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Blood and Brains: Marginal Substances in Colonial Mexican Women's Witchcraft

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Latin American Studies

by

Abigail Laurel Weinberg

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Blood and Brains: Marginal Substances in Colonial Mexican Women's Witchcraft

by

Abigail Laurel Weinberg

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Kevin B. Terraciano, Chair

Women in colonial Mexico engaged in magical practices to exert power over their households and communities. These practices often involved feeding one's husband substances, such as menstrual blood and donkey brains, intended to tame or bewitch him. By analyzing reports made to the Mexican Inquisition about women's use of magic substances, this thesis seeks to explain the symbolic power that these materials held in colonial Mexican society. It views love magic as a practice of primarily Iberian origin which flourished in colonial Mexico as Spanish, Indigenous, and mixed-race women sought to exert control over marriages increasingly defined by patriarchal gender roles. It thus challenges the idea that Mesoamerican women were practicing love magic prior to the arrival of Europeans. Furthermore, this study treats menstrual blood and donkey brains as "marginal" substances, both because they had crossed the boundary

of the body and because they were a source of power for those who lived at the margins of society. This approach allows us to examine how Spanish anxieties around religion and gender gave rise to a host of magical practices that persisted throughout the colonial era.

The thesis of Abigail Laurel Weinberg is approved.

Robin Derby

Bonnie Taub

Kevin B. Terraciano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

On a June evening in 1626, a roughly 60-year-old widow named Juana López appeared before a deputy of the Mexican Inquisition in Tepeaca to confess to thoughts and acts she had committed long ago. Roughly 40 years prior, she said, she created a potion of menstrual blood, little black worms, flowers, body hair, and red wine, which she gave to her abusive husband to rid him of his “mala condición.” She also confessed to once being overcome with sexual desire for a dog, admitting that if she could have, she would have had sex with it. Lastly, she said that, 14 or 15 years prior, she took some of her husband’s semen and applied it to a scar on her young granddaughter’s eyebrow.¹

López’s self-denunciation for illicit magical and sexual acts appears alongside thousands of similar records in the Inquisición section of the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. The Mexican Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition was established in 1571 to root out heresy—particularly Judaism.² After hearing Edicts of Faith which required them to confess heretical acts, men and women across Mesoamerica appeared before local inquisitors to report their own and others’ blasphemies. While inquisitors in Mexico were largely dismissive of witchcraft allegations, viewing magical practices as trivial superstitions of little threat to the Catholic Church,³ their scribes recorded detailed descriptions of magical ritual practices by

¹ AGN, Inq., vol. 356, exp. 45, f. 227.

² Richard E. Greenleaf, “The Great Visitas of the Mexican Holy Office 1646–1669,” *The Americas* 44, no. 4 (1988): 399–420, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1006967>.

³ Ruth Behar, “Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women’s Powers: Views from the Mexican Inquisition,” in *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 200.

which women could tame, tie, pacify, cuckold, or otherwise bewitch the men in their lives. Four hundred years after her confession, López's private recipes and desires are digitized and globally accessible.

Women (and some men) of all ethnicities, classes, and ages participated in the sort of love magic that Juana López undertook to cure her husband, although those of lower socioeconomic status faced severer consequences when formally targeted by Inquisition proceedings.⁴ Many of these practices had Iberian roots. In late medieval and early modern Spain, women at the margins of society offered their services for pay; Fernando de Rojas based his famous procuress Celestina on this type of witch. Spanish women brought these love magic practices to Mexico, where they took on new, syncretic forms: women divined with corn kernels rather than fava beans, and they mixed their potions with pulque or chocolate rather than wine. The spells might have been Iberian, but their disseminators were often Indigenous. By the 17th century, Indigenous people, though exempted from prosecution by the Inquisition in Mexico, frequently appeared in Inquisition testimony as providers of magical recipes and materials.

This thesis is concerned with the symbolic and cultural significance of these materials. It focuses, in particular, on two substances that women frequently confessed to using to tame their abusive husbands in colonial Mexico in the 17th and 18th centuries: menstrual blood and donkey brains. I understand these substances through the related concepts of viscosity and marginality. These substances are *visceral* both in their literal relation to internal organs—viscera—and in the

⁴ For discussions of the prejudicial prosecution of witchcraft in colonial Mesoamerica, see Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2003); Joan Cameron Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007); and Martin Austin Nesvig, *The Women Who Threw Corn: Witchcraft and Inquisition in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

gut reactions they produce in the scribes, inquisitors, archivists, and researchers who encounter their descriptions.⁵ They are also, to borrow Mary Douglas's definition, *marginal* in that they have "traversed the boundary of the body."⁶ I am concerned with how these substances acquired symbolic meaning, how women learned about and procured their ritual ingredients, and, most importantly, what these processes say about the roles of women of various social statuses in colonial Mexican society.

By showing how these notions of viscosity and marginality derived from Spanish anxieties around religion and gender, I seek to challenge the idea, often repeated in scholarship on colonial witchcraft, that Mesoamerican women were practicing love magic prior to the arrival of Europeans. Instead, magical practices, substances, and animals derived power from their places at the edges of colonial society.

1.2 Terminology

Many of the distinctions and categories that allow us to discuss witchcraft in colonial Mexico were imposed by the colonial elite. For example, despite inquisitors' accusations, the women who gave their husbands donkey brains and menstrual blood in Iberia and Mesoamerica would likely not have thought of themselves as witches, nor their actions as magic.⁷ Their potions were more like medicine than magic; Juana López was, after all, trying to cure her husband's bad condition. Most Inquisition documents on love magic refer to their users as

⁵ My thinking on viscosity is heavily influenced by Zeb Tortorici, "Viscosity in the Archives: Consuming Desires," in *Sins Against Nature* (Duke University Press, 2018), 25–45.

⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001), 122.

⁷ As Martin Nesvig notes, there is a complex debate about whether witches existed prior to being labeled as such by inquisitors. Nesvig, *The Women Who Threw Corn*, 78.

hechiceras, although some use the term *bruja*. *Hechicería* connotes sorcery and the casting of spells (*hechizos*), whereas *brujería* often involves a pact with the devil.⁸ There is a sense of doubt inherent in the word *hechicería*, in all its forms. An *hechizo*, from the Latin *facticius* for artificial, can be a spell or a conjuring, but it is also something fake or feigned. It is something *hecho*, or made, but also made-up. The term itself can thus be taken to reflect colonial officials' devaluation of women's power. Even though *hechizos* were not quite *magia* and *hechiceras* were not quite witches, I use the terms "magic" and "witchcraft" throughout this paper to refer to a specific set of love magic practices that afforded women power in colonial Mexico. I do so in part to differentiate the purveyors and practitioners of love magic from the Nahua healing specialists, *titiçih*, "whom scholarship has viewed as magicians, sorcerers, charlatans, cheats, physicians, curanderos, and midwives,"⁹ and in part to emphasize that colonial women derived power from elite perceptions of their magic abilities.

Women constituted a discrete social category in colonial Mexico, in both Iberian and Indigenous societies. Even though some men partook in the practices discussed here, the overwhelming majority of love magic practitioners were women. As such, I follow scholars such as Ruth Behar and Jacqueline Holler in considering women as a category for analysis. In discussing women's healing practices, Holler cites "a commitment to women's history and to understanding the ways in which the category of 'woman' based on bodily distinction has not only served to bring women together...but also to highlight imbricated distinctions of race,

⁸ Kristen Block, "Remedios for Relationships: Social Precarity and Amatory Therapeutics in the Early Circum-Caribbean," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (2024): 187, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-11085317>.

⁹ Edward Anthony Polanco, *Healing Like Our Ancestors: The Nahua Tiçitl, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Central Mexico, 1535–1660* (The University of Arizona Press, 2024), 39.

ethnicity, class and culture.”¹⁰ The multiethnic healing networks that arose in the colonial era were so syncretic that, per Behar, “after a while it became impossible to distinguish what in it was ‘Indian’ or ‘Spanish’ or ‘African.’”¹¹

“Indigenous” is an imprecise term that risks presenting the diverse groups native to Mesoamerica as a monolithic whole. The dominant cultural groups with which the Spaniards interacted in the central valley of Mexico were unified in speaking Nahuatl; however, a Nahuatl-speaking Tenochca would laugh at the notion that he had much in common with the rival Tlaxcalans who worked with the Spanish to overthrow Tenochtitlán. Still, it is possible to speak of broad social mores common to various Indigenous groups across Mesoamerica, just as it is possible to speak of patriarchy in Europe. Furthermore, Indigenous versus non-Indigenous was an important distinction in the colonial power structure, and Inquisition records often refer to, for example, “un yndio hechizero,” without specifying to what particular group the individual belonged. Therefore, I use the terms “Indigenous” and “Native” when more precise descriptors are not available.

1.3 Literature Review

Since the 1980s, scholars have analyzed witchcraft as a source of both power and danger for women in colonial society. Ruth Behar’s classic study of “sexual witchcraft” notes that women, widely perceived as capable of performing witchcraft, engaged in magic rites “to reverse

¹⁰ Jacqueline Holler, “Mixing/Medicines: Healing Exchanges Among Women in Early Colonial New Spain (1530–1650),” *Gender & History* 33, no. 3 (2021): 634, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12553>.

¹¹ Behar, “Sex and Sin, Witchcraft and the Devil in Late-Colonial Mexico,” *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 1 (1987): 48.

their subordination to men and gain some degree of control over their husbands or lovers.”¹² This power was necessarily limited—in part by a Catholic Church that dismissed sexual witchcraft as mere superstition—but, as Behar notes, “control within the symbolic domain is also a form of power.”¹³

Subsequent studies have incorporated deeper analyses of class and caste, showing how colonial society attributed exceptional power to women lower on the ethnic hierarchy. Laura A. Lewis views witchcraft as an Indigenous corollary to the Spanish justice system: “In a profoundly colonial sense the judiciary acted as a kind of sanctioned magical force controlled by Spaniards...while witchcraft operated as a kind of unsanctioned system of justice controlled by Indians.”¹⁴ Others view witchcraft and sorcery practices as a result of a syncretic, multiethnic social network. Kristen Block, for example, contrasts the “theoretical social hierarchy” with the “more complex hierarchy of ethnicity and wealth” that defined people’s daily lives.¹⁵ Joan Cameron Bristol has shown how Afro-Mexicans participated in this network, both performing private love magic and offering their curing services to Spanish clients.¹⁶ And, according to Martha Few’s research on Santiago de Guatemala in the 17th and 18th centuries, women of all classes and ethnicities used their powers to exert authority within their communities.¹⁷

¹² Behar, “Sexual Witchcraft,” 179.

¹³ Behar, “Sexual Witchcraft,” 200.

¹⁴ Lewis, “Hall of Mirrors,” 8.

¹⁵ Block, “Remedios for Relationships,” 632.

¹⁶ Bristol, “Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches.”

¹⁷ Martha Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (University of Texas Press: 2002).

While some historians have commented on the symbolic ritual power of menstrual blood and body hair, they have tended to ascribe little importance to the physical materials used in witchcraft. The most complete descriptions of Iberian and colonial Mexican witchcraft practices are Julio Caro Baroja's *Las brujas y su mundo* and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's *Medicina y magia*, both published in the 1960s.¹⁸ More recently, Martha Few has highlighted women's use of their own body parts, such as hair mixed with bathwater, to exploit "many people's fears about women's ability to control men through witchcraft and magic."¹⁹ Lastly, Martin Nesvig's recent book on Spanish women's early acculturation to Nahua society takes great interest in the provenance of substances used in witchcraft. Nesvig highlights Spanish women's use of Indigenous herbs and roots, suggesting that they likely would have had to speak Nahuatl to procure them.²⁰ Like Nesvig and Few, I am interested in how women obtained their love magic ingredients and the symbolic meanings they ascribed to them.

A separate body of literature has focused on the role that European-introduced plants and animals have played in the colonization of the Americas. In *The Columbian Exchange*, a foundational text in environmental history first published in 1972, Alfred Crosby grapples with the profound impacts of European transportation of plants and animals to the Americas, arguing that biological factors played a significant role in Europeans' subjugation of Native populations.²¹ Similarly, in *A Plague of Sheep*, Elinor G. K. Melville suggests that the

¹⁸ Julio Caro Baroja, *Las brujas y su mundo* (Revista de Occidente, 1961); Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia: El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1963).

¹⁹ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives*, 54.

²⁰ Nesvig, *The Women Who Threw Corn*.

²¹ Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange* (Greenwood Press: 1972).

uncontrolled growth of the sheep population in the Valle del Mezquital in the 16th century contributed to the demographic collapse of the human population and facilitated Spanish colonization of the valley.²² Though monumental contributions to environmental history, these texts risk suggesting that Indigenous people lived in static harmony with the landscape prior to the arrival of Europeans, or were merely victimized by European animals in the colonial era.

Several historians have since sought to complicate the animals-as-colonizers narrative by discussing the ways that Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas have used European animals to their benefit. Attention to Indigenous agency allows scholars to view how Native peoples have used introduced species to diversify their diets,²³ improve their economic status,²⁴ and, in some cases, engage in imperial conquests that rivaled those of the United States and Mexico.²⁵ For example, whereas Crosby viewed the horse primarily as a weapon that allowed the Spanish to topple a great empire,²⁶ scholars of American Indian history have established the central role of the horse in shaping intertribal power relations and hunting activities. Many of these histories have focused on the Native American populations of the United States, but

²² Melville, Elinor G.K. *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²³ E.g. Chris Valesey, “Managing the Herd: Nahuas, Animals, and Colonialism in Sixteenth-Century New Spain” (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2019), 94; John Ryan Fischer, *Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawai’i* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), Introduction, EPUB e-book.

²⁴ The value of sheep in establishing economic autonomy among the Diné is central to Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (University of Washington Press, 2009).

²⁵ Richard White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of American History* 65, no. 2 (1978): 319–43; Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (Yale University Press, 2008).

²⁶ Crosby, *Columbian Exchange*, 81.

volumes such as *Centering Animals in Latin American History* have begun to analyze the relationships among imported and indigenous plants and animals in Mesoamerica.²⁷

This work aims to begin to bridge the divide between witchcraft histories and animal histories by examining the ways that visceral substances derived from both human and non-human animals functioned within colonial society. By seriously considering Martha Few's and Zeb Tortorici's calls to center animals in Latin American history, it analyzes animals not just as tools of conquest or resistance by humans, but as agents of witchcraft in the colonial power structure.

1.4 Using Inquisition Documents

The primary sources for this study are roughly two dozen *denuncias* for the use of donkey brains, menstrual blood, and other substances in the AGN's Mexican Inquisition archive. While Inquisition trial records are richer in detail than denunciations that did not lead to prosecution, *denuncias* provide brief, nearly poetic snippets of colonial life. They record behavior that was troublesome among laypeople but not criminal enough to warrant further investigation. And though their transcription was mediated by a scribe, Inquisition documents "captured firsthand accounts of women" at a time when most could not read or write.²⁸

Inquisition documents have been controversial for their tendency to record rumor and immortalize interpersonal conflicts. "People exaggerate and people embellish," Martin Nesvig notes. "But the exaggerations and embellishments come from some collective cultural script and

²⁷ Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici, eds., *Centering Animals in Latin American History* (Duke University Press: 2013).

²⁸ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives*, 8.

imagination.”²⁹ This thesis examines the collective cultural script surrounding visceral substances in colonial Mexico.

Even if witchcraft allegations were purely gossip—that is, even if no woman in colonial Mexico ever actually fed her husband menstrual blood or donkey brains—the contents of these sorts of *chismes* are still worthy of examination. Indeed, gossip was a major driver of witchcraft allegations in colonial Mexico. Inquisitors were clearly wary of spiteful complaints; it was common for declarants to aver, likely upon being asked, that they did not make their statements out of hatred. But, like the very substances used in witchcraft, gossip had the power to heal and to harm; it could bolster women’s reputations as providers of magical substances and cures, but in doing so, it increased the odds that these women would face legal repercussions.³⁰ Historian Luise White, in her work on vampire rumors in East and Central Africa, defines rumor as that which “reports behavior” and “rests on evaluating reputations.”³¹ Following this model, I view reports made to the Mexican Inquisition as a form of institutionalized gossip, in which people could gab directly to an inquisitor. If, as White writes, the power of gossip derives from the ties of intimacy it creates between gossipers,³² then those who bring gossip about their friends and family to the Mexican Inquisition are asserting their own intimacy with the Catholic Church. This was an unequal relationship, as people submitted their accusations to an institution that

²⁹ Nesvig, *The Women Who Threw Corn*, 77.

³⁰ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives*, 12; Block, “Remedios for Relationships,” 207.

³¹ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (University of California Press), 60.

³² White, “Historicizing Rumor and Gossip,” 57.

largely devalued their experiences, casting them aside as mere superstition. Still, their reports tell us about the anxieties and habits that dominated daily life in colonial society.

If reports about others constituted a form of gossip, then what are we to make of the many *auto-denuncias*, or self-denunciations, in the Inquisition archive? Behar views these self-reports as evidence that “women had internalized religious prescriptions for appropriate female behavior and denigrated sorcery practices and their roles in them.” Few, on the other hand, reports that elite Spanish women in Santiago de Guatemala denounced themselves as a preemptive strategy to prevent prosecution by the Inquisition.³³ Following Behar, I view auto-denuncias as likely expressing some guilt. Still, these confessions represent a degree of power, even if the women making the statements were not aware of it. In a time and place where most women were illiterate, the Inquisition recorded their stories of abusive husbands and magical potions. The danger of the Inquisition’s wrath became a source of power.

³³ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives*, 131.

CHAPTER 2: Magic at the Margins

2.1 Chapter Introduction

Purveyors of love magic materials in medieval and early modern Iberia lived at the margins of society. They were “young unmarried women, widows, wives abandoned by their husbands, or women living in casual unions with men; they were maids and servants, sometimes prostitutes, and in southern Spain often *moriscas*, women of mixed Spanish and Moorish blood.”³⁴ They were poor, or old, or disabled, and their practices ran counter to Catholic orthodoxy. Still, they performed an important social function, providing women with the means to exert control over their husbands.

The tradition of marginalized groups selling magical substances continued in colonial Mexico. The substances and rituals themselves were often Iberian in character, but their purveyors included mulattoes, mestizos, and “yndios hechizeros.” As Behar notes, in colonial Mexico, the idea of the witch-procuress “took on a further cultural elaboration, with uncanny power being ascribed to women of the marginal Indian and mixed castes.”³⁵ Yet there was nothing inherently witchy about the women who procured love magic substances in colonial Mexico. Witches and magic were European constructs which Spaniards imposed on marginal groups, in both Spain and its colonies. In other words, marginalization produced magic.

The notion of marginality allows us to understand how non-Iberian women came to be associated with magic in colonial Mexico, how they took advantage of this association, and why the substances they used were symbolically significant. Sociologists in the 1920s and ‘30s began using the term “marginal man” to refer to someone who straddled two cultural groups but did not

³⁴ Behar, “Sexual Witchcraft,” 183.

³⁵ Behar, “Sexual Witchcraft,” 179.

fully fit in with either—someone who transcended boundaries and defied classification. Since then, the term “marginalized” has come to refer to anyone low on a particular economic or social power structure.³⁶ I use the term “marginal” to refer both to people who existed on the fringes of the colonial power structure, and to the illicit substances they used as magical remedies. I suggest that Spanish authorities viewed the groups they marginalized as threats to the colonial power structure and the sanctity of the Church. Yet these groups refashioned their perceived danger to their own advantage, becoming purveyors of magical substances and providing remedies that threatened the systems of colonial dominance. This chapter analyzes how witchcraft practices—and their components—have occupied the margins of society, the body, and the archive.

2.2 Mexica “Magic”

Some scholars have suggested that colonial food magic might have derived as much from pre-Hispanic Indigenous practices as from Iberian ones. However, I contend that Mesoamerican gender relations diverged so radically from Iberian ones as to render the discourse of taming one’s husband meaningless. It was only when Spanish colonial authorities misinterpreted and marginalized Indigenous practices that they took on magical power.

While the Mexica had their own amatory practices prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, it would not be quite accurate to refer to these as love magic. Rather, Mexica customs, like the ceremonial use of psychotropic plants or the association of hummingbirds with war deity Huitzilopochtli, took on a magical character when perceived as such by Spaniards. In the colonial era, Indigenous people sold the revered hummingbird to Spaniards, mestizos, mulattoes,

³⁶ Varghese, Charles and Sheethal S. Kumar, “Marginality: A Critical Review of the Concept,” *Review of Development and Change* 27, no. 1 (2022): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09722661221096681>.

and Afro-Mexicans as an amulet to cure lovesickness. The hummingbird symbol would have had an air of mystery for non-Indigenous groups, as Noemí Quezada notes. “That a sacred object of a conquered religion be converted to magic should not surprise us,” she writes. “In the west, magic is frequently the patrimony of marginalized groups.”³⁷

Scholars tend to cite a passage from Book 6, Chapter XXII of the Florentine Codex as evidence of Nahuas’ use of food magic; however, I argue that this reading places too much emphasis on Iberian conceptions of witchcraft.³⁸ In the relevant passage, a man advises his son to be wary of the food that a woman gives him, lest he become overcome with lust and perform the carnal act over and over until he dies. Yet the Spanish text of the Florentine Codex, on which these citations are based, is not a completely faithful rendering of the Nahuatl original. The Florentine Codex was compiled by Nahua scribes under the advisement of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, and the Nahuatl text was then loosely translated into Spanish, with frequent discrepancies and omissions. By considering the Nahuatl and Spanish texts separately and viewing the manuscript as the product of several layers of translation and authorial voice, we can

³⁷ Noemí Quezada, *Amor y magia entre los aztecas* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1975), 100: “Que un objeto sagrado de una religión vencida se convierte en mágica no tiene por qué asombrarnos...En occidente, la magia es con frecuencia patrimonio de los grupos marginados.”

³⁸ Behar writes that, “Typically, women made men ‘eat’ their witchcraft, using their power over the domain of food preparation for subversive ends, a practice that was common in pre-Hispanic times as well as in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Castile.” Citing the same passage from the Florentine Codex, Amos Megged writes, “Menstrual blood mixed with drinks of cocoa or Pulque was one of the most striking among their syncretist repertoire and may have originated from pre-Columbian indigenous practices rather than from its counterpart in Europe, as the Franciscan chronicler, Fr. [Bernardino] de Sahagún informs us.” However, the cited text does not mention the consumption of menstrual blood, and I have been unable to locate a passage in the Florentine Codex that does. Ruth Behar, “Sexual Witchcraft,” 180; and Amos Megged, “The Social Significance of Benevolent and Malevolent Gifts Among Single Caste Women in Mid-Seventeenth-Century New Spain,” *Journal of Family History* 24, no. 4 (1999): 427.

begin to disentangle the elements of Indigenous and European thought it embodies.³⁹ A close analysis of this passage suggests that Spanish translators, led by Bernardino de Sahagún, imbued their version with an aura of gender-based magic that the original Nahuatl text lacked.

The chapter as a whole stresses the importance of moderation. It warns against sleeping too much, walking too fast or too slowly, speaking too loudly or too softly, staring, eavesdropping, dilly-dallying when called upon to do something, wearing clothes that are too fancy or too shabby, and eating too much, too quickly, with bites that are too big. In the section taken as proof of Nahuas' belief in food magic, the Nahuatl text, as translated by Arthur Anderson and Charles Dibble, warns, "Especially art thou to proceed cautiously with, to live in fear of, the women, above all the whores. Thou art not to eat, thou art not to drink the things offered. Such is said of the evil ones, the disloyal, the agitators, those with potions."⁴⁰ The text goes on to say that some such foods "causeth one to discharge one's fluid when the whores, the harlots cause one to eat it, swallow it, or drink it to provoke lewdness."⁴¹ It notes that the *maçacoatl*, in particular, causes insatiable lust. (Interestingly, this deer-horned snake, repeatedly referenced in the Florentine Codex for its dangerous properties of arousal, does not appear as an

³⁹ My methodology here is inspired by Kevin Terraciano, "Three Texts in One: Book XII of the Florentine Codex," *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1 (2010); and Pete Sigal, "Queer Nahuatl: Sahagún's Faggots and Sodomites, Lesbians and Hermaphrodites," *Ethnohistory* 54 no. 1 (2007).

⁴⁰ Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy", fol. 105r, (Anderson & Dibble 1953–1982) Nahuatl Translation, Getty Research Institute, 2023.
<https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/6/folio/105r>

⁴¹ Digital Florentine Codex, "Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy", fol. 105v, (Anderson & Dibble 1953–1982) <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/6/folio/105v>

ingredient in the love magic of the colonial era.) Because Nahuas believed that men had a fixed amount of semen,⁴² this could be dangerous: “it is very deadly because one is dried up.”

This is not a magical process whereby a woman utters the right phrases and mixes the right potions to harness supernatural power and subvert the natural order. Instead, the passage describes a natural physical process: a man is administered a known aphrodisiac, which causes him to have sex with so many women that he has no more seed to spill and shrivels and dies.

However, the text’s Spanish translators likely viewed this process through the lens of Iberian love magic. After warning men not to eat or drink what evil women give them, they introduce a phrase with no analogue in the Nahuatl original: “muchas veces dan hechizos en la comida y en la bebida”—they often cast spells in food and drink.⁴³ What was described in the Nahuatl as a mechanical process here takes on a magical flair. Just as outsiders saw the Nahuas’ reverence for the hummingbird and ascribed it magical amatory powers, so the Spanish translators saw *hechizos* where there were none.⁴⁴

Indeed, the Iberian practice of casting *hechizos* would have made little sense in a Native milieu defined primarily by complementary, rather than patriarchal, gender roles, as Lisa Sousa has shown. Whereas marriage for Iberian women meant losing legal autonomy and “owing total

⁴² Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, 112.

⁴³ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán cites this line as evidence that, “since the ancient times that preceded the Conquest, the ingestion of food has been seen as an act fraught with danger.” Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia: El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1963), 226: “Desde los viejos tiempos que precedieron a la Conquista, la ingestión de alimentos se presenta ya como un acto preñado de peligros.”

⁴⁴ Pete Sigal describes a similar process in Book 4, where the Nahuatl term *cuiloni*, which he translates as “passive partner in the act of sodomy,” appears in the Spanish text as *puto*, or “faggot.” Sigal, “Sahagun’s Faggots and Sodomites,” 9.

obedience to their husbands, who assumed they had the right to physically punish their wives if they deviated from proper female norms,”⁴⁵ evidence from colonial Mexican archives suggests that wife-beating was not accepted in Indigenous societies. According to Sousa, “the criminal prosecution of wife beating suggests that domestic violence, especially if deemed excessive, was not condoned or accepted (even if common) in indigenous communities.”⁴⁶ The community support for Indigenous women with abusive husbands obviated their need to resort to this sort of marital witchcraft, at least in the early years after the conquest.

A more complete interpretation of the passage from Book 6 would need to situate it within a broader Nahua discourse of moderation versus excess, in keeping with the admonishments of the chapter as a whole.⁴⁷ Notions of excess are embedded in the Nahuatl words used to refer to these dangerous women who incite men to lust. Anderson and Dibble translate the words “cihuatlahueliloque” and “ahuianime”⁴⁸—rendered “malas mujeres” in the original Spanish—as “whores” and “harlots.” Subsequent scholars have complicated these translations. Montserrat Mancisidor Ortega explains that Nahuas used the word “tlahueliloc” to refer to “someone who lacked moderation in their conduct and emotions, someone who went about agitated, unable to control their impulses, passions, and desires”; it took on the meaning of “bad woman” when viewed through a European lens.⁴⁹ Likewise, the “ahuiani,” or pleasure

⁴⁵ Behar, “Sex and Sin,” 35.

⁴⁶ Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, 109.

⁴⁷ For more on this discourse, see Pete Sigal, “Sex,” in *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture* (Duke University Press, 2011): 207–39.

⁴⁸ These are standardized spellings of the original text’s “cioatlahueliloque” and “aujanjme.”

⁴⁹ Montserrat Mancisidor Ortega, “In cihuatlahueliloc: La ‘mala mujer’ en textos cristianos en lengua náhuatl del siglo XVI,” *Korpus21* 3. No. 7 (2023): 48,

woman, was, per Pete Sigal, an “individual steeped in excess”; these excesses of pleasure involved sex, drugs, and alcohol.⁵⁰ A 16th-century Spanish translator, encountering a passage in which pleasure women give men a substance that provokes insatiable lust, would likely think of the witch-procuress Celestina, who uses magic to whet people’s sexual appetites so that she can then provide the means to satisfy them. The lustful woman who gave food that caused excess would, to a Spaniard, take on the connotation of a sorceress, one who gives *hechizos*. Divorced from a discourse on moderation, it is the woman herself, and not the man’s immoderate consumption, that produces evil results.

The Spanish ascription of magical qualities to women’s actions in the Florentine Codex reflected a broader misinterpretation of Indigenous practices in the early colonial era. Several scholars have shown how Spaniards viewed Nahua healing specialists, *titiçih*, as sorcerers or magicians.⁵¹ Spaniards derided these healers even as they relied on them for medical treatment amid a shortage of licensed physicians in the colonies.⁵² But, in a process that unfolded throughout the Spanish Empire, those who lived at the margins of society used Spanish perceptions of their “uncanny power” to their advantage. Irene Silverblatt has shown how, in colonial Peru, “Indian sorceresses could take advantage of the witchcraft fears that Spaniards projected onto their colonized subjects” by pretending to perform “devil-derived acts” at the

<http://dx.doi.org/10.22136/korpus21202391>: “la voz ‘*tlahueliloc*’ era utilizada por los nahuas para identificar a la persona desmesurada en su conducta, en sus emociones, a alguien que andaba agitado, incapaz de controlar sus impulsos, sus pasiones, sus deseos.”

⁵⁰ Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, 226.

⁵¹ Nesvig, *The Women Who Threw Corn*, 281.

⁵² Edward Anthony Polanco, *Healing Like Our Ancestors*, 22.

Spaniards' behest.⁵³ Likewise, in Mexico, non-Iberian women met the Spanish demand for love magic substances by providing herbs, powders, amulets, hummingbirds, and donkey brains, often for a fee. And the power in these practices was not just economic; as Joan Cameron Bristol notes of Afro-Mexican healers, "the radically subversive nature of these curers' practices seems to lie in the consequences of their actions, in the possibility that their activities would subvert the social hierarchy by creating situations in which Spaniards deferred to them."⁵⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Spaniards invented magic whole cloth.⁵⁵ Rather, in marginalizing people and practices that did not conform to the Catholic, Spanish order, the colonizers created the perfect environment for magic to take root.

2.3 Bodily Margins

To be effective in love magic, ingredients had to carry symbolic meaning. If we view body hair, menstrual blood, and the like as "marginal substances"—that is, substances that have traversed the boundary of the body—we can begin to appreciate the power these ingredients acquired in colonial society. Following Mary Douglas' analysis of purity and pollution, I consider fears of bodily pollution from marginal substances to mirror fears of religious pollution

⁵³ Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 190.

⁵⁴ Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 188.

⁵⁵ Luise White critiques scholars such as Margaret Murray and Carlo Ginzburg for framing their analyses around either/or terms: "The narrative of witchcraft in all its rich details either belongs to the commonfolk or to the inquisitors. These analyses argue that there was no shared vocabulary with which peasant women and clergymen negotiated a description of the world, no genre of talking that both parties might use to different ends." I believe that inquisitors' and commonfolk's understandings of witchcraft cases in colonial Mexico were distinct but overlapping. Certainly, some women viewed witchcraft with the same general disregard that inquisitors did, while some inquisitors took witchcraft seriously enough to prosecute its perpetrators. White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 23.

from marginal groups. Magic—and its power and danger—resided in the margins of society and the body.

Douglas suggests that we view the body as symbolic of the broader social structure it inhabits. Substances that issue forth from the body are “marginal stuff of the most obvious kind.”⁵⁶ But these substances are not powerful by themselves. “Each culture has its own special risks and problems,” Douglas notes. “To which particular bodily margins its beliefs attribute power depends on what situation the body is mirroring.”⁵⁷ In colonial Mexico, marginal substances gained power amid anxieties about blasphemous incursions against the Catholic faith.

Catholic authorities in this era feared incursions from marginal groups. Even as the Church sought to root out idolatry in Spain’s colonial possessions, it also remained wary of crypto-Jews and -Muslims. These two groups faced forced conversion or exile from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century, but the Catholic Monarchs feared that those who had converted were continuing to practice their religious traditions in private. Forced conversions had brought Jews and Muslims into the Church. The heresy was coming from inside the house.

Skepticism about the purity of people’s commitment to the faith gave rise to concerns about the corruption of Catholic traditions, such as the veneration of relics. In his 16th-century invective against witchcraft, Franciscan friar Martín de Castañega warned, “No one should carry as relics things that are unknown or unauthorized by the clerics and governors of the Church, so as not to honor someone undeserving, nor confuse true relics with false ones, because they might happen to carry and honor the bones of some hangman or ass, as if they were those of a martyr or

⁵⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 122.

⁵⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 122.

saint.”⁵⁸ This anxiety about incorrect use of relics could be linked to women’s magical use of their own bodily substances, as Martha Few suggests in her study of colonial Guatemala. If bona fide relics had miraculous power, then illicit relics from women’s bodies took on subversive power, threatening to beguile well-intentioned worshipers.⁵⁹

Fear of religious pollution also gave rise to a set of anxieties around food. Food itself can be seen as marginal, since, as Douglas notes, food traverses a bodily boundary when ingested.⁶⁰ Jewish food preparation practices were of particular concern. Several Mexican Inquisition documents denounce people who wanted to *sacar* or *quitar la landrecilla*—that is, remove the sciatic nerve from a leg of meat to kosherize it. We see these anxieties around consumption in the statement of 25-year-old Maria Ramires, who, in Tepeaca in 1626, reported two suspicious food-related behaviors.⁶¹ First, she said that a woman named Mariana Ybañes told her that another woman, Ysabel de Rojas, had given her husband donkey brains to eat. Ramires, perhaps feigning ignorance, said that did not know what purpose the donkey brains served, but that she heard from Ybañes that they had had the desired effect on Rojas’ husband. Ramires went on to say that, on another occasion, Rojas told her to “quitar la landresilla” from a leg of meat so that it would

⁵⁸ Fray Martín de Castañega, “Tratado muy sutil e bien fundado de las supersticiones y hechizerías, y vanos conjuros y abusiones, y otras cosas al caso tocantes; y de la posibilidad y remedio de ellas,” edited by Girassol Sant’Ana, *Lemir: Revista de Literatura Española Medieval y del Renacimiento* 24 (2020), 374: “Ninguno deve traer por reliquias cosas no conocidas y que no están autorizadas por los perlados y gobernadores de la Yglesia, porque no den honrra a quien no la merece, ni confundan las reliquias verdaderas con las falsas, porque acontecería traer y honrrar algunos huessos de algún ahoracado o asno, como si fuessen de algun martyr o santo.”

⁵⁹ Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives*, 54.

⁶⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 127.

⁶¹ AGN, Inq., vol. 356, exp. 49, f. 236.

cook faster. Ramires, not knowing any better, did as she was told. Whether or not Ramires came to understand that deveining meat was a Jewish practice, she clearly viewed food preparation as potentially dangerous enough to warrant a report to the Inquisition. It did not matter that Ramires was not a Jew; by preparing food in the Jewish way, she had become, on some level, polluted.

Amid these anxieties around consumption, menstrual blood, already a dangerous substance in Catholic thought, took on extraordinary power. The notion that women could use menstrual blood to tame their husbands dates as far back as the eighth century, although it is not clear whether this was an actual practice among medieval women or simply a male anxiety.⁶² But by the 16th century in the Canaries and the 17th century in Mexico, women were frequently reporting themselves and others to the Inquisition for using menstrual blood to tame their abusive spouses.⁶³ The practice was well-known and, apparently, popular.

Medieval hangups around menstrual blood derived from beliefs in women's sin. Menstruation was one of women's many punishments for Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit.⁶⁴ Because conception during menstruation was thought to lead to monstrous births, sex during menstruation was a sin.⁶⁵ It seems significant that menstrual blood should take on

⁶² Irven M. Resnick, "Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses," *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2000): 247.

⁶³ Francisco Fajardo Spínola, "Las Palmas en 1524: Hechicería y sexualidad," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 31 (1985): 217.

⁶⁴ Resnick, "Medieval Roots," 245.

⁶⁵ Confessional manuals written in Spanish and Nahuatl, such as Bartolomé de Alva's 1634 *Confessionario mayor*, include questions about whether the confessor had had sex with a menstruating woman. Nahuas, who did not historically consider menstrual blood to be polluting, might be surprised at this question. Alva, Bartolomé de. *Confessionario mayor, y menor en lengua mexicana* (John Carter Brown Library, 2012), 60; Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 206.

particular potency in a religion whose holiest sacrament involved consuming the literal blood of Christ in the form of wine. Bodily parings could be sanctioned objects of devotion if derived from saints or dangerous tools if wielded by witchy women. Likewise, drinking blood was purifying in one context and contaminating in another. In both instances, marginal substances from women's bodies acquired power amid concerns about pollution of the faith and its rituals.

2.4 Archival Margins

We have seen how magical practices thrive in the margins of society, and how bodily substances' very marginality gives them power. But there is a third level of marginalization that warrants discussion, involving the production and consumption of the archive itself. Here, I would like to return to Juana López, mentioned in the introduction. A close reading of her appearances before the Inquisition offers a microhistorical example of how colonial archives recorded, reinscribed, and ultimately elided one woman's acts and desires.

My treatment of colonial archives is informed by Zeb Tortorici's *Sins Against Nature*, which "seeks to offer a methodology of desire, interpellating the desires of the past with those of the present."⁶⁶ Inquisition archives inscribe a variety of desires, including colonial desires to control subject populations, individual desires for marital concord, and archival desires to preserve. If we think of reading the colonial archive as an act of consumption, then we, too, are implicated in a process of marginalization. Colonial stories become marginal stuff when they traverse the boundary between the past and the present.

Juana took the advice of marginal women to use marginal substances to remedy some problems in her life. After hearing the Edict of the Faith read aloud during mass, she appeared before the Inquisition twice in one week to confess to having given her now-deceased, abusive

⁶⁶ Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature*, 6.

husband a potion to tame him some 40 years prior. First, she said that she had heard from “unas indias” that some little black worms would do the trick. She had taken some worms from the trash, toasted them, ground them, and put them in her husband’s wine. Two days after her first confession, she returned to the Inquisition with more details. In addition to worms, she said, her potion had included “uñas de caballo,” or coltsfoot, a flower native to Europe; hairs from her underarms and other shameful parts of her body; and blood she had wrung out from her menstrual rag.

Juana used marginal substances from men’s bodies, too. When one of her granddaughters had fallen and wounded her eyebrow some 14 years prior, she recalled having heard “unas gitanas”⁶⁷ say that a man’s seed was good for healing a scar. So, she performed the carnal act with her husband, took his semen, and applied it to the 1-year-old girl’s face.⁶⁸ The effect here is almost poignant; Juana, doting grandmother, had sex with the man who mistreated her so that she could improve the child’s health and appearance.

Juana manipulated not just the boundaries of her own and her husband’s bodies, but that of a nonhuman animal, as well. About 25 years prior, upon seeing a male and a female dog mating, she experienced such great “desire and concupiscence” that she called out to the male

⁶⁷ The phrase “unas gitanas” appears in Juana’s first confession, as well, for having offered to read her palms. Noting the presence of these fortunetellers in Tepeaca, Solange Alberro writes that “the theme of the foreigner remains linked to censurable behaviors even when their heterodoxy is benign.” Alberro, *Inquisición y sociedad en México, 1571–1700* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), 343: “El tema del extranjero queda ligado a comportamientos censurables aun cuando su heterodoxia es benigna.”

⁶⁸ Mary Douglas famously defined dirt as “matter out of place.” The description seems especially fitting here. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

dog and tried to have sex with it.⁶⁹ Colonial archives rarely refer to bestiality among women,⁷⁰ and it is unclear how precisely Juana intended to have “exseso carnal” with the animal. Juana’s attempts were ultimately fruitless, and, seeing that she could not get the dog to do what she wanted, she let it go. Still, she averred that if she could have, she would have had sex with it.

Juana’s auto-denuncias seem to derive from genuine guilt. Given the amount of time that passed between her actions and her appearance before the Inquisition, it is unlikely that anyone else was planning to report her—her husband was dead, her granddaughter would have been too young to remember what happened, and the dog could not talk to the Inquisitor, no matter how eloquently he may bark. Because Juana’s statement would have involved responses to an inquisitor’s question, it is impossible to tell how much of her testimony she provided voluntarily. Still, she repeatedly attempted to diminish her acts, clarifying that she only tried to ensorcell her husband once before throwing away the potion, that the cure for his abuse was ineffective, that the attempt at bestiality had occurred a long time ago, and that she learned of her remedies from marginal “indias” and “gitanas.”

I suggest that Juana was compelled to confess these acts partly because of their viscosity. Taming one’s husband was sinful not only because it ran counter to the Catholic demand for a woman’s submission to her husband, but also because it involved belief in superstition. But Juana already admitted to subversive and superstitious beliefs the first time she appeared before the Inquisition. That she reappeared, without having been called, to supply more

⁶⁹ “viendo estar juntos a un perro i una perra i que se tomaban fue tanto el deseo que tubo i la concupisencia que quisiera que el perro tubiera con ella exseso”

⁷⁰ Of the 144 colonial bestiality cases Tortorici reviewed, just three involved women, and they each referred to the acts in vague terms. Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature*, 142–143.

details about the body hair and the menstrual blood suggests that the nature of the substances themselves contributed to her guilt.⁷¹

What is recorded and what is omitted from the archive can be seen as a reflection of viscosity. Noting his own visceral reaction to a criminal proceeding for necrophilia, Tortorici suggests “that we understand archiving itself as an ongoing process set in motion, at least in part, by a chain of visceral reactions: from historical actors to colonial officials, from notaries and scribes, from archivists and historians.”⁷² These events likely stuck in Juana’s memory for the disgust they inspired, even in herself. More than 400 years later, we are left to speculate whether the notary, inquisitor, and friar who heard her story were similarly repulsed, or whether they, like a physician who has seen it all, remained unfazed.

The marginal comments on the document allow us to surmise. Juana’s auto-denuncias, like many documents recorded by notaries of the Mexican Inquisition, left a large margin on the left side of the page, where another reader, perhaps a Commissary of the Holy Office, took notes. Lacking Ctrl-F, Inquisitional authorities would have relied on these marginal comments when sifting through tomes of handwritten testimony. They highlighted the details most relevant to the Holy Office’s interests. Inquisition scribes did not always render their subjects’ words exactly as spoken, and any analysis of a historical actor’s visceral sensations is, as Tortorici notes, necessarily speculative. Still, discrepancies between the main text of the denuncia and subsequent marginal notes can provide insight into Inquisitional authorities’ perspectives.

⁷¹ Juana’s testimonies note that she had previously confessed to a priest who had not referred her to the Inquisition until the reading of the Edict of the Faith. It is unclear which crimes she previously confessed or how much detail she gave the priest.

⁷² Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature*, 32.

In Juana's case, the marginal comments seem to elide the viscosity conveyed in the original denuncias. The notetaker does not appear to have been as concerned as Juana with the specific substances she fed her husband; the accompanying marginal comment simply says that she gave him a drink to get rid of his jealousy ("dio a su marido una vebida para quitarle los celos"). The marginal comments also translate the metaphorical description of her husband's "simiente," or seed, into the more clinical "semen." Lastly, her bestial desire takes on a degree of sterility. Whereas the main text notes her *deseo* and *concupisencia*, the accompanying marginal comment renders her desire in purely physical terms: "she tried to make a dog perform the carnal act with her" ("intentó q un perro tubiese con ella acto carnal").

The Holy Office was ultimately unconcerned with Juana's confession. Her statement, like most auto-denuncias for witchcraft, was apparently not pursued further. The Inquisition's disinterest in this sort of witchcraft report represented, as Behar suggests, a devaluation of "what on the local level was viewed as a source of power for women."⁷³

Many years later, an archivist at the AGN viewed Juana's statement and appended the description: "Juana López's testimony against herself for giving her husband black worms mixed with coltsfoot, body hair, and menstrual blood to drink to rid him of his jealousy."⁷⁴ Perhaps the archivist recorded only the first statement on the page, or perhaps he or she deemed the confessions about the semen and the dog unimportant compared to the charge of *hechicería* against one's spouse. Regardless of the archivist's intentions, the finding aid privileges the ingredients of Juana's potion over her bestial desires. Because it is not clearly indexed, the report

⁷³ Behar, "Sexual Witchcraft," 184.

⁷⁴ "Testificación de Juana López contra sí por dar de beber a su marido gusanos negros mezclados con uñas de caballo, vellos corporales y sangre de menstuo para quitarle los celos."

of attempted bestiality is hidden among hundreds of pages of denuncias, lurking in the archive's margins.

Even as we attempt to center the substances of women's witchcraft, they remain elusive, hiding amid thousands of pages of archival accusations of *hechicería* that defy complete perusal. When we do stumble upon the visceral, marginal stuff of the archives, we implicate ourselves in a type of historical voyeurism, as Tortorici notes.⁷⁵ After all, Juana likely would not have imagined that the acts that caused her so much guilt would intrigue a 21st-century reader. Long after the hair, the blood, the semen, and the little black worms inscribed in the archive have decomposed, their power to incite visceral responses remains. The substances that once traversed the boundary of the body have managed to traverse the most perilous boundary of all: that between past and present.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

Our understanding of colonial magic results from three layers of marginality: social, bodily, and archival. At each layer, human and non-human animals and substances derived power from their distance from colonial authorities.

Spaniards drew the margins. They feared, devalued, and sometimes simply misunderstood various Indigenous customs, such as veneration of hummingbirds and wariness of substances that could cause a man to have so much sex that he died. They feared Jewish and Muslim defilement of Catholic rituals. They recorded and assessed thousands of statements to the Inquisition, and they decided which behavior was licit and which merited prosecution. Many abused their wives and considered it their right to do so.

⁷⁵ Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature*, 50.

At every turn, those who resided in the margins played upon Spanish anxieties and employed magic to their benefit. Indigenous people took advantage of Spanish perceptions of their powers by selling them ingredients for use in love magic. Women played on fears of religious pollution when they fed their husbands marginal substances, such as menstrual blood and bodily parings, to tame them. And women who reported themselves to the Inquisition, even if driven by a sense of guilt, exerted power over their husbands' lives—not simply by bewitching them, but by testifying to their jealousy and mistreatment in records that would be stored, preserved, and archived for hundreds of years. In this way, the mutually constitutive forces of magic and marginality were a danger to those at the center of the colonial power structure, and a source of strength to those at the edge.

CHAPTER 3: Sesos de Asno Para Amansar

3.1 Chapter Introduction

It was well known in Cuencamé in the 1620s that Catalina Ortiz de Iburguren's husband abused her, and everyone seemed to have some sort of a remedy for his "mala condición."⁷⁶ A mestiza woman named Mariana de Avila suggested that Catalina feed her husband some little black worms from the trash to tame him. Doña Lucia de Moxica had a more extreme solution: get a frog, tie it up, beat it, feed its drool to the abusive husband, take a bit of the husband's food, put it in the frog's mouth, and bury the frog at the foot of the bed, so that when the frog died, the man would die, too.⁷⁷ Catalina did not dare try this, even though she occasionally considered it. She was much more amenable to feeding him donkey brains. But even though men continually suggested that she give her husband some sort of remedy, she could not find anyone willing to kill a donkey and remove its brains for her.

Alongside human bodily parings, animal parts figured prominently in reports of women's witchcraft in colonial Mexico. But if menstrual blood and body hair derive symbolic power from being marginal products of women's bodies, what are we to make of the little black worms, the frogs' drool, and the donkey brains that were used to similar effect? Why did certain animals acquire power over men's behavior? And what can the magical use of the bodies of nonhuman animals tell us about the boundary between human and animal in colonial Mexican society?

Donkey brains would have been a particularly difficult ingredient to procure. Unlike a frog or a worm, a donkey is a large, domesticated animal. And, unlike with parts of their own

⁷⁶ AGN, Inq. Vol. 356, exp. 136.

⁷⁷ One hundred years later, a woman in San Luis Potosí accused a woman of killing her father this same way. AGN, Inq. Vol. 878, exp. 46, f. 381.

bodies, women tended to rely on men to slaughter donkeys and extract their brains. Despite these obstacles, donkey brains appeared to have been a popular way for women in colonial Mexico to *amansar* or *apaciguar* or *asimplar* their husbands. The cure was apparently common enough that a 15-year-old boy told Catalina Ortiz that everyone knew about it—“así lo dicen todos.”⁷⁸ At least 15 people between 1614 and 1724 are recorded in the Inquisition archives as having given *sesos de asno* or *sesos de burro* to a man to eat. (In one additional instance, the offending substance was a cat’s brains.) These likely represent a fraction of the total number of donkey brain accusations in the archive, because I examined only those whose finding aids mentioned “sesos,” and there are hundreds of other denuncias whose finding aids mention “hechicería” or “hechiceras” but not the particular ingredients involved.

Four of the denuncias describe men who killed donkeys to give the brains to a woman in need, while the rest lay the blame on women for either requesting donkey brains from a man or for actually feeding them to her husband. The recipient of the donkey brains was always a man. However, none of the abusive husbands testified before the Inquisition. Perhaps the men were oblivious to their wives’ actions, or perhaps they felt a degree of shame for their abuse.

The accused appear to be of various ethnicities. Catalina Ortiz de Iburguren’s denuncia does not specify hers, but her surname suggests that she hailed from the Basque Country. Other women accused of giving donkey brains were labeled “tresalva,”⁷⁹ “coiota,”⁸⁰ and “mestiza.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ AGN, Inq. Vol. 356, exp. 136, f. 392.

⁷⁹ AGN, Inq. Vol. 308 primera parte, exp. 72.

⁸⁰ AGN, Inq. Vol. 792, exp. 14.

⁸¹ AGN, Inq. Vol. 1568A, exp. 139.

So, even though the practice hailed from Iberia, it was adopted by woman of mixed Indigenous, Spanish, and African descent.

In this chapter, I attempt to trace the history of donkey brains' use in love magic and to explain the remedy's popularity in colonial Mexico. I suggest that women used donkey brains as a way to strengthen community ties as they alerted neighbors to their abuse and requested assistance from men they knew. I also attempt to center animals in my analysis of colonial witchcraft, considering imported European animals such as donkeys not simply as colonizers, but as unwitting agents in men's subjugation.

3.2 Why Donkey Brains?

The most famous reference to donkey brains appears in the first act of the literary dialogue *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*, better known as the *Celestina*. The text, attributed to converted Jew Fernando de Rojas, was first published in Spain in 1499. In the next few decades, several editions of the *Celestina* were published throughout Europe in Italian, Hebrew, German, and French. Celestina, a procuress, uses magic to whet people's sexual appetites so that she can then provide the means to satisfy them. In the first act of the play, the character Pármeno describes Celestina's love magic potions thus:

And in another place she kept things to mend hearts and make people love well. She had deer heart bones, snake's tongue, quails' heads, donkey brains, horse's tail, child's caul, Moorish bean, sea stone, hangman's noose, ivy flower, sea urchin's spine, badger's foot, fern seed, the rock from the eagle's nest, and a thousand other things...Who could tell you what this old woman did? And it was all mockery and lies.⁸²

⁸² Rojas, Fernando de. *La Celestina*, Edición y notas de Julio Cejador y Frauca (Ediciones de La Lectura, 1913), 81: "E en otro apartado tenía para remediar amores e para se querer bien. Tenía huesos de corazón de ciervo, lengua de búfalo, cabeças de codornizes, sesos de asno, tela de caualllo, mantillo de niño, haua morisca, guija marina, sogá de ahorcado, flor de yedra, espina de erizo, pie de texó, granos de helecho, la piedra del nido del águila e otras mill cosas...¿Quién te podrá dezir lo que esta vieja fazía? E todo era burla e mentira."

Rojas' description of Celestina's charms is, according to Julio Caro Baroja, so faithful to actual medieval Iberian practices as to be an excellent model for cultivators of realist literature.⁸³

Several of the mentioned ingredients frequently factor into colonial love magic, such as fern seeds⁸⁴ and the caul of a newborn baby,⁸⁵ suggesting that Iberian women imported these existing medieval love magic practices to Mesoamerica relatively unchanged. Still, scholars of the play have struggled to find references to donkey brains in medieval treatises on superstition. Where did ideas about donkey brains' taming powers come from, and how did these ideas become entrenched in colonial Mexican society?

Many medieval and classical texts advised the consumption of elaborate concoctions derived from animal parts to treat various maladies. Pliny the Elder, for example, recommended that donkey brains and hare's rennet be smoked with burning leaves and consumed with honey wine to treat epilepsy.⁸⁶ And animal brains, particularly of birds, have long been considered to have magical erotic properties. Some of the recipes in the medieval Hebrew *Book of Women's Love*—with which Fernando de Rojas might have been familiar⁸⁷—advise eating birds' brains as an aphrodisiac. Scholar Carmen Caballero-Navas links this cure to Hippocratic and Galenic ideas

⁸³ Julio Caro Baroja, *Las brujas y su mundo* (Revista de Occidente, 1961), 151: "Su dibujo correspondía tan perfectamente con tipos reales que podían encontrarse en las ciudades españolas en los siglos XV y XVI, que dio un patrón excelente a los cultivadores de la literatura realista."

⁸⁴ Nesvig, *The Women Who Threw Corn*, 111.

⁸⁵ E.g. AGN, Inq. Vol. 308 primera parte, exp. 72.

⁸⁶ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, translated by John Bostock and Henry T. Riley (Taylor and Francis, 1855), 28.63.
<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-eng1:28.63>

⁸⁷ Bradley J. Nelson, "Love Magic and Control in Premodern Iberian Literature. Veronica Menaldi," *Renaissance Quarterly* 78. No. 2 (2025): 662.

about semen being generated in the brain: “According to this system, which stems from analogical thought and gives order to the world, the ingredients that possess certain determined qualities generate these same qualities.”⁸⁸ Belief in the magical amatory powers of bird brains continued in the colonial era.⁸⁹

These texts provide a rubric for the type of concoctions that appear in the *Celestina*, but they do not explain donkey brains specifically. Literary scholar Julio Cejador y Frauca, who edited a 1913 edition of the *Celestina*, suggested that donkey brains could attract foolish lovers “because of the ass’s proverbial ineptitude.”⁹⁰ Celestina scholar Dorothy Sherman Severin likewise concludes that the term “ass” in the play refers to those “who have had their brains addled by love.”⁹¹ According to this logic, the donkey brains used in colonial Mexico should tame abusive men by dumbing them down and restoring the love they should have had for their wives. Modesto Laza Palacios, a botanist who compiled a glossary of Celestina’s cures, has a different interpretation. He suggests that Jewish and Muslim *hechiceras* might have informed Castilian women about the African ass’s tendency to attract domesticated females and incorporate them into its herd. According to Laza Palacios, “The ass is not so stupid, even if he is perennially miserable.”⁹² This appears to be the inverse of the situation in colonial Mexico: instead of the male being tamed, the female is made wild.

⁸⁸ Caballero-Navas, Carmen. *The Book of Women’s Love and Jewish Medieval Medical Literature on Women, Sefer Ahavat Nashim* (Routledge, 2014), 71.

⁸⁹ Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 166.

⁹⁰ Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, 81n251: “por la torpeza proverbial del asno.”

⁹¹ Dorothy Sherman Severin. “Animals and Abuse in ‘Celestina’: The Dog and the Ass.” *Celestinesca* 21, no. 1/2 (1997): 112.

Still, these explanations are all conjecture, as no scholar of the *Celestina* has, to my knowledge, located a recipe for the use of donkey brains in love magic that predates Fernando de Rojas' text. It is certainly possible that Fernando de Rojas included *sesos de asno* in his work of fiction to reflect real, contemporary love magic practices which might have spread through Iberia by word of mouth long before they were written down. But I think it might also be possible that Rojas' work helped popularize the association of donkey brains with love magic, giving rise to a practice that continued for centuries. Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici note that, in the Latin American historical record, "real animals figure alongside the metaphorical animals that were used to symbolically represent the limits of humanity and thus sometimes occluded the real, sentient animal."⁹³ We see this dynamic play out in accounts of Iberian and Mesoamerican witchcraft. In the *Celestina*, the ass was a metaphor for a love-addled idiot. Yet the donkey was also a living, historical being that, while often maligned, occasionally died in the service of women who suffered from their husbands' abuse.

By the 16th century, donkey brains seem to have moved from the literary, metaphorical realm to the real, as they began to factor into accounts of love magic in Iberia and the Canaries. Francisco Fajardo Spínola reports that donkey brains were frequently mentioned in love magic denuncias recorded by the Inquisition in Las Palmas in 1524. In one instance, one woman gave another ground donkey brains with the directive that she first beat them with a broom, put a stick upright in the ground, bring the brains around the stick, and say, "just as these brains go around

⁹² Modesto Laza Palacios, *El laboratorio de Celestina* (Instituto de Cultura de la Excma. Diputación Provincial de Málaga, 1958), 179: "No es tan tonto el asno, aunque siempre sea desgraciado."

⁹³ Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici, *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, 19.

this stick, in the same way may so-and-so go around after me.”⁹⁴ The intention here is to invert the marital relationship, allowing the woman to control the man instead of vice versa. About 50 years later, the Dutch-born Martin Del Rio, studying at the University of Salamanca, had his first encounters with popular magic.⁹⁵ In his anti-witchcraft treatise *Investigations Into Magic*, produced toward the end of the century, he writes, “I remember the trial of a notorious prostitute in Madrid in 1573. They found a young donkey near her house. Its brains had been removed, and the woman confessed under torture that she had used them for a magic philtre.”⁹⁶ The truthfulness of any confession made under torture should be suspect, but the anecdote reveals that donkey brains were a known magical ingredient, either to the inquisitors or to the woman herself. The last clue about Iberian understandings of donkeys’ powers comes from physician Andrés Laguna. In his mid-16th-century Spanish translation of Dioscorides’ ancient Greek pharmacopoeia *De materia medica*, Laguna offers that the unfortunate ass goes on serving man even after death, though he declines to specify how. He adds that he does not care to comment on the ass’s virtues, lest he discover that the animal has relatives at court.⁹⁷ Despite Laza Palacios’ protests, the donkey is generally presented as a stupid, awkward, miserable animal useful only for carrying heavy burdens and, perhaps, for treating epilepsy.

⁹⁴ Francisco Fajardo Spínola, “Las Palmas en 1524: Hechicería y sexualidad,” *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 31 (1985), 225: “Así como estos sesos se andan alrededor deste palo, así fulano se ande tras de mí.”

⁹⁵ Martín del Rio, *Investigations Into Magic*, edited and translated by P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester University Press, 2000): 3. <https://archive.org/details/investigationsin00riom>.

⁹⁶ Martín del Rio, *Investigations Into Magic*, 206.

⁹⁷ Pedanius Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, translated by Andrés Laguna (Jean Laet, 1555): 146. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021666851/>.

In Iberian magical belief, brains of a particular animal could, when ingested, imbue an individual with the same qualities that the animal possessed. Colonial Mexico, as we will see, provided fertile ground for the continuation of these practices.

3.3 Human–Animal Relations in Mesoamerica

Whereas Iberians could metaphorically turn into animals, Nahuas could, through a very different process, experience literal transfiguration. The shapeshifting *nahualli*, who could transform into animals or natural phenomena, was yet another aspect of Indigenous life that Spanish authorities associated with witchcraft and devil pacts.⁹⁸ These were not occult or magical beliefs to those who adhered to them, but rather natural explanations of physical phenomena. Indigenous notions of the porousness of the boundary between human and animal bodies remained entrenched in popular thought throughout the colonial era.⁹⁹

The notion of the *nahualli* allowed one Nahuatl-speaking *tlaciuhqui*, or diviner, to interpret the proliferation of European livestock and the decimation of the Indigenous population in the mid-16th century as a transfiguration. In his essay “The Year the People Turned into Cattle,” León García Garagarza presents the story of Juan Teton, a *tlaciuhqui* who appeared in the 1558 *Anales de Juan Bautista*, a text produced by Indigenous scribes trained by Spanish friars in a similar manner to the Florentine Codex. Teton was concerned with Indigenous people’s Christian baptism and their adoption of the meat of Spanish domestic animals into their diets. The decrease in the human population and the increase in the animal population was the result of a “fateful metamorphosis, one operating with a strict and precise reciprocity—a person

⁹⁸ Anderson Hagler, “Exhuming the *Nahualli*: Shapeshifting, Idolatry, and Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico,” *The Americas* 78, no. 2 (2021): 203.

⁹⁹ Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, 22.

would be transformed in the animal that he or she ate.”¹⁰⁰ As García Garagarza notes, in Juan Teton’s view, it was the Spaniards, not the Nahuas, who were performing “insidious magic,” and he called for a revolt against Spanish control and a return to a traditional way of life.¹⁰¹

The consumption of donkey brains for magical ends was clearly an Iberian invention. Still, given the persistence of Indigenous beliefs and culture throughout the colonial era, it is worth considering whether the practice might have taken on additional potency in a society where shape-shifting was a regular part of life.

3.4 Taming Men

Scholars of love magic tend to view women’s use of ensorcelled food as a subversion of their normal role as providers. Francisco Fajardo Spínola notes that love magic was a feminine pursuit because of women’s economic and emotional dependence on men: “This dependent role, of service to the man, also appears to be reflected in how they performed their spells. So, a woman can give her husband certain powders or substances to eat or drink because she is the one who gives him food.”¹⁰² That women relied on men to procure them donkey brains could be seen as an extension of their dependence. But women’s requests for men to bring them donkey brains could also be seen as an inversion of gender roles which required a man to labor in service of a woman, rather than the other way around. In this way, women were taming not just their

¹⁰⁰ León García Garagarza, “The Year the People Turned into Cattle: The End of the World in New Spain, 1558,” in *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, ed. by Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici (Duke University Press, 2013), 41.

¹⁰¹ García Garagarza, “The Year the People Turned into Cattle,” 37.

¹⁰² Francisco Fajardo Spínola, “Las Palmas en 1524,” 201: “Ese papel dependiente, de servicio al hombre, aparece reflejado también en los modos en que los hechizos se realizan. Así, la mujer puede dar de comer o beber a su marido o amante determinados polvos o sustancias porque es ella la que le pone la comida.”

husbands, but also the men in their community who killed the donkeys at their behest. Killing a donkey was no small task, and women relied on community support to complete it.

Sometimes, men denounced themselves to the Inquisition for assisting in the acquisition of donkey brains. These denuncias tend to take on an altruistic tone, as when one Alonso Pacheco denounced himself for killing a donkey “to rid a man of his bad condition, for the great trouble he gave his wife every day.”¹⁰³ Other times, men denounced the women who requested the donkey brains, but denied having fulfilled their requests.¹⁰⁴ While these men’s confessions could be seen as a betrayal of women’s trust and an affront to women’s power and community cohesion, they universally condemn the abusive husband’s actions. That is, the women were justified in desiring better treatment from their husbands, but they were wrong to resort to *hechicería* to achieve it. The very fact that abusive husbands were referred to as having a “mala condición” suggests that wife-beating was not a good look, even if it were legally and religiously permitted.

In two cases, the donkey brains were used to facilitate adultery. In 1615, a 24-year-old Spanish man accused the Portuguese Diego Méndez of bringing *sesos de burro* to the married woman he was sleeping with so that she could give them to her husband to cuckold him.¹⁰⁵ A year later, in Querétaro, the “tresalva” Maria Vásquez was formally reprehended by the Inquisition for throwing everything but the kitchen sink at her husband so he would not discover that she was having an affair. In addition to feeding her husband donkey brains, she reportedly

¹⁰³ AGN Inq. Vol. 1574, exp. 20: “para que a un hombre se le quitase la mala condición por los grandes disgustos que cada día pasaba con su mujer”

¹⁰⁴ E.g. AGN Inq. Vol. 793, exp. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Inq. Vol. 308 primera parte, exp. 65, f. 383.

put cemetery dirt under his pillow; put roots under his mattress; cast lots with grains of corn to see if her husband would leave her; fed him roots to prevent him from doing so; mixed some of the roots from under her husband's mattress with her own menstrual blood and water and gave them to him to drink; wore a child's caul as an amulet around her neck so that she would have peace with her husband; carried around a stick that she had requested from "un yndio hechizero" so that her husband would love her well; and asked "un yndio viejo" to consume peyote and tell her her fortune.¹⁰⁶ Maria Vásquez's case highlights the dangers of relying on community support to obtain the necessary materials for love magic. She hoped to maintain a secret affair and keep her husband's love, but her formal reprehension would have undermined her efforts.

In one instance, a woman reported receiving donkey brains that she did not want. The married 14-year-old "parda libre" named María Josefa Rendón reported receiving unsolicited donkey brains from a neighbor named Gertrudis de la Concepción. Gertrudis instructed that María feed them to her husband so that he would become "senseless, without the liberty to do anything else" to María. Gertrudis became very angry when María said that she was scared to feed her husband the brains, and María subsequently reported Gertrudis to the Inquisition.¹⁰⁷ It is unclear how Gertrudis obtained the donkey brains. Even though María portrayed Gertrudis as a meddling hechicera and claimed that she was completely at peace with her husband, we might view Gertrudis' actions as another form of community support, in which an older woman attempted to help a younger one escape abuse that she was either too naïve or too frightened to admit was occurring.

¹⁰⁶ Inq. Vol. 308 primera parte, exp. 72.

¹⁰⁷ Inq. Vol. 792, exp. 17: "insensato sin que tuviesse libertad en obrar cosa alguna contra la declarante"

Other times, donkey brains were more difficult to procure, as men did not always oblige women's requests. Catalina Ortíz asked multiple men to help her tame her husband, to no avail. Phelix de Mendoza, 31, must have gotten Catalina's hopes up when he told her that he would find an ass, kill it, and bring her its brains. Instead, he reported her to the Inquisition.¹⁰⁸ (It could also be that Mendoza did give in and provide the brains, but did not want to admit it to the authorities.) Catalina herself admitted to asking a 15-year-old boy to fetch her donkey brains. In a comment that sheds light on the extent of the environmental change wrought by Spanish animals, she asked the boy to kill an ass "because there were so many around here."¹⁰⁹ Even though the boy had suggested that Catalina give her husband something to tame him, he said that he did not dare kill an ass. Catalina's difficulty in obtaining donkey brains, even though her abuse was well known, suggests that the killing of a useful pack animal for its brains was not something to be taken lightly.

In colonial Mexico, the donkey's metaphorical stupidity led to actual animals' deaths. The donkey, of course, had no say in the matter, and might be viewed as a victim of colonial love magic practices. But we might also consider donkeys to be active agents in love magic, working in a sort of alliance with victims of abuse. In this light, the tamer becomes the tamed, and the beleaguered donkey finally comes out on top.

¹⁰⁸ AGN. Inq. Vol. 356, exp. 136. f. 489.

¹⁰⁹ AGN. Inv. Vol. 356, exp. 136, f. 490: "esta declarante le rogo que le matara un asno y se lo traxese pues abia tantos aquí"

CHAPTER 4: Conclusion

While many elements of love magic had Iberian origins, these practices thrived in the colonial context. Kristen Block sees the circulation of love remedies as intertwined with “white supremacy, Catholic hegemony, and exploitative labor practices” and notes that “women (and men) turned to the practice and solicitation of love magic to address the afflictions created by colonialism and slavery, systems of economic exploitation.”¹¹⁰ Love magic was invoked in unequal marital relationships, and it flourished as Spanish notions of patriarchy became entrenched in colonial Mexico, even while it incorporated indigenous elements.

The focus on the symbolic and social meanings of substances used in love magic has allowed us to explore how menstrual blood derived power as a marginal product of women’s bodies, and how women’s reliance on men to procure visceral substances like donkey brains helped them strengthen community ties. In each case, products of animal bodies—human and nonhuman alike—acquire extraordinary healing properties. People who testified about these practices before the Inquisition frequently claimed that their cures had no effect, but they might have done this out of embarrassment or fear, or as a protective strategy before the Inquisition officials. Regardless, the prevalence of these practices suggests that these substances held great cultural power.

Several aspects discussed merit further inquiry. A thorough review of the Indigenous practices that the Spanish translators of the Florentine Codex deemed *hechizos* could provide a more complete understanding of the original Nahuatl text and of how the Spanish came to see Mexica practices as magic. Such analyses have already shed light on the original meaning and subsequent Spanish interpretation of the *nahualli*, the *cihuatlahueliloc*, and the *ahuiani*. The

¹¹⁰ Block, “Remedios for Relationships,” 191.

terms “maleficios” and “hechizos” are used in the Spanish text of the Florentine Codex to refer to the habits of the the Ocuiltecas,¹¹¹ of the *tlacatecolotl* born under the sign One Rain,¹¹² and others, possibly collapsing a wide array of Nahuatl meanings into a narrow Spanish definition of witchcraft.

A wider study of Inquisition records, including those in other parts of colonial New Spain and Europe, could shed light on whether the use of menstrual blood and donkey brains were localized practices or more widespread. However, obtaining a comprehensive understanding of witchcraft practices in Inquisition archives is a nearly impossible task. Tortorici’s treatment of viscosity in the archives quotes Carolyn Steedman: “you know that you *will not finish*, that there will be something left untouched, unconsumed, undigested.”¹¹³ Indeed, the documents mentioned here represent a tiny fraction of the denuncias stored at the AGN. Those who study the Inquisition are indebted to scholars such as Solange Alberro and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, who completed their exhaustive studies of the archives long before the AGN’s Inquisition files were digitized—and before digital cameras even existed. And, of course, the AGN is just one of dozens of colonial archives located throughout Mexico, the United States, and Spain. There are likely many more visceral substances to exhume.

A foray into the archives rarely goes as planned. I approached this project with an interest in the ecological changes wrought by Spanish animals in Mesoamerica. However, I could not resist the voyeuristic impulse to read about the blood and guts, the donkey brains and the frogs’

¹¹¹ Digital Florentine Codex, “Book 10: The People”, fol. 132v, (López Austin & García Quintana, 2000).

¹¹² Digital Florentine Codex, “Book 4: The Soothsayers”, fol. 38r, (López Austin & García Quintana, 2000).

¹¹³ Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature*, 44.

drool, the bestiality and the sorcery. Humans have always been interested in the morbid, the gross, and the taboo, and I think that we owe it to both the humans and the animals of the past to seriously study even the grotesque aspects of their ritual practices. The margins, as we know, are often where the magic lies.

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