

“Like a Virgin,” Touched for the Very Last Time:<sup>1</sup> The Conquest of Nahuatl Women’s  
Sexualities by the Catholic Church in the Late 16<sup>th</sup> and Early 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries  
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<sup>1</sup> “Like a Virgin,” Madonna, 1984.

In August of 1693 in the pueblo of Malinalco, Mexico, there was tension in the courtroom. “Indian” Catarina María had filed a law suit against fellow native Juan Teioa, accusing him of forcing her into the home of his sister, and “robbing [Catarina] of [her] virginity.”<sup>2</sup> If found guilty, Juan would be expected to “repay” Catarina María for the “loss of [her] virginity,” or marry her so that she might not be “ruined.”<sup>3</sup> In his defense, Juan claimed they had pre-marital sex, but he argued that the sexual encounter had been consensual. Moreover, he did “not know whether she was a *doncella* or not,” but assumed that she was not due to rumors he heard around the pueblo warning him to not “touch Catarina María with a ten-foot pole” and to not marry her due to her rumored sexual history.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Juan argued he should not be punished because regardless of consent, he did not think Catarina María had been a virgin to begin with, so he could not have robbed her of her *doncella* title. The real crime, then, was not the sexual act itself, but the destruction of Catarina María’s virginity, a concept that did not exist prior to the Spanish colonization of modern-day Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

The purity of women was central to the Spanish Catholic ideology that spread throughout Mexico in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The honor of both men and women in Spanish society was directly linked to whether or not a woman maintained her chastity (or perception of chastity), even after marriage.<sup>6</sup> A lack of *doncella* status could prevent a woman from finding a successful marriage and prevented her from a life in the church—leaving her with no respectable options.

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<sup>2</sup> “Catarina María Complains That Juan Teioa Forcibly Deflowered Her,” Mexico, 1693, translated by Richard Boyer, *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 156.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 156, 160.

<sup>4</sup> *Doncella* is a maiden, a title given to pure and chaste unmarried women. Ibid, 161.

<sup>5</sup> The Nahuatl language did not even have a word for ‘virgin.’ Karen Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>6</sup> A man married to an unchaste woman who lost her honor lost his honor as well. Powers, 123.

This was particularly true if the sexual encounter was consensual.<sup>7</sup> The sexuality of women (and the conquest thereof) was ultimately the conquest of natives—the attempted elimination of native women’s sexualities inherently altered social structures in a way that subordinated natives to Spanish control.<sup>8</sup> Generally, conquest is considered to have ended in 1521 when Hernán Cortés led the “siege of Tenochtitlán”—the final battle in the subjugation of the native government to the Spanish.<sup>9</sup> However, Spanish colonization of the native society was not complete in 1521; the colonization of native culture was not completed through military endeavors alone.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the forced conversion of native women to Catholicism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the attempted (though never completely successful) decimation of their sexualities characterized the final stages of the Spanish conquest of modern-day Mexico.

Scholarship surrounding the spread of Catholicism through Mexico and the sexual subordination of natives to the Spanish breaks down into two main categories: the institutional subordination of natives by the Church and State and the ideological subordination of natives by the Church. Scholars who center their work on the institutional subordination of men and women by the Catholic Church and State in New Spain write about the implementation and enforcement of legal structures that eliminated traditional native practices. These scholars argue that these legal structures changed the ways natives engaged in sexual encounters. Indeed, historian

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<sup>7</sup> Powers, 56; “Catarina María Complains That Juan Teioa Forcibly Deflowered Her,” 161; Asunción Lavrin, “Introduction: The Scenario, the Actors, and the Issues,” *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, Asunción Lavrin, ed. (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 10.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the theory behind the conquest of sexuality, see Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> The governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, sent forces into Mexico to punish Cortés for his insubordination, and Cortés had to leave Tenochtitlán to handle the issue. While he was gone his lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado, attacked the natives for fear of a conspiracy against them, and massacred them. Cortés returned to chaos, and the Spaniards were driven out of the city. They took time to prepare for their final siege, and under the leadership of Cortés went in and subjugated the city. “The Battles of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco,” *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 109-113.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1572*, translated by Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 2.

Richard C. Trexler focuses his work on male homosexuality in the native world, ultimately concluding that the Spanish institutionalized heterosexual monogamy out of a fear that homosexuality would spread throughout New Spain, threatening traditional Iberian gender roles that posited that men penetrated—to be penetrated was a feminine notion.<sup>11</sup> Turning the focus from the sexualities of men to the sexualities of women, historian Karen Vieira Powers describes how during conquest, native women were removed from their positions of power in native religions and politics, which institutionally disenfranchised all native women. These women were subsequently assigned reproductive labor in marriage as their sole work, which aligned with Iberian understandings of gender.<sup>12</sup> These legal structures required the State and the Church to collude on social matters, ultimately institutionalizing Iberian social structures in native society. Other scholars focus on the ideological subordination of natives to the Spanish in the Catholic Church. This scholarship generally focuses on Confession and Missions as tools to decimate native identity and graft Catholic notions of shame and guilt onto the native conscience. Historian Viviana Díaz Balsera argues that through Confession, natives were forced to give power to the Spanish priests and friars by making natives “become visible to an authority that has the prerogative to interpret, reconcile, or condemn the verity” of the lived experiences of natives.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Confession allowed the Spanish to dictate Iberian morals to the natives in an intimate and personalized manner. Similarly, historian Sylvia Marcos discusses the impact of Missions on native identity, explaining how although Missions sometimes provided refuge for natives to avoid physical violence, they also condemned native erotic practices, altering “the

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<sup>11</sup> Trexler, 176, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Powers, 42, 48, 53. Physical love was only valid through matrimony, and it was bad for people to engage in any sort of physical love outside the confines thereof. Asunción Lavrin, “Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma,” *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, edited by Asunción Lavrin (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Viviana Díaz Balsera, *The Pyramid Under the Cross: Franciscan Discourses of Evangelization and the Nahuatl Christian Subject in Sixteenth-century Mexico* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 117, 3. See also Serge Gruzinski, “Individualization and Acculturation: Confession among the Nahuas of Mexico from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century,” *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, edited by Asunción Lavrin (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 96.

roots of ancient Mexican perceptions of the body and the cosmos.”<sup>14</sup> These scholars mention sex as a sin dictated to the natives, but their work focuses on broader notions of native identity.<sup>15</sup>

This paper attempts to bridge these two categories with a gendered methodology, looking at the institutionalization of Iberian sexual practices in conjunction with the ideological conquest of native women’s sexualities. This paper challenges the notion that the conquest of Mexico was over in 1521, but rather that it ended with the attempted conquest Nahuatl women’s sexualities.

Prior to the Spanish conquest of Mexico, native women participated actively in society under a parallel system based on complementary gender relations that prescribed them a valid and active sexuality. This system operated under the idea that men and women existed in two separate but equivalent spheres, with women having autonomy in their own sphere.<sup>16</sup> The division of labor for men and women in an equitable way is seen in native cosmology. The Aztec gods of maize, maguey, salt, water, fire, and earth were all seen as female, demonstrating the value of reproductive work and work to sustain the home in ancient Mexico.<sup>17</sup> In addition, children were seen to be made of both the mother’s blood and the father’s blood, giving daughters equal rights to inheritance as sons; women could and did own property.<sup>18</sup> The lives of native women prior to conquest also existed outside of reproductive labor and protection of the hearth. Women could work outside of the home as priestesses, teachers, merchants, healers and midwives, and professional spinners, weavers, and embroiders. This gave them economic independence from their husbands and authority to be socially and legally responsible for

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<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Marcos, “Indigenous Eroticism and Colonial Morality in Mexico: The Confession Manuals of New Spain,” *Numen*, Vol. 39, Fasc. 2 (1992), 160, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Balsera, 2, 92, 132; Marcos, 157, 161, 164.

<sup>16</sup> Powers, 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Powers, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Powers, 24, 25; Susan Kellogg, “From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal: Tenochca Mexica Women, 1500-1700,” *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, edited by Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 126.

themselves.<sup>19</sup> Aligned with these notions of a woman's place in society, native women's sexualities were not viewed as something to be penetrated or conquered by native men, but instead "as a cavern that is filled, that receives male semen."<sup>20</sup> An active sexuality for a woman was what allowed her to engage in the spiritual act of reproduction, an important part of Aztec society prior to Spanish conquest. Unfortunately, in 1524, the first Franciscan missionaries arrived in Mexico at the request of Hernán Cortés, and the "reshaping" of native societies to "fit into the universal and ecumenical world of Christianity" commenced.<sup>21</sup>

Sixteenth-century Catholic ideology denied female sexualities, believing that for moral Catholic women, desiring sex was a sin. Sex was viewed as strictly reproductive—never for pleasure.<sup>22</sup> Legally, it was referred to as the "*debito*" between a married man and woman, or "marital debt."<sup>23</sup> Thus, purity was valued in the Spanish Catholic Church above any other quality a woman could possess – indeed, Mary, mother of Jesus and the ideal Catholic woman, had managed to conceive a child while maintaining her virginity.<sup>24</sup> Some Catholic families even practiced enclosure, keeping their women secluded to guard her sexuality and protect the honor of the family.<sup>25</sup> Spanish society was more lenient about male sexual transgressions and male honor was tied to that of their wives. Thus, the burdens of Catholicism fell most heavily on

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<sup>19</sup> Kellogg, 123-124, 127; Powers 15-16; June Nash, "Aztec Women: The Transition from Status to Class in Empire and Colony," *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (New York: J.F. Bergin Publishers, 1980), 137.

<sup>20</sup> Powers, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Balsera, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Powers, 53; Balsera, 92; Lavrin, "Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma," 53. Marina de San Miguel confessed that "she had been condemned to hell, because for fifteen years she has had a sensual temptation of the flesh." "The Spiritual and Physical Ecstasies of a Sixteenth-Century *Beata*: Marina de San Miguel Confesses Before the Mexican Inquisition," Mexico, 1598, translated by Jacqueline Holler, *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850*, edited by Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87.

<sup>23</sup> Powers, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Powers, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Powers, 55.

women.<sup>26</sup> It follows, then, that the burden of forced conversion to Catholicism fell most heavily on native women, who were about to be denied the sexuality they once knew.

The Spanish government in Mexico made many attempts to institute laws and practices that denied native women their sexualities, mostly through the attempted policing of native women's bodies. The first attempt, the *General Edict of the Faith*, was published in 1571 to "ensure universal comprehension" of the religious tenets that constituents of New Spain, including natives, were expected to follow.<sup>27</sup> According to the *Edict*, it should be announced before the Church if one knows any person who has "injured in deed or word the Virgin our Lady or the saints in heaven, or has invoked the devil or has made a tacit or explicit pact with him."<sup>28</sup> In other words, natives were expected to police each other, and report when their neighbors acted outside of Catholic morality. The *Edict* was read out loud in an attempt to prevent natives from claiming ignorance at the contents if it was discovered they knew a transgression they did not report. This was not very effective, as it was only read sporadically and many listeners still could not comprehend its contents.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the government turned to the temporal lords in New Spain, asking them to police their constituents by saying "the lords also sin . . . if they are not careful and diligent in eliminating public sinfulness in the community, such as concubinage, gambling, [or] playing prohibited games. . . [and] The governor sins gravely if he is not careful or if he pardons offenders too easily because the principal intent and obligation of those who govern in the Indies is to secure the conversion of the heathens and help

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<sup>26</sup> Powers, 56, 123; Stephen Haliczer, *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4; Marcos, 166.

<sup>27</sup> "Abridgement and Summary of the General Edict of the Faith, and the Cases in It Compromised," translated by Nora E. Jaffary, Edward W. Osowski, and Susie S. Porter, *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader* edited by Nora E. Jaffary, Edward W. Osowski, and Susie S. Porter (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 121.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Nora E. Jaffary, Edward W. Osowski, and Susie S. Porter, editors, *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 120.

them to live in a Christian manner once converted.”<sup>30</sup> Through this decree, the New Spanish State attempted to institutionalize Catholic senses of government and morality through the policing of the natives by their local governments. This meant that native women were policed by Spanish men. Land-owning Spanish men took advantage of the hierarchy institutionalized by the government. These men raped virgin women on their plantations—denying the women access to a *doncella* title and all agency over their sexualities.<sup>31</sup> These women were denied the ability to engage in consensual sex and were unable to abstain as the Catholic tenets directed, thus denying female sexualities.

When women were accused of sexual transgressions, meaning they engaged in sexual activity for pleasure or outside of marriage, they were brought to trial for their actions. For example, in 1598, Spanish woman Marina de San Miguel was brought to court, and in her seventh confession she admitted to engaging in sexual contact with a man to whom she was not married and that she enjoyed it.<sup>32</sup> She claimed that she was not completely at fault, though, because he told her “All of this is earth,” meaning it was natural, and that he just wanted to see if she was a *doncella*.<sup>33</sup> In bringing women to court for their sexual transgressions, the Catholic Church and the State ensured that women knew they were not entitled to sexualities; for a woman to acknowledge her sexuality was criminal and she would be persecuted. This put native women in a particularly difficult bind, as many native women were raped, and to report that transgression would be to admit that the woman had previously had a sexual encounter

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<sup>30</sup> *Directorio Para Confesores*: “Lords Who Hold Temporal Government Over Vassals,” Mexico, 1585, translated by John F. Schwaller, *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850*, edited by Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>31</sup> In raping them, native women could not engage in consensual sexual encounters as they previously had been able to, and they also were unable to protect their purity and honor, leaving them with no control over their sexualities. Marcos, 165.

<sup>32</sup> “The Spiritual and Physical Ecstasies of a Sixteenth-Century *Beata*: Marina de San Miguel Confesses Before the Mexican Inquisition,” 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

(regardless of consent), negating her status as a moral Catholic.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the Catholic Church worked to eliminate female sexualities by criminalizing the acknowledgment thereof, forcing women to conform to the gender roles outlined for them in the Catholic faith.

The ideological conquest of native women's sexualities manifested itself most notably in confession. Alonso de Molina, a Spanish man who likely arrived in Mexico in 1524, wrote and distributed a bilingual Confession manual that instructed natives to "remember all your bad thoughts, bad intentions, [and] bad desires with which you . . . coveted someone," and confess those bad thoughts and desires to the Catholic Church, as they are sinful.<sup>35</sup> In other words, women were to report all sexual thoughts to the Church so that the Church could target its attempts at destroying native identity in a personalized fashion. For example, Marina was also convicted of failing to confess her sexual desires and actions, which she must have known were "very grave sins," meaning that she failed to acknowledge that she had sinned, and she had failed to make herself vulnerable to the Catholic Church in a way that would allow them to instill notions of sexual propriety into her conscience.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps more importantly is the notion that women were vulnerable in confession. At times, native women were abused by the priests in confession. It was impossible for these to be absolved of their sexual sins, as they were abused by those who could perform the absolving. This ruined their respectability in the Spanish Catholic society and perpetually subordinating native women to their pure Spanish counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Essentially, native women were forced to recognize sex as a sin and confess that they had sinned to the Church. This allowed the Church to, through the act of Confession, graft

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<sup>34</sup> See Zeb Tortorici, "Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire: Connecting Sexuality and Religiosity in Colonial Mexico," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2007), 355-356; Marcos, 165; The Spiritual and Physical Ecstasies of a Sixteenth-Century *Beata*: Marina de San Miguel Confesses Before the Mexican Inquisition," 90; Powers, 56.

<sup>35</sup> Fray Alonso de Molina, *Confessionario mayor*, 1569, translated by Mark Z. Christensen, *Translated Christianities: Nahuatl and Maya Religious Texts* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2014), 103.

<sup>36</sup> "The Spiritual and Physical Ecstasies of a Sixteenth-Century *Beata*: Marina de San Miguel Confesses Before the Mexican Inquisition," 90.

<sup>37</sup> "Priest abusing indigenous women during confession," Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*, 576, Royal Library, Copenhagen, reprinted in Powers, 49.

notions of shame and guilt onto the conscience of those women and put them at risk of further physical abuse. This left native women with two options: to either transition into the gender roles assigned to them by the Church and protect their purity or remain subordinate to Spanish women who could maintain their purity.

The Catholic Church and the State of New Spain worked tirelessly to eliminate and subordinate the sexualities of native women, but they were never fully successful in this endeavor. Despite the Church's best efforts, native women maintained their sexual drives. Marina de San Miguel confessed in 1598 that she "had a sensual temptation of the flesh, which makes her perform dishonest acts with her own hands on her shameful parts" and as a result of these sinful desires, she "came to pollution" multiple times.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Marina engaged in sexual acts with another woman who had taken a "vow of chastity," and she "came to pollution ten or twelve times," despite Spanish Catholic rule.<sup>39</sup> A century after the final battle in the military conquest of the Nahuas, twenty-year old Agustina Ruiz was denounced in 1621 because she did not ask for forgiveness after confessing to the Church that she had carnally sinned with herself since the age of eleven, imagining characters such as Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary.<sup>40</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it was reported that Ana Rodríguez de Castro y Aramburu and Ana María de la Colina did "what a man can do in this manner with a woman and giving her kisses during the night," and more scandalously, she had "touched herself" with the "holy host."<sup>41</sup> All of these examples together demonstrate the ways in which the Spanish conquest of native women's sexualities was never complete. Institutionalized legal doctrines, policing, and the attempted

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<sup>38</sup> "The Spiritual and Physical Ecstasies of a Sixteenth-Century *Beata*: Marina de San Miguel Confesses Before the Mexican Inquisition," 87; The act of pollution is defined as masturbation. Tortorici, 356.

<sup>39</sup> "The Spiritual and Physical Ecstasies of a Sixteenth-Century *Beata*: Marina de San Miguel Confesses Before the Mexican Inquisition," 96.

<sup>40</sup> Tortorici, 355.

<sup>41</sup> Ana Rodríguez de Castro y Aramburu's trial quoted in Nora E. Jaffary, *False Mystics: Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 2.

decimation of native identity on a broad scale did not completely eradicate erotic native practices in Spanish society—it only scandalized them.

Native women suffered the greatest burden under new Spanish Catholic ideologies, as the Catholic Church continuously attempted to eliminate and subordinate the sexualities of native women, which had been an integral part of native society prior to conquest. Catholic ideology valued the purity of women more so than any other characteristic a woman could possess; thus, the conquering of native women's sexualities became necessary for complete conquest. Toward the goal of total conversion and conquest, the Spanish attempted to implement legal procedures, encouraged the policing of native bodies, and criminalized sexual desires, in addition to using confession as a way to instill Catholic notions of womanhood, purity, and virginity onto native women. At the same time, Catholic men abused native women, perpetually subordinating them to their Spanish counterparts, as they could never achieve likeness to the Virgin Mary. Despite their best attempts, the Spanish Catholic Church was never completely successful in the decimation of native women's sexualities; women maintained 'sinful' sexual desires throughout Spanish conquest and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the end, it was the subordination of native women through and by the Catholic Church that characterized the final stage of Spanish conquest. This is not to say that Nahuatl women were completely conquered – they were able to maintain some sexual agency throughout conquest, and as a result they should not be considered the passive victims of conquest. In 1621, Agustina Ruiz found herself in court for a crime that would have been impossible to commit before the Spanish arrived: pleasuring herself.<sup>42</sup> In 1693, Catarina María and Juan Teioa fought in court over a concept that had not existed one hundred years beforehand, prior to the Spanish invasion of Mexico: her virginity.<sup>43</sup> The legacy of the Spanish Catholic conquest of native women's sexualities, therefore, is both the scandalization and

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<sup>42</sup> Tortorici, 355.

<sup>43</sup> Powers, 27; "Catarina María Complains That Juan Teioa Forcibly Deflowered Her," 156.

criminalization of consensual sexual acts perpetrated by native women and the introduction of a new concept—virginity—a fundamental alteration to native identity.

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