside of another—is used in reference to Jesus spiritually putting Ruiz in his soul as well as his physically putting his penis into her vagina. For Ruiz, the devotional metaphors of putting herself within the heart and soul of Jesus, and vice versa, transcend the spiritual plane to the physical and the sexual. The pious desire for spiritual salvation manifests itself through Ruiz’s belief

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³⁹Ligia Bellini, *A coisa obscura: Mulher, sodomia, e Inquisição no Brasil colonial* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987), 31. In terms of female sodomy in early modern Europe, Louis Crompton has argued in “The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791” (*Journal of Homosexuality* 6 [1980]: 11–25) that sexual acts between women were as serious a concern as sexual acts between males and that cases of female sodomy were punished just as severely. The sheer dearth of cases dealing with female sodomy in historical archives, however, demonstrates that while many cases of sexual acts between women were often dealt with harshly, they were tried very sporadically. While Crompton asserts that “lesbians” were not exempt from the harsh sentences meted out by the Inquisition, there was clearly less concern with regulating female sexuality when compared to male sexuality. The same holds true for colonial Latin America.

³⁰BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 12: “y antes de tener la copula carnal y teniendola él [Je-
sus] le dezia y ella respondia, ‘mi alma q te meto’ y ella dezia mis ojos el carajo me meto el carajazo, y él dezia por donde? y ella respondia por el coño q es tuyo, y el dezia y q te hago? y ella dezia, me hoder, me estas hodiendo.”

³¹BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 12: “por q eres mi alma y mi vida y mi querida mas q todas las cosas y tienes un coño sabroso y gostoso p’mi.”
that it is she who, over anyone else, is the soul, the life, and the beloved of Jesus.

This description of heavenly love alongside intense physical and spiritual joy also raises the issues of bridal mysticism and spiritual union with Jesus so common among the early modern female mystics. Central to the tradition of Christian mysticism are the notion of the exchange of hearts between Jesus and the mystic, the metaphor of marriage with Christ the bridegroom, and the transformation of carnal desire into spiritual desire. We cannot be sure to what extent Agustina Ruiz may or may not have been influenced by widely publicized female mystics like Saint Catherine of Siena (died 1380), Saint Teresa of Ávila (died 1582), or the only recently deceased Peruvian mystic, Saint Rose of Lima (died 1617), but it appears that there are a number of similarities and overlappings, given the highly erotic language used by mystics to describe the ineffable nature of ecstasy and the mystical experience, with the important difference that Ruiz—given her lack of a clerical education and likely scant exposure to the rhetoric of the mystics—used vulgar street language to describe her experiences. Just as Ruiz used the language of penetration to describe the simultaneous physical and spiritual love of Jesus for her, Saint Teresa of Ávila told of how a beautiful angel with his great golden spear "plunged [it] into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one’s soul content with anything but God."32 A purely sexual reading of the mystical experience in this context or even a forced implication of the sexual organs would be an “unjustified oversimplification,” yet in many mystical experiences it is through the idiom of sexual pleasure that the ineffable nature and ecstasy of intense physical and spiritual union with Jesus is most closely approximated.33 For Ruiz it was ultimately this desire for spiritual salvation that merged with the desire for physical salvation and that manifested itself through the acts of copulation with Jesus, who was both spiritually and physically in love uniquely with her. Ruiz recognized and knew that some of her actions and visions contravened religious dogma, and still she continually described her interactions with Jesus, the Virgin, and the saints in ways that elucidate the erotic nature of her piety and spirituality. The testimonies offered by Ruiz show not only the conflicts between the


sexual, the mystical, and the spiritual but also how often these spheres worked together and reinforced one another.

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 22 April 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 candidly discussed how and when her erotic visions began. Even 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 San Nicolas de Tolentino mounted on a small altar. Ruiz said that the painting was so beautiful that she fell intensely in love with the saint. In her third confession she related that that night, “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.”

Agustina then related how for several days after this vision she had similar visions of and experiences with San 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 San 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” (requiebros y ternuras). He then got on the bed, lifted his clothes, placed himself on top of her, and had “carnal access” (acceso carnal) 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

34BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 33: “con esta imaginacion se fue a su casa y estando acostada en su cama la misma noche y tocandose sus partes vergoncossas para venir en polución se le represento con una imagacion el dho S. Nicolas trayendolo ella a la memória para el dho acto y en efecto le tubo consumado como si realmente estubiese pecando con el.”

35BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 34.
consummated the sexual act with San Diego and, on the fourth night, with the Virgin. Given that these visions began with her desire to find solace in that painting of San 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, given that she said she had been “tricked” into going away with the father of her child, who eventually engaged in sexual relations with her under a promise to marry her), 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 who had been severely emotionally and physically traumatized. Agustina Ruiz’s radical reinterpretation of church discourse that Jesus 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 close to her.

The final issue that is worth noting is the specter of priestly sexuality. Given my attempt to historicize desire, it is apt to ask the questions, Who desires whom, and in what ways? While I have spent time discussing the desires of Agustina Ruiz, the desires of priests and inquisitors also deserve some attention. Priestly sexuality—though negated by the church through required vows of celibacy—has been recorded in a variety of solicitation cases in which priests sought sexual favors from their male and female penitents. While priestly sexuality is successfully concealed in the background of Ruiz’s overt sexuality, we can safely assume that it did influence her reception and treatment. While some inquisitors expressed their unabated surprise at the detailed descriptions of Ruiz’s masturbatory fantasies and experiences, sexual titillation may have partly contributed to this surprise and even intensified it. Just as Ruiz was deeply affected by the painting of San Nicolas de Tolentino and based a large part of her sexual imaginary on religious iconography and things that she encountered in her everyday life, the inquisitors interrogating her were likely influenced on both spiritual and corporal levels by her declarations, and she may have even become masturbatory fantasies for them. Yet the inquisitors expressed their “desire”

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for Agustina Ruiz in their determination to interrogate her, record her detailed utterances, punish her, and then “save” her. While we have nothing in the way of an historical record to prove how the priests and inquisitors personally dealt with the testimonies of Ruiz, the scopophilic nature of the inquisitorial gaze was never far removed.

In a recent edited collection on women and the Inquisition in Spain and the Americas, Mary E. Giles in her introduction broaches the very topic of the sexualized male inquisitorial gaze:

Imagine for a moment the woman—or a girl of twelve just coming to awareness of her sexuality—brought into the chamber where torture is administered: stripped nearly naked, she is surrounded by men—looking at her. Somehow the word pornography seems appropriate to a scene in which men masked in the attire of institutional respectability look at the female body bent and twisted, listen to and record the moans, the cries, the pleas for mercy as cords fastening the body to the rack are gradually tightened and pitchers of water slowly poured down the throat. . . . The woman—the girl—is raped by the male gaze.

While neither torture nor physical coercion was ever applied to Ruiz, an analogous male inquisitorial gaze remains central to her story. Yet the application of the word “pornography” to her experiences seems oversimplified and highly decontextualized. Given the complexity of the gaze and the multiple sites and types of desire, it is counterproductive to conflate pornography with the inherent fear, coercion, violence, and torture that often characterized the inquisitorial process—even if this gaze was sometimes sexual in nature. In other words, both Ruiz and the girl of Giles’s torture scene are “raped” by the male gaze, but this is not pornography. Historical voyeurism, the male inquisitorial gaze, and the pornographic are all interrelated, but they are not the same and cannot be treated as such.

As evidenced by this case, the division between obscenity and the holiest of religious ecstasies—both mediated in the historical record by colonial filters and notarial procedures—was often a thin one. As stated at the outset, 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 Holy Office 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. In line with Lee Penyak’s assertion that “deviant sexuality did not necessarily mean

38BANC MSS 96/95 5:4, fol. 51.
deviant religiosity,” the case presented here ultimately depicts a woman who largely saw herself as a devout Catholic and who never sought to contravene religious dogma overtly.39

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 masturbation 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 mal de corazón, 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—even while recording it in salacious detail. While we can never know what happened to Agustina Ruiz 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.