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Geographic Space, Law, and Social Recognition in *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*

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In 1691, writing within the transatlantic space of the colonial empire, Mexican author Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora uses his protagonist's adventures to explore the relationship between social recognition, law, and lawlessness as these concepts are represented in *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*. The eponymous protagonist is a poor Catholic creole who spends years navigating the territories of the Spanish empire in search of fortune. After experiencing lawlessness at sea, Alonso receives social recognition as a creole subject welcomed at the urban center of mainland Mexico by the viceroy of New Spain. The viceroyalty of New Spain, based in Mexico City, served as the urban center for the administration of colonial Spanish law during the seventeenth century. Alonso's arrival in Mexico City and his immediate acceptance by the viceroy at the end of the narrative evidences a notable relationship between the law, social recognition, and geographic urban space.

Debate surrounds the relationship between the historical figure Alonso Ramírez and Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora. This paper analyzes *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* in light of Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel's mainstream interpretation of the relationship between the two men in her text *From Lack to Excess*. She writes: "I am interpreting the *Infortunios*...as a work coauthored by Sigüenza y Góngora and Ramírez, and I conceive Ramírez as a historical character who is also capable of actively participating in the production of his own narrative of adventures" (Martínez-San Miguel 146).

The power and significance of the law was undoubtedly important in the growth and development of colonial New Spain. In his text *Latin American Law: A History of Private Law and Institutions in Spanish America,* M.C. Mirow explains: "Law was the most important function of the Spanish government in New Spain because it allowed for royal economic and social control over distant possessions" (Mirow 22). The concept of law analyzed and applied in this article refers to the written regulations and codifications that were created by Spanish royal officials to govern New Spain during the seventeenth century. The most well known compilation of early

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colonial public law is the *Recopilación de las leyes de las indias de 1680* comprised of nine books and two hundred and eighteen titles (47). Similarly, the medieval *Siete Partidas* was the primary legislative resource for matters of private law in New Spain (49). Both the *Recopilación* and the *Siete Partidas* combined to form the foundation of 17th century legal authority in Spanish America. The term "law" is also used in this article to refer to the administrative institutions, official procedures, and legal figures that interpret and apply the rules of law found in the above codifications. In analyzing *Los infortunio*, I contrast the concept of law with lawlessness, which is essentially the absence of law. Compared to the urban space, the ocean was a legally unprotected and therefore lawless geographic space where competing national economic interests among the Dutch, French, and British yielded criminal activity. Pirates, notably the British, resorted to cannibalism, torture, and treachery against the Spanish.

The themes of social recognition, law, and lawlessness have been addressed in the scholarly criticism of *Los infortunios*. Alonso's desire for social recognition most clearly places the *infortunios* as a novel within the picaresque genre. In her article "Picaresque Elements in Carlos Sigüenza y Gongora's *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*," Julie Greer Johnson compares how both *Guzmán de Alfarache* and *Los infortunios* share the similar picaresque generic structure. Both protagonists start by revealing their family backgrounds, poor economic situations, and share in their desire to leave home to find wealth. Johnson writes: "The early upbringing and environment of these two juveniles bore a profound stigma for them, and as a result they sought to be rid of their all too familiar surroundings and escape to another country. Alonso naively contemplates the opportunities that await him in New Spain, and Guzmán seeks to elude parental opprobrium by traveling to Italy" (63). Both Alonso and Guzmán zealously pursue social recognition, first among members of their extended families, and eventually by society at large. This need for acceptance demonstrates the importance that family held in early modern Spain and Spanish America. The concept of lawlessness in *Los infortunios* is explored in Nina Gerassi-Navarro's *Pirate Novels Fictions of Nation Building in Spanish America*. The author emphasizes the lawlessness of British pirates who capture and torture Alonso while he is en route to the Philippines: "The (pirates) have no moral values. Cruel heretics, they are moved by greed; interested in obtaining a good lot, they will even attack innocent civilians" (Geraassi-Navarro 55).

With regard to the theme of law in the narrative, Patricio Boyer explores the relationship between law, criminality, and Alonso's subjectivity in the narrative, most recently in "Criminality and Subjectivity in *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*," This article adds to the existing criticism on *Los infortunios* by analyzing the link between representations of social recognition, law, and lawlessness and geographic space in the narrative. These themes are explored by documenting three different phases of Alonso's lifetime. The first phase of the protagonist's life is characterized by his pursuit of social recognition. Alonso departs Puerto Rico in search of fortune and family, though his progress is soon halted by unsuccessful efforts to obtain work in Puebla. He later suffers rejection by extended family in Oaxaca, and finally experiences the untimely loss of his wife. Unable to find acceptance among his relatives, Alonso treats his failure with family as a crime and he judges and condemns himself harshly. He characterizes himself as a criminal and banishes himself to the furthest reaches of the empire, the Philippines, a peripheral geographic space where, under Spanish law, criminals were sent to serve their punishment as workers on the ships of the Manila Galleon trade route. By doing this, Alonso actually transforms himself into someone he is not: a man who is worthy of judgment and therefore entitled to recognition by the law. This "criminal responsibility" grants him a type of legitimacy under the law that he seeks and is unable to attain through family relationships or fortune.

The second phase of the narrative begins with Alonso's self-imposed exile to the Philippines. Alonso's decision to leave the urban mainland and to exile himself to the geographic periphery of the Philippines ultimately causes him more suffering. This decision marks the beginning of Alonso's movement toward a geographic space, the ocean, which is characterized by lawlessness. Once within the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, en route to the Philippines, Alonso is captured by British pirates and subjected to torture and slavery. Before Alonso is freed, the British pirate ship acts as a pseudo-legal tribunal for Alonso's fate. The result is a type of theatrical display of law and order on the high seas among pirates who are thieving criminals. The scene describing Alonso's trial demonstrates Sigüenza's attempts to superimpose the rule of law in a geographic space where lawlessness prevails.

The third and final phase of the narrative traces the end of Alonso's journey around the world. The protagonist arrives at the Yucatan where again he must endure lawlessness at the hands of

unscrupulous local officials who seek to steal his fortune. However, as a man in possession of goods and with a desire to protect them, Alonso can now expect the protection of the law and expect to participate in its administration. When he is faced with claims against his property, Alonso goes to Mérida and requests a hearing. The themes of social recognition and law conflate at the end of the narrative when Alonso, as a man of wealth, is warmly received by the author Sigüenza y Góngora, and the viceroy, the symbolic representative of the law in New Spain.

Alonso's pursuit of social recognition vis-à-vis his movement through geographic space is most clearly understood when considered in light of the author's plight during his own lifetime. Born in Mexico, don Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora was a well known scientist, astrologer, and mathematician. In his biography *Mexican Savant of the Seventeenth Century*, Irving Leonard notes that Sigüenza was eager and willing to be included among outstanding men of learning, particularly in Europe (Leonard 52). He was very generous with the information he gained from his studies and showed far more understanding in mathematics and astronomy than did the majority of his contemporaries on either side of the Atlantic (184-185). Aware that Europe tended to regard his native land as not progressive, Sigüenza was one of many creoles who unsuccessfully sought social validation (190).

Much like his peninsular predecessor Guzmán de Alfarache, Alonso Ramírez starts out on his own at a young age. Like Guzmán, Alonso wants to escape a life of manual labor, pursue a more comfortable life, and find a way to become rich outside of his native Puerto Rico. The livelihood of his father does not offer a suitable life for the young man: "Era mi padre carpintero de ribera e impúsome (en canto permitía la edad) al propio ejercicio, pero reconociendo no ser continua la fabrica y temiéndome no vivir siempre" (Sigüenza y Góngora 150). At thirteen years old, Alonso sets out to pursue fortune on his own as a page. He joins Captain Juan del Corcho as they disembark for Havana, Cuba. Unable to foresee any immediate opportunity for fortune or fame in this line of work, Alonso leaves and heads for mainland Mexico, arriving in Puebla. His six month stay yields him no work and eventually he is led to starvation. At one point, Alonso expresses regret at his decision to leave home: "Abominando la resolución indiscreta de abandonar mi patria por tierra a donde no siempre se da acogida a la liberalidad generosa" (32). The shortage of "liberalidad generosa" toward Alonso is the first sign that, even in an urban setting, where

prosperity is more likely, the law offers him no protection as a man without fortune or assets.

After about a year in Mexico City, Alonso travels to Oaxaca to reunite with his uncle and arrives only to discover that his mother's brother denies any blood relationship to him. The uncle, a high-ranking legislative official, works and lives on the mainland. He rejects his underprivileged nephew by refusing to help him get on his feet. Their shared lineage is exactly what Alonso relies upon to try to forge a connection: "Afiance, ya que no asensos desproporcionados a los fundamentos tales cuales estrivaran, por lo menos alguna mano para subir un poco." However, blood ties do not offer him any advantage and Alonso suffers only insults: "Después de un viaje de ochenta leguas el que negándome con muy malas palabras el parentesco" (Sigüenza y Góngora 33). In the end, Alonso accepts the reality that he must turn to strangers for employment and support in this new space far from home. The rejection is all the more painful because Alonso does not expect to be dismissed by his own family. Establishing a connection with his uncle is Alonso's primary objective for going to Oaxaca. In a colonial society governed by inheritance laws that place a high premium on lineage and family ties, a family connection would offer him legitimacy under the law that he lacks as a single man alone in the world. In the end, however, Alonso's attempt at social recognition through his traditional means fails him and he experiences not prosperity but devastation while on the mainland.

The cumulative effects of Alonso's misfortunes in Mexico spur him to exile himself to the Philippines, a geographic space under colonial law that was commonly reserved for housing criminal delinquents. Alonso uses his unfortunate circumstances to construct a means of achieving legitimacy as a colonial subject by characterizing himself as a criminal under the auspice of the law. Other critics view Alonso's exile to the Philippines as achieving different motives. Anna More sees his self-propelled expulsion as an act that signals the crisis of his attempt to find a place in a system of multiple *patrias chicas* within the colonial state (More 35). In *The Creole in His Labyrinth,* José Buscaglia-Salgado describes Alonso's self-exile to the most distant geographic space, the Philippines, as an effort to find a better life for himself and shed his marginal creole status: "He thought that perhaps in the further reaches of the empire he could turn his luck around. Certainly in that land of exiles and outcasts he would have a chance to become a Spaniard and to live

the promise of empire" (Buscaglia-Salgado 155). Up to this point in the narrative, Alonso does not (at least explicitly) express his reservations about being creole. In fact, he appears to celebrate his creole identity by taking his mother's maiden name, rather than his father's last name. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel views Alonso's motive as fueled by the desire for wealth. She explains that the route he chose to the Philippines was used by the Spanish to transport fine goods from the Orient for sale in New Spain (Martinez-San Miguel 147). In her article "Dos pícaros religiosos: Guzmán de Alfarache and Alonso Ramírez," Sister María Cristina Quiñonez-Gauggel argues that Alonso moves to the Philippines to try to purge himself of the sin of despair that he entertains. This was his duty as a Christian, according to the claims of Quiñonez-Gauggel: "Sigüenza crea un personaje que por medio de un acto de virtud, purga otro acto: la desesperación, el pecado más serio que puede cometer un cristiano. Precisamente, es ese sentimiento negativo lo que le lleva a emprender el viaje para mejorar su fortuna" (54). While desperation is certainly a feeling that Alonso entertains immediately after he suffers through the rejection of his family, this same rejection seems to inevitably transform into a need for legitimacy by greater society. One way Sigüenza portrays Alonso as achieving this legitimacy is by placing his protagonist before the powerful social institution of the law.

The second phase of the narrative continues with Alonso's capture by ruthless British pirates as he makes his way to the Philippines. At the time, the sea was a legally unprotected space where Iberian imperial efforts at control were disputed and challenged. In *The Free Sea (Mare Liberum)* published in 1609, Hugo Grotius claimed that the sea was an international space and all nations were free to use it for seafaring trade (3). The British were a daunting presence in the Caribbean as they fought ruthlessly to maintain control over their rich possessions seized from the Spanish. As a result, looting pirates seeking riches like gold and silver used violence and captured Spanish ships in order to achieve their aims. Within the vast expanse of the sea, outside the reach of Spanish law, Alonso indeed suffers violence: "Comenzaron con pistolas y alfanjes en las manos examinarme de nuevo, y aun á atormentarme amarráronme a mí y a un compañero mío y árbol mayor, y como no se les respondía a lo propósito cerca de los parajes donde podía hallar la plata y oro por que nos preguntaban" (Sigüenza y Góngora 53). With pistols in hand, the British pirates construct their own tribunal on the ship and they subject Alonso to incessant questioning

and eventually to physical threats in order to get their desired information. However, the tribunal serves merely as pretense since written laws do not guide the pirates at sea within the vast geographic expanse of the ocean. Rather, they steal and pillage mercilessly without regard for authority. They are savages who resort to cannibalism. The pirates, in effect, occupy an unlegislated and therefore unordered, lawless geographic space that yields violence. Unsuccessful in their efforts to extract information, the pirates decide Alonso's fate: "Jamás me recelé de la muerte con mayor susto que en este instante; pero conmutáronla en tantas patadas y pescozones que descargaron en mí, que me dejaron incapaz de movimiento por muchos días" (55). Alonso recounts for the reader the weekly misery to which he is subjected by the British:

> Era para nosotros el día del lunes el más temido, porque haciendo un circulo de bejuco en torno de la mesana y amarrándonos a él las manos siniestras, nos ponían en las derechas unos rebenques y habiéndonos desnudado nos obligaban con puñales y pistolas a los pechos a que unos a otros nos azotásemos. (81)

Just as the British pirate ship serves as a venue for lawlessness, it also acts as a pseudo-tribunal for adjudicating Alonso's freedom between fiercely disputing sides:

> ¿Qué es lo que hizo este pobre español ahora para que la pierda? Habernos servido como un esclavo en agradecimiento de lo que con él se ha hecho desde que lo cogimos. Dejarlo en este río donde juzgo no hay otra cosa sino indios bárbaros, es ingratitud. Degollarlo, como otros decís, es más que impiedad, y porque no de voces que se oigan por todo el mundo su inocente sangre, yo soy y los míos, quien los patrocina. (74)

In the manner of a trial, the captain of the ship, Donkin, comes to Alonso's defense and makes a plea for his life and release by appealing to the pirates' mercy. Donkin then adopts of the role of judge, deciding that to leave Alonso in the Amazon would only put him at risk of further and unnecessary harm. He dismisses calls to behead Alonso and ultimately finds the poor creole and his travel companions innocent of any wrongdoing. After Donkin's speech, the matter goes to the rest of the pirates and their final decision is to grant Alonso his freedom. In the end, Alonso's freedom is the result of an adjudicative process that is essentially a theatrical portrayal of law and order among lawless pirates.

Among the savage men is a Spaniard named Miguel who participates in the torture committed against his fellow countryman:

> Estuviera con ellos un español que se preciaba de sevillano y se llamaba Miguel. No hubo trabajo intolerable en que nos pusiesen, no hubo ocasión alguna en que nos maltratasen, no hubo hambre que padeciésemos ni riesgo de la vida en que peligrásemos, que no viniese por su mano y su dirección haciendo gala de mostrarse impío y abandonando lo católico en que nació oír vivir pirata y morir hereje. (86)

Alonso blames Miguel's abandonment of the Catholic Faith as the primary cause for the disorder and mayhem that Alonso experiences while with the British. He realizes that he cannot look to his fellow countrymen Miguel for any protection, neither legal nor otherwise. Rather, Miguel's behavior toward him represents the demise of Spanish power and authority in the Atlantic region. Without the protection of the Crown and the royal laws, Alonso suffers only continuous lawlessness.

In the final phase of the narrative, after his eventual release from the British, Alonso continues his adventures around the world. Caught in a treacherous storm at sea, he shipwrecks. Alonso survives for days on the water alone before Indians on the shore of the Yucatán eventually rescue him. After adequate sustenance and rest, Alonso and his men travel as a group on foot through the towns of Tila and Tihosuco where they are fed and treated well by the Indians. Alonso eventually makes his way to Valladolid where he meets two local *encomenderos* who prevent him from returning to salvage his goods (those given to him by the British) from his shipwrecked vessel. He denies their claims and demands access to the law in the form of a hearing. As a man of status, Alonso is now in a position to participate in the administration of law since he has wealth to protect: "Y noticia donde que quería yo pedir de mi justicia, y que se me oyese, al segundo día me remitieron a Mérida" (125). Once in Mérida, Alonso continues to fight with the same corrupt officials who claim privilege to the goods on his shipwrecked vessel. He is almost at the risk of losing everything when he receives news that the viceroy of New Spain seeks to meet him and learn more about his journey. Alonso arrives in Mexico City where he recounts his time with the viceroy and the writer Sigüenza y Góngora: "El viernes siguiente besé la mano a Su Excelencia y correspondiendo sus cariños afables a su presencia augusta, compadeciéndose primero de mis trabajos y congratulándose, de mi

libertad con parabienes y plácemes escuchó atento cuanto en la vuelta entera que he dado al mundo queda escrito" (130).

The presence of the viceroy in the final phase of the narrative brings Alonso's search for social recognition full circle. Having suffered rejection by his family in the initial stages of his life, Alonso is legitimized when the highest political figure in all of New Spain becomes his captive audience and offers him "cariños afables." At the end of the narrative Alonso finds himself at the viceregal court, one of the two main geographic urban centers for the administration of law in New Spain. Colonial political figures and theorists argued, drafted, and studied the law in the courtrooms and universities of this urban space. It follows then that law was, in effect, dependent upon and tied to the urban geographic space. The viceroyalty was governed by the viceroy, who served as a representative of the king in the territory. The official duties of the viceroy were to serve as both judge and legislator in the colonies. The viceroy's physical acknowledgement ("besé la mano") of Alonso symbolizes the powerful figure's intent to extend Alonso the protection of the law. Having escaped the lawlessness of the geographic periphery, Alonso finally receives the social recognition he seeks in the geographic urban center.

In *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez,* Sigüenza y Góngora uses the narrative to explore notions of social recognition, law, and lawlessness as these themes are revealed throughout Alonso's journey around the world. The fact that Alonso's misfortunes occur both within the geographic centers and peripheries of New Spain, speaks to the creole struggle for social recognition in a geographic space separate, yet also tied to peninsular Spain. As a creole, writing in seventeenth century New Spain, Sigüenza y Góngora uses the narrative to draw a connection between social recognition, law, and the geographic placement of the individual.

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