

No Friends in the Holy Office: Black and Mulatta Women Healing Communities and Answering to the Inquisition in Seventeen Century Mexico

by

Rhonda M. Gonzales, Ph.D.
rhonda.gonzales@utsa.edu
Associate Professor of History
University of Texas at San Antonio

Abstract

This article examines Inquisition proceedings brought against three Black and Mulatta women for heretical practices. As far as the Inquisition was concerned, the wide-ranging healing work the women did in and for their communities was unlicensed and unsanctioned. In its view, the women were witches who mingled in occultism: sorcery, magic, curses and clairvoyance. But in the eyes of their community members their works were viewed in more complex ways. Witness testimonies shed light on the complex and precarious relationships and communities to which Black and Mulatta women belonged before they were denounced to the Inquisition. Once they were entangled in the Inquisition their intricate and multilayered lives were disrupted. The Inquisition was a powerful repellent; people who had been clients of or perhaps even friends to these women were compelled to denounce them in their testimonies. Yet their accounts underscore the importance, need, and demand their work garnered in their communities.

The desire to understand the myriad experiences of and historical contexts in which people of African descent enslaved in Africa then brought to the Americas lived invites scholars to look beyond well-trodden North American landscapes and adjacent island colonies whose academic emphases has generated robust historiographies that are at once illuminating and skewed. The concerted turn away from earlier lines of inquiry stems from the trajectories forged largely within the broad areas collectively termed African Diaspora studies. Scholars with interest in the field have underscored the shortcoming of using only narrow examples of diasporic experiences, which commonly centered on the ways in which enslaved persons were oppressed and victimized within hegemonic societies that an elite stratum controlled.

The field's shift recommends, if not insists, that such themed-histories, while relevant, must be interwoven and examined as part of an *mélange* of disparate and unique diasporic realities in which diasporic people, too, shaped their life's course and those of others. Moreover, it maintains that the breadth of representations recovered and the analyses and conclusions they generate must themselves be the scaffold that leads us to develop relevant theories built from and across their multifarious realities.¹

The histories of African people and their descendants in sixteenth and seventeenth century New Spain (Colonial Mexico) offer an opportunity for Diaspora scholars to not only broaden the geographic scope of diasporic experiences and theory, it also opens a chance to reach into and reconstruct historical narratives centered on the early modern period that include people of African descent as subjects of those histories.²

The current contribution stems from the examination of three Inquisition records housed in the *Archivo General de la Nación de México*.³ Using these sources, its aim is to recover facets of Black and Mulatto people's lives within a dynamic milieu in which their multiple, variable identities collided, merged, emerged, and were at times negotiated, appropriated and even shed. Their choices highlight the environment of change, skepticism, mistrust, and ubiquitous uncertainty in seventeenth century New Spain.⁴ More specifically, it combs the documents whose primary protagonists are women to draw out an understanding about aspects of the lives enslaved and free Black and Mulatta women experienced and shaped.⁵

Assessing files pertaining to three women whose actions were brought to the attention of the Inquisition for witchcraft allegations, the case is made that within the testimonies the Inquisitors amassed to determine the validity of and resolution for reports made about them located in the stories of shrewd women involved in complex social networks, and healing works that tied them to multiple people within their communities.

The women's stories introduced below transpired within the framework of seventeenth century Mexico. By that time the colonial enterprise had been in process for more than fifty years. The major economic enterprises they developed in agriculture and mining made them dependant on Indigenous and African labor. Throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century African laborers and their descendants – enslaved and free – had been transported to New Spain to offset the dearth of labor caused by the early decimation of Indigenous populations. The importation of African origin peoples—some directly from the African continent and others from the Iberian world—set the stage for creating a colony in which “[b]y the mid-sixteenth century, people of African descent outnumbered Spaniards in New Spain and comprised the second-largest slave population in the Americas.”⁶

Throughout the seventeenth century the demographic growth of African origin people and their descendants continued to grow, and that included the increasing number of New Spain born African descendents (*creoles*).⁷ By the mid-seventeenth century, the majority of African descended people comprised of creoles and free mulattos.⁸ These increasingly diverse Black and Mulatto populations played critical roles in rural and urban economies as well as in the transport systems that connected them.

Within the urban milieu of cities and towns is where the important healing works of Black and Mulatta women was done in the colony. In towns and communities these women, whether free or enslaved, commonly took care of people comprising Spanish households.⁹ They were obliged to take care of the many needs and oblique desires of their owners and employers; in the period town and city living required burdensome work. They commonly lived in tight quarters with their Spanish overseers, which meant that people generally had little privacy in their homes. And life outside of the home was not likely any more private or anonymous, for the culture was one in which people were familiar with neighbors. People knew who belonged, who did not, and who the newcomers were. Gossip was rampant, and gossip was the Inquisition's engine.¹⁰

The Inquisition's official purpose was to secure the colony by imposing a requirement to report on the denunciation all Spanish and African people known to have committed crimes against the Catholic faith. This applied to heretics, blasphemers, bigamists, and perpetrators of other acts deemed immoral. Eventually, however, the institution came to have jurisdiction over a range of additional crimes. People denounced others or self-denounced. People who did the denouncing were identified as witnesses, not accusers, of the person(s) implicated. The processes involved carrying out any subsequent investigation which remained in the hands of the Office of the Inquisition.¹¹

To create an air of purpose and obligation in society, the 1571 instruction for the Tribunal instituted in New Spain emphasized that the goals of its actions were to create an environment that was "feared and respected."¹² In practice the Inquisition functioned as a form of "social, religious, and political control over what it saw as seditious ideas and heretical propositions spread by foreigners and other dissenters in the colonial milieu."¹³ But in addition to that it could be used as a tactic to entangle people within Inquisitorial processes for contrived reasons, with the full security of anonymity that the Inquisition guaranteed.¹⁴

Maria Vasquez, Leonor Ontiberos, and Phelipa Angola were each brought to Inquisition on accusations of their involvement in heresies involving "witchcraft." They lived in distinct areas of New Spain and there is no suggestion in the record that they knew one another.

In 1614, Maria Vasquez, a free Black woman, living in Salaya, Michoacán was called to the attention of the Inquisition for her alleged involvement in the treatment of a sick child who ultimately died. In 1652, Leonor Ontiberos, a free Mulatta woman of about forty years in age, was a resident at a labor hacienda in San Martin where she was a seamstress. The Inquisitorial Office brought her into custody because it knew of her widespread reputation for being a “witch.” And in 1662, Phelipa Angola, an aged Black enslaved woman identified as belonging to the Angolan caste, who lived in San Augustin de las Cuebas, was denounced for her involvement in divining the source of stolen merchandise.

On the surface, the material records generated in their Inquisition proceedings suggest that these heretical women were solo actors turned over by witnesses who were far removed from the denounced, but when one reads closely it becomes evident that none of them would have appeared to testify to the Inquisition were it not for their relationships, however distant or close, with the person under investigation. Setting aside the question of substance and legitimacy of the claims made against them and focusing instead on what the witnesses said about Maria, Leonor and Phelipa and their works gives us an opportunity to see that these Black and Mulatta women, free and enslaved, participated in dynamic communities that involved complicated relationships that were unbounded by ethnic category.

Maria Vasquez’s journey to the Inquisition was anything but linear. On October 25, 1614, she along with two other women and one man—Ysabel Duarte, Maria de Torres and Juan Garcia, each identified as Spaniards —were collectively reported to the Inquisition by Ysabel Maria, a twenty-seven year old enslaved person by Maria de Torres for suspicion of witchcraft and palm reading. According to Ysabel M., Maria V. was a frequent visitor to the home of Maria de T. She explained that it was there that she had witnessed them in intense discussions that sometimes involved the exchange of items that were used to make remedies. She said that some of these were placed in chocolate drinks given to her spouse to soften his temperament. Talking about the others and their works, she explained that Juan Garcia was a palm reader and that Ysabel Duarte had been known to have given herbs to a young girl to use in bringing her parents around to a marriage they opposed.¹⁵

The following day, October 26, 1614, Maria Hernandez, a 60 year old Black woman originally from Badalona, Spain, who was also enslaved to Maria de T. came forward to denounce the same group of people. Maria H. corroborated Ysabel M.’s claims about Torres, Duarte and Garcia in her denunciation. But she offered more detail, adding that Maria V. had spent two nights in the Torres home and that she had witnessed she and Maria de T. spending time in a chamber talking very secretly and that one time Maria de T.s’ child had been present. The child, she says, was handed a half-folded paper that had an image of a saint printed on it.

And she claimed that she had also witnessed them praying over an incense-burning altar (*sahumerio*). Another time Maria de T. had received a small paper folded with a substance that she sent to be ground up and later put it in her husband's chocolate to "bind" him. She said that she was not sure what the substance in the paper was but that it looked to be small white bones and wings.¹⁶ Other times she said, Maria de T. had sent Maria H. to visit Maria V. at home so that she could pick up urgent materials for her.¹⁷

On the same day that Maria Hernandez gave her testimony, a neighbor described as a forty year old, single Black Ladina (Hispanicized non-Spaniard) woman named Ynes Maria, reported the incidences she knew about to the Inquisition. They included information about Maria de T. and Maria V. She explained that after Maria de T. discovered that items were missing from her home—two sheets and a silver spoon—she sought out the help of an Indian man who, after receiving his payment of two *reales*, used his divination skills to tell her who had stolen from her. Additionally, she corroborated Maria Hernandez's story about Maria de T. having had associations with Juan Garcia, the palm reader, as well as the incident involving Maria Vasquez and the construction and use of a *sahumerio* altar. It is noteworthy that in separate testimonies other people identify Ynes Maria too as a healer (*curandera*). However, Ynes did not disclose this information in her testimony.¹⁸

Apparently noting in the overall record that between October 21 and October 23, 1614, up to four days prior to the above denunciations, at least five people identified as Spaniards had already denounced Maria Vasquez for witchcraft allegations, and thus the Inquisition turned its full attention to Maria V. The record suggests that a minimum of thirteen people came forward to directly denounce Maria V. With the exception of the three Black woman, the two enslaved by Maria de T. and Ynes Maria, the healer—all of the witnesses implicating Maria Vasquez were identified as Spaniards and of those two were men.¹⁹

In testimony after testimony, Maria V. was implicated for causing sickness and sometimes death to people known or related to the denouncers. Though we do not hear Maria Vasquez's voice in the available record, it is clear that she had a long familiarity with the people in her community in Salaya, Michoacán. The witnesses who came forth between October 21 and November 4, 1614 with claims of heresy associated with Maria V, the majority of which reached back to six years prior and as recent as one month, provided accounts that make one wonder why would people who had associated with her for so long would suddenly be compelled to denounce her.

Francisca de Zamora, the first to denounce Maria V. on October 21, 1614 testified that she was responsible for killing her daughter with witchcraft six years earlier. Yet only in that moment, six years after the death, was she ready to make an accusation. Noteworthy in her testimony is that Ynes Maria, whom Francisca refers to as a *curandera* (healer), is mentioned as a witness to the incident involving her child. In fact, Ynes Maria is among the witnesses who declare that Maria V. and her maleficent works led to the death. And as we have seen, Ynes Maria testified five days later, on October 26, 1614, against Maria de T. and at the same time she implicated the unnamed Indian man and Maria V., both of who worked for Maria de T.²⁰

So why was it that such a long list of clients, Spanish clients, who had previously called on Maria V. to help them, presumably in a curative capacity for more than six years might turn to denounce her? Might it be that Ynes Maria threatened to report Francisca de Zamora and others to the Inquisition if they did not? Perhaps she was envious of the reputation and clients that Maria V. had? After all she was a known healer and likely wanted more business. If so, perhaps she wanted to enmesh Maria V. with the Inquisition/s processes to limit her competition? Or might it be that Francisca de Zamora knew through the rampant gossip that characterized their communities of the time that other people, like the enslaved women who worked for Maria de T., were about to come forward to denounce Maria V. and others? And so Francisca wanted to absolve herself of any relationship with her. Or might it be that the enslaved women who came forward wanted to ensnare Maria T. in the grip of the Inquisition? After all, this was a tactic that enslaved persons commonly used to gain a respite from harsh masters. Or like others, might they simply have felt they were witnessing genuine acts of heresy and so they did just what the Inquisition required them to do? Clearly, we are able to imagine their likely complex and compelling reasons.

What we do know is that whatever the impetus for Francisca de Zamora's denouncement of Maria Vasquez six years after the death of her child, Maria Vasquez's precarious position as someone whose worked as an unsanctioned and unlicensed healer was about to crumble. It is also clear in the testimony that her healing works were valued and called upon by people in her community. But these were healing practices that they would have known to be defined as witchcraft by the Inquisition, so they would have known the importance of keeping their relationships clandestine if they were to continue. But in the moment that an Inquisitional edict of faith was made, perhaps all parties who knew anything about the accused had to make their way to the Inquisition to denounce, lest they risk a self-demise.

Hence, an edict of faith, the proclamation that required people to come forward and denounce others or risk excommunication themselves was fairly standard. An example from 1571 reads, “Any who have seen, heard of or witnessed acts of heresy should come and appear personally before us [the inquisitors] in our Audience chamber to declare and manifest anything that they may know or have done or seen done or said, touching upon Our Holy Catholic Faith and His Holy Office.” Thus once this process was set in motion with Francisca’s de Zamora’s denunciation, others were compelled to follow. Through the body of testimony, we can see the unraveling of the delicate relationships and reputation that Maria Vasquez faced, and as a free Black woman she must have at least in part sustained herself through her healing works, and had very likely worked carefully to establish herself as a reputable healer in Salaya, Michoacán in the years leading up to 1614. And it was at that point that Maria V. was forced to stand alone, because before the Inquisition, she had no friends.

In 1652, Leonor Ontiberos, a free Mulatta woman in her forties who worked as a seamstress resided on a labor hacienda owned by Antonio González in the pueblo of San Martin faced criminal charges for being a witch. In contrast to Maria Vasquez, whose denunciation was instigated by a *simple denunciation*, which meant that a person of their own volition, in her case Francisca de Zamora, initiated the denunciation without being first called by the Inquisition, but in Leonor Ontiberos’ case, officials of the Inquisition itself (*de oficio*) initiated the inquiry. This avenue to the Inquisition was far less common than a simple denunciation, because such cases were costly endeavors paid for by the Institution.²¹ Here we can presume thus that Leonor’s trial was deemed worthy because of the Inquisition’s awareness of her well-known reputation as a witch.²²

The proceedings for Leonor’s case are similar to Maria Vasquez’s in that through testimonies we are introduced to Spanish and Black witnesses who had long known her, turned to her for help, and sometimes sold her the products she needed to make cures. However, the proceedings were distinct in two significant ways. First, throughout, Leonor was in the Inquisition’s secret prison, where she was sent in February 1562.²³ Also, in contrast to Maria V., we have access to Leonor’s voice in the lengthy testimony she gave to the Inquisition between May 22 and June 15, 1652.²⁴ And second, in addition to her testimony the Inquisition secured testimonies from at least nine people familiar to Leonor.²⁵ Though Leonor, like all people accused in an Inquisition, she had no way of knowing who had come forward as a witness against her. Her testimonies were Leonor’s only chance to communicate information that could be viewed as a legitimate defense that could lead to an acquittal, absolution, or the recognition of her innocence, but such outcomes were unlikely.²⁶

As she spoke to the Inquisitors, one senses that Leonor was very careful in the content she divulged. She told them that she had been enslaved but was now free and that by profession, she was a seamstress, and that she had been married to Miguel Sanchez de Orduna. She makes it clear that he was an upstanding man who came from a reputable family. She told them that he had been a Captain during the time of the Tepehúan Revolt (1616-1620), he had worked in the transport of goods, left her and that she had not seen him since the time of the great floods in Mexico City and as a result, she did not know where he was.²⁷ The testimony continued with her identifying her lineage. Her father was a Spaniard and her mother was an enslaved Mulatta born in Salaya. She told them she had two sons; the youngest was twenty, and she confirmed that she was a baptized Catholic who went to mass and confession “thanks be to God.”²⁸ She shared many other details about herself and family and constructed herself as a woman with honorable ties to her family, children, church, and community.

Leonor’s subsequent testimony unfolded with stories that intersected in substance with those of witnesses. We learned about her involvement with a number of people she helped, from sick children to women who were looking for ways to tame their aggressive husbands. And we see that there was a cadre of people involved in securing the materials she needed to create remedies. And that there were clearly other people involved in healing works implicated in their stories. The striking difference in the testimonies comes in the tone of the people who denounced Leonor. In their words we hear that the witness knew it was required that Leonor’s work be deemed, without question, witchcraft. Leonor, on the other hand, represented the exchanges as merely pragmatic transactions. They asked for things, and she delivered them. The material items utilized were just that, materials. They were herbs, teas, and chocolate. The items were not imbued with magical power. In fact, she said that they were things that once clients learned to do, they too could do them. At times, she went as far as to identify people she knew who had done things that likely constitute witchcraft.²⁹ In this way she may have been attempting to undermine their credibility, and thus their claims about her, should they be among the people who denounced her.

Leonor may not have directly known who was brought forward as a witness or what they had said about her, but she seemed to have a fairly strong intuition about who they some of them may have been, and what the substance of their claims could have included. Working from what she knew, she recalled the works she had done for them. And she clearly know that it was important to never suggest that she believed her works involved anything that could be characterized as witchcraft. And Leonor likely relied on or hoped that the testimony that had begun with details of her having had a respectable private life, that included a good family, good mothering, and a strong Catholic faith would cushion her.

She painted a picture of herself as a person well known in her community. And she suggested that she, like most people, also had poor relations with some people she knew. In other words, she wanted the people listening to her story to know that she was just a seamstress who sometimes helped people in need by doing the things she knew how to do.³⁰

In 1662 Phelipa Angola, an enslaved and aged Black woman living in the town of San Augustin de las Cuebas, located about three leagues outside of Mexico City, was denounced after a events that transpired when she made a trip to a small shop to buy such things as butter, honey, and tobacco. Phelipa Angola's errand seems to have been one she had made many times before. According to the shopkeeper, Ysabel Gutierrez Carrasquillo, she and her family had known Phelipa for about fifteen years.³¹ At some point while Phelipa was still in the store a situation unfolded in which Ysabel and her son Joseph Tello de Menesses asked Phelipa if she could identify for them the person who had stolen their mule. Apparently, they knew that she had the ability to divine such things. Having understood what they were asking for, Phelipa let them know that she would need some time to bring forth an answer. She told them that the gifts of divining, which had been given to her by the Virgin Mary while she was still in the womb, could not be hurried. Thus, they would have to wait for her to return on the following Friday, which they understood.

The exchange between Phelipa and the shopkeeper's immediate family likely would have been a run of the mill exchange if it were not for the fact that the family had a guest with them at their shop on the day Phelipa returned to buy some butter and to deliver information about the mule. The guest was Doña Antonia Ramirez, who was the mother-in-law of Joseph Tello de Menesses. After having learned from Ysabel that she was awaiting the news from an unnamed person about who had stolen their mule, Antoñia became suspicious that it might be a woman named Phelipa. She explained to Ysabel, whom she described as naïve to the Inquisitors, that when she was a young girl she had overheard her parents talking about Phelipa, who was now old, and the fact that the Inquisition had previously censured her and that people were prohibited from discussing the matter and from asking Phelipa about it. Sure that Phelipa was up to no good, Antoñia made it a point to be at the shop when Phelipa returned.³²

When Phelipa returned to Ysabel's shop she tried to get Phelipa to tell her what she knew about the mule, but Phelipa was insistent that she only tell Joseph. Ysabel told her that Joseph was in the house. Her insistence on telling Joseph may have stemmed from Antoñia's presence in the shop. But as Phelipa made her way into the house, Antoñia followed close behind. When she told Joseph what she knew she did so in a whisper, telling him that a close family friend, Luis Cabello, had taken their mule and sold it. Afterward, Phelipa asked Joseph to keep the information that she shared secret otherwise the accused would be sure to come after her. Joseph agreed to keep quiet.

Phelipa's burden, however, was that Joseph's mother-in-law admonished them for being taken for fools by Phelipa. She told them that Phelipa was engaged in acts involving the devil and they must at once denounce her to the Inquisition. On March 18, 1662, about fifteen days after the incident that Antoña witnessed, four witnesses made their way to office of the Inquisition in Mexico City, followed by two additional witnesses on March 20, 1662. One after another, they divulged what they had witnessed and heard about Phelipa's divining work.³³

Through their collective testimonies, Phelipa was revealed to be a well-known, aged woman who likely had many clients over the course of her lifetime. And she was clearly aware of the trouble she would be in if people knew that she had been divining the perpetrators of criminal actions. Though in reality, Phelipa may have been less worried about Luis Cabello than she was about being brought to the Inquisition for a second time, because she surely knew that the Inquisition was especially unforgiving when it came to repeat offenders.

Each of the above cases shed light on the stories and experiences of Black and Mulatta women who lived lives in which they had to claim simultaneous familiarity with and distance from the people they knew as neighbors and clients. They knew all too well that these were the same people who might eventually denounce or be called to testify about them to the Inquisition. In spite of the risks involved, they shaped and used their social networks to apply knowledge about healing to generate and justify their works as legitimate, necessary and pragmatic within their communities and, when they were compelled to, to the Inquisition.

To do their work required that they moved within a landscape that demanded that they possess a clear understanding of the limits of colonial authority. And they had to be savvy about leveraging their social ties and positions within their communities. And when they had to answer to the Inquisition they had to be equally careful. But through all of this, it had to be clear to them that no amount of skill or care would guarantee that they could avoid or successfully defend themselves against the denunciations made by people familiar to them to the Inquisition.³⁴ For it was a system built to impair and weaken people believed to be threats to an elite agenda.

The Inquisition proceedings to which Maria Vasquez, Leonor Ontiberos, and Phelipa Angola were subjected were not exceptional. In fact we should see them as representative of what others likely experienced. Many other Black and Mulatta women who did healing works endured similar fates tied to the Inquisition. And surely a great many more stories were never told, as those women healers who may not have been denounced must have been plentiful.

Additionally, the details of these women's lives and their work as healers within their communities shows us that they, in the context of seventeenth century New Spain and as Black people, were viewed as an omnipresent threat to Spanish hegemony, and yet they still managed to lead productive lives. And we should see the ordinary Spanish population who called upon these Black women for help and yet were likely always trepidatious about their relationships with them as representative of many others' experiences and relationships.

But beyond these realities, their stories, captured in these sources, open up avenues for discerning and showing that Black and Mulatta women were critically important to their communities. New Spain was not equipped with enough licensed physicians to deal with the many ailments plaguing the colony. Unlicensed and unsanctioned healers, be they Indigenous, Black, Mulatta or other, were the primary caregivers for their ethnic communities. Moreover, the shortage of physicians in the colony also meant that Spanish populations turned to them for their healing knowledge and practices. This was especially true for poorer Spaniards and those who lived far from urban areas, where fewer licensed physicians lived.³⁵ In addition to healing clients with physical ailments, these women's stories tell us that they were healers who offered a variety of services to a largely Spanish, female clientele, from helping to temper their husbands' harshness to solving crimes.

The emphasis on their many works is important and intriguing, but perhaps what is most compelling is that through their experiences we witness women who had complex relationships within their communities. And that for all the risks it took to do the work they did, they still did it. We might wonder why? Why did they find it worth the risk? Were they compelled or coerced into doing it? Perhaps those questions cannot be answered, at least not yet. But what is clear is that they surely knew that their work involved the risk of being accused of witchcraft, so like anybody might they covered their tracks by crafting careful and sustained relationships with people and clients they trusted. And in their everyday lives they seemed to be willing to tolerate and manage any potential mishap. It is their stories that permit us to imagine a seventeenth century New Spain in which untold numbers of women just like them were essential in the histories of their communities.

Though lesser centered in the historiography than men are, African women and their part in shaping history spanning the African Diaspora is picking up interest in general scholarship. For the most part, it is now understood and accepted that women, Black women, enslaved and free, made particular and important contributions to diasporic communities, cultures and in the building of modern nation states. And most recently these themes have been particularly emphasized in research linked to agriculture and medicine.³⁶

Through these works and others likely to follow, we will learn how women not only interfaced with the colonial institution, but also how they interfaced in their communities, and how that mattered in everyday living.³⁷

Moving forward, delving more deeply into the matter of African, Black and Mulatta women's healing and social works means that we must work through the diversity of gendered expressions, medicinal knowledge, and religious and economic practices that were already familiar to the diverse people who forcibly and voluntarily migrated across the Atlantic—African and European—and how their sets of ideas pertaining to those interacted with the Indigenous people of the Americas. Hence, the analysis of gender dynamics in tandem with healing, medicine, economics, and knowledge produces an effective web of lenses useful for examining the processes at work in their lives.³⁸ And it also acknowledges that these variables were in each of the homelands of the period assumed intersecting at an epistemological level as religion informed healing, and in that healing involved economies and that economies were tied to religions and that all of this shaped lives on the ground were ideas were not solely held by colonial elites. Indeed, these notions were as true for Africans as they were for European and Indigenous populations. And these assumptions were dynamic and subject to shaping to meet the interests and circumstances of particular people in particular circumstances. And thus, questions to which we should seek answers.

With information from these three Inquisition proceedings, we encounter some of the first modern historical actors to comprise some of the earliest expressions of African Diaspora identities tied to trans-Atlantic enslavement that transpired in New Spain. Their colorful and complex struggles and lives add much-needed nuance to the many diverse realities that diasporic people lived and shaped. Through these women's stories the often assumed popular notion of destitute, disempowered and isolated Black women whose only connection to community was through that of a slave master is jostled. Their stories force us to see that while their marginal position relative to the elite class in New Spain was real, it did not preclude them from forging interesting and in some form lucrative social networks and relationships in their local communities. And perhaps most rewardingly, they permits us opportunities to recover glimpses of how they saw themselves through the choices they made, the work they did, and the people with whom they associated. Yet, what remains to be done is the heavy lifting of recovering more of their stories. And indeed, this is work that will surely continue to be done as long as the fields invested in African Diaspora studies continue to emphasize and value the unimaginable number of ways that Africans and their descendants lived, thrived, and died as they used their will and knowledge to shape the history of the Americas.

Notes

¹ Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 189; James H Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2000): 27–32; Kevin A Yelvington, "The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 227; *Beyond Black and Red: African-Native Relations in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Ben Vinson III, "Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History," *The Americas* 63, no. 1 (July 1, 2006): 1–18; Jualynne E. Dodson, *Sacred Spaces and Religious Traditions in Oriente Cuba*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008); Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2004).

² For example, see Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African- American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2, Third Series (April 1, 1996): 251–288; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); James H Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

³ The limitation of these sources as being representative of an absolute truth, validity, or legitimacy of the specifics pertaining to their finite, antiseptic claims of transgression is recognized. However, the narratives that that are brought to bear on the building of the case contain testimony, if not outright conversation, with the Inquisitors as intermediaries, about the people who at minimum we can assume knew and interacted at some basic level. After all, the voices contained herein are not negating having known the denounced.

⁴ Herman L. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico* (Indiana University Press, 2010), xii–xiii.

⁵ The term Black is employed as a concept understood in Diaspora Studies as referring to descendants of African origin, all the while acknowledging the limits of the term's application in the period considered here. While colonial documents often refer to ethnic categories that were suggestive of skin color/ pigmentation, such references do not confirm or deny an existence of a consciousness of community among such people self-defined as Black or African. As historian Herman Bennett, among others, has suggested, people whose ancestry likely linked to Africa within a few past generations seem to have self-identified as Mulatta/o. *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁶ Herman L Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 18; Bennett, *Colonial Blackness*, 19–20.

⁷ Africans born in New Spain were commonly called *creoles*.

⁸ Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁰ *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 103; Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (Yale University Press, 1999), 242; Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*, 71.

¹¹ John F. Chuchiak IV, ed., *The Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1820: A Documentary History* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 5.

¹² 7/16/2013 11:18:00 AM

¹³ Chuchiak IV, *The Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1820*, 11–12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–2, 5.

¹⁵ Archive General de la Nación (AGN), Mexico, Inquisición 278.18, f. 151-151v.

¹⁶ See for discussion of ideas about bird organs useful in magic. Joan Cameron Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 166 and 177.

¹⁷ AGN, Inquisición 278.18, f. 154-154v.

¹⁸ AGN, Inquisición 278.18, f. 154-155, 163.

¹⁹ AGN, Inquisición 278.18, f. 156.

²⁰ AGN, Inquisición 278.18, f. 169.

²¹ Chuchiak IV, *The Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1820*, 35.

²² AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 523, 526.

²³ AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 556.

²⁴ AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 560-569.

²⁵ AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 524.

²⁶ “A sentence of innocence or absolution remained a rare occurrence in Inquisition proceedings. In New Spain, for instance, of all the cases tried and sentenced by the Mexican Inquisition from 1571-1700, only 2.7 percent ended in an acquittal or absolution.” Complete acquittals in the same period occurred in only 3.7 percent of cases. Chuchiak IV, *The Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1820*, 48.

²⁷ AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 560. Presumably she is referencing the 1629 flood in Mexico City. Assuming she was in her early forties at the time of her testimony, she could have been as young as 17 at the time. This would suggest that at the time of her husband’s disappearance or abandonment they likely had had a brief marriage.

²⁸ AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 560-61.

²⁹ AGN, Inquisición 454.40, f. 550-69.

³⁰ Leonor’s tactic was not likely unique. Similarities can be found in a 1673 case in which a Mulatta named Inés cured the son of a Black slave’s child and is then denounced. In her defense, she insists that she is not bad and that she had learned to do this the healing work she did from Spanish physicians. So although she may have been unlicensed, she was not practicing witchcraft. Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 171.

³¹ AGN, Inquisición 592.8 f. 450.

³² AGN, Inquisición 592.8 f. 448.

³³ AGN, Inquisición 592.8 f. 448-459.

³⁴ Doing their job well, I believe, is not negated by an event with which they are implicated ending up in the Inquisition record. However, more than implying failure or weakness, I tend to think that their denouncements were due to relative success. Also, see Nicole von Germeten, "Routes to Respectability," in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*, ed. Martin Austin Nesvig (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 215–234. She touches on the importance of reputation with regard to devotion to Catholicism in overcoming or trumping ideas about one's ethnic inferiority, in this case involving a mulatto.

³⁵ Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 164.

³⁶ Judith Carney, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2011); Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2002); Fields-Black, *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Indiana University Press, 2008); Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Karol K Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*, 1st ed. (Harvard University Press, 2010); Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil: 1500-1600*, annotated edition (University of Texas Press, 2006); Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

³⁷ The matter of gender in the context of enslavement, and particularly its (re)negotiation is complicated, for just as it is acknowledged that material culture and knowledge across the three relevant continents intersected to create new or changed knowledge and culture in the colonies, so did ideas about gender. Because gender, like religion, for example, is not static, so we must see this category of analysis and experience as contested and changing.

A few works that provide some insight into understanding potential gendered assumptions and complexities of the period, see Susan Migden Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Oyewumi, *Invention Of Women*; Oyewumi, *Gender Epistemologies in Africa*; Karen Sacks, *Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman*; Apostoles, *The Inquisition of Francisca*; Metcalf, *Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil*; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (University of California Press, 1988); *Women in the Inquisition*; William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton University Press, 1989); William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981); Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992); *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain: Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450-1650*, *Hispanisms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Patricia Seed, *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice, 1574-1821* (Stanford University Press, 1992).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

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