

The Historian

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From the Editors

For sixty-three years, *The Historian* has given students at NYU the opportunity to share their original historical research, gain insight into the editorial process, and build a community of writers and editors committed to challenging themselves and their peers to expand their historical perspectives. We are honored to contribute to this long tradition. As editors, we are proud of the rigorous process through which the articles contained in this issue were selected and made ready for publication. As students ourselves, we understand the dedication required to research and craft a thought-provoking article, as well as the courage that comes in sharing this work with others. We commend the writers of the eight articles that comprise this issue.

The journal's publication would not be possible without the generous funding of NYU's Department of History and the continued support of its faculty. We are especially grateful to our advisor, Professor Rebecca Anne Goetz, and to the faculty members who encouraged and guided the research contained within this journal. We are also grateful to Jackie Menkel, the History Department's extremely capable undergraduate administrator, for always being a helpful resource and having answers to our many questions.

Of course, this issue would be nothing without the articles contained within it. These articles cover a wide range of topics and perspectives, spanning from medieval Judaism to present-day conflict in the Dominican Republic. Their variety speaks to the strength and diversity of historical scholarship at NYU. Our writers also vary in their approaches to studying this history, analyzing primary sources including illuminated manuscripts, oral histories, and even modern media platforms. And, most importantly, they understand the importance of representation in historical study.

Many of these articles examine historical and cultural phenomena through oft-neglected perspectives. Caroline Cook, for instance, analyzes how medieval Jews responded to and adapted

the tales of King Arthur to fit their own cultural context. Jieyuan Chen, meanwhile, considers China's changing relationship with western ideas of modernity in and around World War I. Eliane Guyader explains how pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read reverted to traditional white femininity for their advantage when facing execution for piracy. Other authors similarly use different narratives and perspectives to challenge prevailing notions of historical phenomena. Alan Chen, for instance, rejects the common narrative of the "Pequot War," instead arguing that English colonists knowingly engineered a genocide against the Pequot people. Bryan Duran Rodriguez argues that the pre-conquest Nahua were much more open-minded about gender and homosexuality than historians have indicated.

Many of the arguments presented in these articles reclaim agency for marginalized groups in history. Gonzalo Appiani argues that indigenous highland communities in Peru had more agency in the Peruvian internal conflict than scholars have assumed. Some papers call into question the process of history-making and the role of memory in this process. Selina Ma argues that time and space have prevented Chernobyl from being acknowledged as a true historical event. And Suhail Gharaibeh analyzes how memories of the 1937 "Cutting" in the Dominican Republic relate to and impact anti-Haitianism today. As we engage with the past, we reflect on our present and future. The research and care these authors put into their articles illustrate the bright present and future of historical scholarship at NYU.

Thank you for reading,

Editor-in-Chief: Olivia Newsome

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Wañuchinakuy: Narratives of Agency in the Peruvian Internal Conflict (1980-1985)

Gonzalo Appiani

The end of the twentieth century saw Peru plunged into a bloody internal conflict that lasted two decades (1980-2000). It was by no means alone in this; other Latin American nations had struggled with internal violence often involving the state and armed insurgent groups. What makes Peru's struggle with conflict an exceptional one was its particularly bloody nature. Unlike other examples of Cold War conflict in South America in which the state was responsible for the vast majority of casualties, notably the U.S.-backed military dictatorships of the Southern Cone, the Peruvian internal conflict saw equal uses of violence both on the part of the state and insurgencies. The two most prominent armed actors in the conflict, the Peruvian state and the guerrilla group known as Sendero Luminoso or Shining Path, treated the Indigenous highland communities that made up the bulk of the casualties of the conflict.

The conflict was sparked in 1980 when the Peruvian Communist Party-Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL) declared the beginning of what it called the people's war, through which it hoped to overthrow the Peruvian state using Maoist-style organizing and guerrilla tactics. In the early stages of the conflict, PCP-SL was able to make strong progress in its people's war. PCP-SL spent the 1970s building an extensive support network stemming from its presence in the San Cristóbal de Huamanga University in the highland city of Ayacucho. From there, PCP-SL members were able to indoctrinate teachers-in-training and other students from Indigenous communities so that when they returned to those communities, they would bring the message of SL with them. Many in these highland Indigenous communities were receptive to the

promises made by SL¹ members: promises of social justice, of an end to exploitation, of a nation where Indigenous peasants finally had the voice they had long been denied.

The Peruvian state was slow to realize the extent of the threat that SL posed, another reason SL was able to make early progress in the conflict. Once the state took notice, it responded by declaring emergency zones in the provinces most affected by the conflict and subjecting those emergency zones to military rule. The armed forces became more directly involved in the conflict, escalating the violence experienced by highland communities. Not only did these communities become victims of human rights violations committed by the armed forces and national police, but as the conflict worsened, the PCP-SL revealed itself to be increasingly totalitarian, dogmatic, and abusive towards the very Indigenous communities it had drawn support from. It was this narrative, of innocent communities caught in the crossfire between the armed forces and the PCP-SL, that came to dominate much of the literature surrounding the Peruvian internal conflict.

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, there was a wave of scholarship written by academics and journalists on the origins of PCP-SL. Many of these took a top-down view of the organization, focusing on the ideological and political origins of the PCP-SL, as well as on its leadership. There was also much written during this period to shed light on the human rights violations committed by both sides of the conflict against Indigenous communities. It was these writings in particular that most tended to emphasize the victimhood of Indigenous communities, and characterized them as being caught in the crossfire between the armed forces and SL.² Since the conclusion of the conflict, a newer wave of scholarship has focused on complicating the

¹ SL is a shortened version of the acronym PCP-SL. It corresponds to how the organization is most often referred to in spoken contexts: simply as Sendero Luminoso.

² For one example of this paradigm, see Smith 1992

previously established narrative about the conflict and going beyond the victim-perpetrator dichotomy. These writings emphasize the agency of Indigenous communities through the ways they participated on both sides of the conflict. This article seeks to add to this newer wave of analysis, hoping to deepen understanding of such a violent and nebulous era.

This change in the way scholars write about the Peruvian internal conflict also marks an important shift in the historical memory of those events. The more simplistic narrative offered by the earlier scholars was limited by historical circumstances; given that the conflict was still ongoing, access to on-the-ground perspectives was difficult, to say the least. Because the voices of those who had lived through the worst of the violence were not included, this simpler narrative took hold over the written memory of the conflict. It was only after the conflict ended, and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2003 report, that the extent of the violence became clear to those outside of the highlands. Later scholarship seeks to challenge previous understandings of the conflict and to build a historical memory that is more inclusive of the voices of highland communities. This more complicated model of historical memory presents painful realities of the years of violence, but it is precisely because they are the realities that they must be remembered.

By analyzing Robin Kirk's book *The Decade of Chaqwa*, published in 1991, this article will explore how the caught-in-the-crossfire narrative, although doing important work to raise awareness of the ongoing conflict, ultimately oversimplified the situation and painted Indigenous communities as passive subjects at the mercy of the armed forces and SL. This contrasts with the account given by Lurgio Gavilán Sánchez in his book *When Rains Became Floods*, published in 2012, which shows the more complicated reality of the conflict. Gavilán gives a rich account of

his experience as a child soldier fighting for SL from 1983 to 1985. He provides a crucial perspective, and one that has increasingly been explored in more recent scholarship: that of rank and file SL members. Through his narrative, we can see the relationship between SL and Indigenous communities, the ways the line between civilians and combatants was often blurry, and how Indigenous communities were neither passive victims nor blind supporters of one side, but instead active participants in the conflict that engulfed them.

Caught Between Two Fires

Robin Kirk's *The Decade of Chaqwa*³ is a prime example of a secondary source that emphasized the “caught in the crossfire” narrative. Published by the U.S. Committee for Refugees in 1991, while the conflict was still raging, this work's main concern was bringing attention to the incredibly difficult situation faced by Peru's internal refugees. These refugees were fleeing violence in rural highland communities and hoping to find safety in Peru's cities, most notably the capital, Lima. Even though Kirk points to many of the difficult realities of the way the conflict played out in the highlands, the way she does so still largely limits Indigenous communities to the role of victims.

Firstly, it is important to look at the way Kirk acknowledges the support SL received from Indigenous communities, which occurs only once during the text. After discussing the early spread of SL throughout highland communities, Kirk states “Some highland peasants ... supported cadres with food and shelter. Others, however, looked on the movement with growing skepticism.”⁴ Here Kirk acknowledges that Indigenous communities provided SL with material support, while downplaying it by emphasizing the partial nature of support, and that others were

³ Chaqwa is a Quechua word meaning chaos, battle, or warfare

⁴ Robin Kirk, *The decade of chaqwa: Peru's internal refugees* (Washington DC, US: U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1991), 8

skeptical of SL from the beginning. None of what Kirk says is untrue, and for the purposes of the text she is writing, it makes sense that she would not want to draw attention to the way certain Indigenous communities were complicit in the rise of SL.

Kirk makes more frequent reference to how highland communities participated in the conflict on the side of the armed forces. Perhaps this tendency stems from her desire and ability to make this participation seem not as something communities willingly engaged in but that they were always forced into. In response to the growing violence of the conflict, some communities organized themselves into what were known as *rondas campesinas*⁵: militia groups meant to defend the community from attacks using whatever weapons they had at their disposal. It later became government policy to actively organize more of these *rondas campesinas*, only the government now labeled them self-defense committees. When Kirk mentions the *rondas campesinas*, she describes peasants as being forced to participate in these patrols by the armed forces.⁶ This is an oversimplification of the *rondas*, and one that clearly robs Indigenous communities of agency.

This supposed passivity of Indigenous communities presents itself when Kirk describes the involvement of *rondas campesinas* in military actions in 1990. Kirk writes “Renewed attention to the strategy of forming civil defense patrols has meant that, more than ever, this war is reaping mostly civilian lives.”⁷ It is notable how Kirk labels those who died while serving in the *rondas* as civilians and not combatants, again making it seem like their participation in the conflict was completely involuntary. Talking about a specific army commander, she says, “He has used up to 1,200 peasant men and boys drawn from patrols ... In effect, these are human

⁵ Meaning peasant patrols in Spanish

⁶ Ibid, 10

⁷ Ibid, 20

shields, to protect troops from guerrilla ambushes and attacks.”⁸ It is not difficult to imagine that army commanders did not value the lives of peasant *ronderos*⁹, as it is well documented that the armed forces committed countless atrocities against highland communities. However, we again see Indigenous people cast exclusively as victims in this situation. Although they may have been actively taking part in fighting SL, in Kirk’s account, they do so unwillingly as “human shields” who are seemingly just as helpless as unarmed civilians.

Another aspect of the conflict that Kirk touches on is the role that previously existing rivalries and disputes between and within peasant communities played in the violence. The chaos brought about by the conflict reignited many of these conflicts, and often with deadly consequences. These incidents played out in a variety of ways, but as with the other examples we have seen, when Kirk mentions them she decenters the communities involved, making them the objects of the actions of the armed forces and SL. She says, “Both the military and Shining Path manipulate these disputes to pull communities to their sides.”¹⁰ As with the previous examples, what Kirk says is by no means untrue. It is clear, however, that throughout the text there is a consistent pattern in Kirk’s representation of the the way highland communities interacted with armed groups and how they participated in that conflict themselves. Kirk’s characterization of these communities minimizes their actions in the historical record. It effectively casts them as secondary, passive actors in their own history. Highland communities made up the majority of casualties and combatants in the conflict. The Highlands were the primary theater of this asymmetrical war. To push these communities to the sidelines of the narrative does a disservice to their capacity to exert agency despite their marginalized status in Peruvian history and society.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Members of *rondas campesinas*

¹⁰ Ibid, 27

Using Robin Kirk's *The Decade of Chaqwa* as an example, we can see the way certain literature on the Peruvian internal conflict told a narrative about innocent Indigenous civilians caught in the crossfire between the state's armed forces and the PCP-SL. Although there is some truth to this narrative, it ultimately falls short in terms of painting a full picture of the events. *The Decade of Chaqwa* and other works like it seek to raise awareness of the atrocities and human suffering brought about by the conflict, but in doing so they oversimplify the role played by Indigenous communities, and characterize them as passive receptors of history, not active participants in it. By turning to other perspectives, we can see how the reality of the internal conflict resists a black-and-white understanding like the one presented by Kirk.

Violence on the Ground

There are few more poignant perspectives to include in the conversation about the years of conflict than that of Lurgio Gavilán Sánchez. Gavilán experienced the conflict from both sides, serving as both an SL militant and an army conscript in one of the most crucial theaters of the war. He grew up in a small, isolated community in the central highland province of Ayacucho, where SL began and carried out most of its attacks. At twelve years old, Gavilán left his home to join SL, just like his older brother had before him. Gavilán's brother had been among the youth inspired by SL's promises of social justice and a society free from exploitation. As Gavilán tells it, he was driven to leave by a need to see his older brother again, as well as a profound desire for an adventure outside his small town.¹¹ He was not a hardened militant or an ardent believer in Maoist ideals; he was a child swept up in the turbulent currents of the time.

¹¹ Lurgio Gavilán Sánchez, *Memorias de un Soldado Desconocido* (Lima, Perú: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2017), 40.

Gavilán would go on to spend two years as a child soldier for SL, from 1983 to 1985. In that time, he would face the harsh realities of the conflict.

His role in the conflict grew more complex after he was captured in an army ambush. Instead of being summarily executed as he expected, the lieutenant who captured him took pity on him and decided to bring him back to his military base. Gavilán was conscripted into the Peruvian army. There, he witnessed the brutality of the conflict from the opposite side. Gavilán would go on to leave the army before the conflict's end and join a Franciscan monastery. It was during his time at the monastery that he reflected on all he had lived through during the conflict and began writing his memoir *When Rains Became Floods: A Child Soldier's Story*. Gavilán does not seek to justify the acts of violence committed by SL, the armed forces, or any armed actors. Instead, his memoirs provide a sober reflection on the years of conflict, not passing judgment while recounting the events.

Needless to say, Gavilán's memoir is an incredibly rich source on the Peruvian internal conflict, especially when it comes to understanding how the war between the state and SL played out on the ground. For this essay, I will be focusing on Gavilán's experience as an SL member. In his memoirs, we see how his lived experiences complicate the previously established narrative of highland communities as victims caught in the crossfire. This book shows the ways in which communities actively supported both sides of the conflict, how they were not merely the receptors of violence but inflicted it on others as well, and how they responded to the different conditions they faced as the conflict evolved.

One glaring contrast between Kirk's telling of the conflict and Gavilán's is the differing accounts of the support highland communities gave to SL guerrillas. As previously mentioned,

Kirk briefly touched on Indigenous support for the guerrilla movement and minimized the role it played in the conflict. Through Gavilán's experience, we see the crucial role that popular support played in sustaining the activities of SL guerrillas. Not only did communities provide material support for SL, but as Gavilán recounts there also seemed to be a degree of closeness between certain communities and guerrillas. He describes one celebration after a resounding victory over police forces that is worth quoting at length:

On that day the masses (Indigenous community) slit the throats of two fat sheep. We were all intimately joyful. During that time, the communist party had expanded and consolidated throughout the peasant communities. It seemed that the whole of the San Miguel Valley, Tambo, Huanta, Ayacucho were with the PCP-SL. The news that arrived from the Central Committee, in the year 1985, announced the occupation of the city of Ayacucho which would put an end to the exploitation of man by his fellow man; since the Yankee capitalists would have to abandon our country and then we would live in a nation without humiliation, where there would be food for all. There would be no rich or poor; the peasants would direct the nation's destiny. That is how we spoke, and the peasants repeated the same thing.¹²

There are a few things that must be noted about this quote. First, there is the material support that the peasant community provides the guerrillas with. Gavilán mentions the butchering of two very valuable animals. Community members are not providing guerrillas with simple rations; they are preparing an expensive feast for them all to share. This gives an air of genuineness to the celebrations Gavilán describes. Second, when Gavilán mentions different parts of the central highlands being "with the PCP-SL," this implies not only that the guerrillas control those regions but that they have significant popular support within them. In this description the PCP-SL does not seem to be forcing their ideology on highland communities;

¹² Ibid, 72

their message had captured the hearts and minds of part of the population. The last part of this quote demonstrates this even more clearly.

Gavilán describes how the guerrillas were in high spirits, and how they felt that the realizations of SL's promises of a more just nation were imminent, and how the peasants spoke in the same way. It is this aspect of the quote that shows the agency of highland communities in supporting SL. As Gavilán tells it, they did not give lukewarm material support; they were not being forced to do this, but they did so because they too believed in the brighter future that SL promised. They chose to support the insurgency in hopes that it would change their lives for the better. This is a far cry from the relationship between SL and Indigenous communities illustrated by Robin Kirk.

In another of Gavilán's anecdotes, peasant collaboration with SL went far beyond providing material support. Gavilán recounts an assault on a community that had organized into *rondas campesinas*. He details how after the successful assault, SL guerillas looted the houses of those they had killed, but it was not only guerrillas who participated in the looting: "The community members from the support bases and we, like always, came carrying all of the looted things we had found in the houses."¹³ Directly afterwards, Gavilán describes another assault on a military base that occurred that same year. Highland community members, numbering around a thousand, joined SL guerillas for this ultimately unsuccessful attack. After the SL forces were defeated, the community members returned to their towns.

In these two instances, highland peasants participated in acts of war against the armed forces and other peasant communities. In some ways, this parallels Kirk's description of the

¹³ Ibid, 73

armed forces using *rondas campesinas*, only that in contrast to Kirk, Gavilán does not give any indication that these community members were forced to participate. Not only are these anecdotes notable because they show peasants participating in acts of violence, but also because of the way peasants seemed to act both as civilians and combatants. In both instances, peasants temporarily leave their communities to join SL, and then seamlessly return to them. This calls into question the distinct lines that Kirk draws between civilians and combatants. As Gavilán demonstrates, community members acted as both depending on their circumstances.

Not only does Gavilán recount how peasant communities played crucial supporting roles in the conflict, he relates how they directly participated in the violence. During part of his time with SL, Gavilán served as a medic's assistant. His duties included going from location to location and providing aid for SL's wounded. Once, he had to attend to a community that had suffered particularly bad casualties, writing, "That day, the *ronderos* from Huamanguilla had attacked the communities near the district of Tambo using knives and other bladed weapons, since they were still with us, they were our masses, and they too had gone to attack the *ronderos*."¹⁴ This is in contrast to the account Kirk gives, in which the use of violence was seemingly monopolized by the state and SL. According to Kirk, when communities did participate in violence it was because they were forced to. Clearly, in Gavilán's experience, this was not the case. Communities attacked each other independently of orders given by SL or the armed forces. Participation in the conflict was clearly not exclusively forced onto communities but in many cases sought out by community members themselves. This blurs the line between

¹⁴ Ibid, 77

victim and perpetrator, between civilian and combatant that had been so clearly defined in previous scholarship.

Gavilán's account further complicates the role communities played in the conflict when he recounts the role that disputes within peasant communities played in the conflict. According to Kirk, the armed forces and SL exacerbated and exploited these fault lines within communities to divide them and draw certain members to their side. In Gavilán's account, the power dynamic between communities and armed groups is reversed; it is the community members who took advantage of SL to further their interests.

One of the duties that Gavilán participated in as an SL militant was the execution of people who served as informants to the armed forces. He recounts how in every town they stopped at, there were always informants to execute. Gavilán admits: "Many times innocent people would die, only because of quarrels between the community members themselves. They would be accused of being snitches and the commanders would have them captured."¹⁵ This account turns the power relation established by Kirk on its head. Instead of the communities being the objects of SL actions—or more specifically within this context, instead of SL using the divides within a community to its own benefit—it was the community members who were manipulating SL militants. This is something that would have been difficult for Kirk to admit in her writing. Kirk's goal was to draw sympathy for communities affected by the conflict. Showing how community members took advantage of the ever-present violence of the conflict to further their interests would have taken away from this goal, but it is the historical reality of the conflict.

¹⁵ Ibid, 56

The final example from Gavilán's memoir I will analyze is something that occurred at the very end of his time fighting for SL. In 1985, Gavilán was captured in an army ambush. The soldiers decided to show mercy to Gavilán and take him back to their base instead of executing him. The army was joined by a group of *ronderos* in this operation, who took issue with the treatment Gavilán was receiving: "During the whole trip, the *ronderos* were asking the soldiers to kill me. They said in Quechua: 'Kill that terrorist, young ones like him, they have burned down our houses,' but the soldiers did not understand nor did they pay attention."¹⁶ Here we again see almost a reversal of the relationship between peasant communities and armed groups described in Kirk's account.

According to Kirk, peasants participated in violence when they were forced into it, and she gives several examples of the army, in particular, forcing peasants to participate in combat. In this instance, however, we see peasants demanding that the army use violence, that it abuse its power and extrajudicially execute a child. Interestingly, they also reveal their motive for doing so. These particular *ronderos* have been the victims of SL attacks, and in response, they want to treat SL members with the same brutality that they suffered. This encapsulates one of the many ways that highland communities participated in the conflict. They were not passive victims of violence but were at the center of the conflict. They suffered and inflicted violence, often in response to or as revenge for attacks suffered. On some occasions community members exacerbated tensions and escalated violent attacks between communities. This is something that authors like Kirk would not have been able to acknowledge at the time, but as Gavilán shows us, it is the reality of what occurred.

¹⁶Ibid, 96

Conclusion

Robin Kirk's *The Decade of Chaqwa* and other works like it were meant to draw attention to the human rights violations being committed in the then-ongoing Peruvian internal conflict. Although based on true elements, these narratives tended to oversimplify the conflict and cast Indigenous highland communities exclusively as victims. This narrative does not leave much room for agency on the part of Indigenous communities and ultimately is not a very accurate portrait of the complex reality of the conflict. Contemporary scholarship is moving beyond a victim-perpetrator dichotomy and shows the various roles occupied by Indigenous people as combatants, civilians, victims, and moving between all of these categories depending on their circumstances. Key to the development of this historical narrative was the inclusion of more Indigenous voices, particularly those who experienced the conflict in the highlands firsthand.

Lurgio Gavilán's memoir *When Rains Became Floods* provides an excellent example of those perspectives that have enriched recent scholarship. Through his recounted experiences, he reveals how in fact Indigenous communities also participated in the conflict as combatants, key sources of support, and in some instances manipulated the circumstances of the conflict to further their own interests. Neither the narrative told by Kirk nor the experiences recounted by Lurgio Gavilán can be universally applicable to the way communities experienced the conflict, but taking various perspectives into account paints a clearer picture of the complicated and painful reality of what happened during those years.

It is this more complicated picture that Gavilán and writers like him try to put at the center of the Peruvian internal conflict's historical memory. In doing so, they create a narrative that includes the voices of the Indigenous communities who suffered the worst of the violence and who have for a long time not had their voices heard in national conversations. This more complicated narrative is undoubtedly a more difficult one; there are no clearly identifiable victims or abusers. There is no one actor to take the blame. Instead, it shows how highland communities were in fact victims of horrible acts of violence, but in other instances also the users of that violence. Accepting this full picture can only help deepen our understanding of a conflict whose scars are still felt to the present day.

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The Pequot Genocide: How a Systematic Decimation of Pequots Was Misunderstood as a War

Alan Chen

Since its occurrence in the first half of the seventeenth century, the Pequot War has been well-known for the harsh treatment suffered by the defeated party. Thomas Salmon, an eighteenth-century English historian, noted that at the end of the war the vast majority of the defeated Pequots were either killed or enslaved by the victorious colonial force and its Native allies: “Being pursued by the English and their allies, some hundreds more of them [Pequots] were killed, and near two hundred men, women and children taken prisoners, who were divided between the colony and the Narraganset Indians.”¹ Historians have been intrigued by the horrible fate of Pequots, and they have wondered what resulted in their mass killing and enslavement.

Throughout time numerous explanations have been proposed. Historian Margaret Newell understood the Pequot War through slavery, arguing that it was a plot by colonists of New England to convert Pequots into slaves under their control.² She further reasoned that English colonists wished to obtain Native slaves because the rapid growth of New England colonies necessitated additional labor, yet this large demand could not be fulfilled by the arrival of new colonists alone.³ In contrast, historian Michael Parker deemed that New England colonists started the war, as well as committed atrocities against Pequots, for political rather than economic reasons. Characterizing the initial expedition sent out by New England colonists against Pequots as a “punitive expedition of unbelievable harshness,” Parker interpreted their intention as to discourage further Native attempts at challenging colonists in the area through a stern response to

¹ Thomas Salmon, *Modern History: or, the Present State of All Nations*, vol. XXXI (London: J. Roberts, 1738), 242.

² Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

“provocations”: “The Puritans... felt the need to use disproportionate and overwhelming force to gain the respect of an immense surrounding population.”⁴ In other words, Parker understood the war as colonists sending a warning signal to Native tribes by making Pequots into an example: harassing English colonists will bring severe consequences. A line from the work of Salmon may be considered as supporting Parker’s conclusions, as some Native tribes recognized the colonists as their overlords in the aftermath of the war: “[The] success struck such a terror into the Indian *sachems* (chiefs) that many of them came in and desired to be taken into the protection of the English.”⁵ While Newell and Parker evaluated the Pequot War through the lenses of slavery and politics respectively, another historian named Harold Selesky attributed the cause of war and English atrocities to an irrational fear among New England colonists of the Natives — the colonists always suspected that Natives had some sinister designs against them.⁶ This paranoia “primed them to overreact the first time any tribe committed hostile acts.”⁷ Rather than wondering if Pequots wished to solve disputes peacefully, New England colonists presumed that they wanted war and destruction of the colonies. As a result, the colonists felt they must strike first to foil Native “designs” through a total war.

Although the explanation offered by Newell regarding the cause of the Pequot War and English atrocities committed during it seems plausible at first, it has questionable aspects. Instead, another interpretation of the cause of the Pequot War as well as the cause of English atrocities committed during said war will be argued here. The Pequot War was not an attempt by New England colonists to solve labor shortages through enslaving Pequots on a massive scale. In fact, the Pequot War was not a war at all. Rather, it was a genocide committed by New England

⁴ Michael Parker, *John Winthrop: Founding the City upon a Hill* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 92-97.

⁵ Salmon, *Modern History*, 242.

⁶ Harold E. Selesky, *War and Society in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

colonists against Pequots. The Pequot Genocide was the product of inherent English distrust and fear of Native Americans, as noted by Selesky. It also could have been the result of English colonists wishing to intimidate Native groups living nearby, as noted by Parker. The various English atrocities, including mass killing of Pequot civilians and destruction of resources which Pequots relied on for survival, serve as testimonies to the argument presented above.

The English Attempt to Justify Starting the Pequot War, and How This Failed Attempt Exposed Their Genocidal Intent

Immediately before the start of the Pequot War, John Oldham, a New England colonist who engaged in trade with Natives in the area, was murdered by a group of Block Island Indians when trading with them.⁸ This, according to John Underhill, who was a colonial military commander that participated in the Pequot War, prompted outrage among colonists, and in response, colonial officials dispatched 100 soldiers against Block Island Indians to avenge Oldham.⁹ On the island, the colonial force laid waste to their dwellings and food supplies as Underhill admitted “wee burnt and spoyled both houses and corne in great abundance [*sic*].”¹⁰ Yet avenging Oldham was not the only objective of the colonial force: they were also tasked with meeting the Pequot tribe to resolve the issue around the earlier murder of two colonial commanders and their entourage.¹¹ They demanded Pequots to surrender those who were responsible for the murder or face a war.¹² The Pequot representative whom the colonial force conversed with agreed to return to the tribe and relay the demands of English colonists to tribal leaders, yet he also asked the colonial force to not approach the village any further.¹³ The Pequot

⁸ John Underhill, *Newes from America, or, A New and Experimentall Discoverie of New England* (London: Peter Cole, 1638), 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9-11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

representative likely made the request because he suspected that the colonists would suddenly attack Pequots while they were unprepared, and before they were informed of the English presence. Unfortunately for Pequots, this was precisely what happened. The colonial force deliberately ignored the request and instead, according to Underhill, “ourselves followed suddenly after [the Pequot representative] before the warre was proclaimed.”¹⁴ Alarmed by the behavior of the English, the representative again asked the English to stop their march at a valley slope and stay at a distance from the village, yet the colonial force disregarded this request as well and readied themselves for battle.¹⁵ When the representative went back to the Pequot village and later returned to inform the English that Pequots were willing to negotiate, English colonists demanded that the *sachem* of the Pequots personally meet with the English, or “we [colonists] will beat up the [war] drumme, and march through the countrey, and spoyle your corne [*sic*].”¹⁶ Eventually, the Pequot *sachem* agreed to meet on the condition that the English disarm before doing so.¹⁷ However, English colonists interpreted this as the Pequots’ conspiracy to seize weapons from them, and they “rather chose to beat up the drum and bid them battell [*sic*],” subsequently “set upon our march, and gave fire to as many as we could come neere, firing their *wigwams*, spoyling their corne, and many other necessities that they had buried in the ground we raked up, which the soldiers had for bootie. Thus we spent the day burning and spoyling the countrey [*sic*].”¹⁸ What started as an attempted “diplomatic meeting” descended into deliberate destruction of Pequot properties and food supplies.

Underhill’s account reveals how the English attempted to justify their starting of the war. But these “justifications” appeared flimsy when they were used to disguise the fact that the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

colonists were the true aggressor who wanted to carry out a genocide. Before hostilities broke out, the colonial force proclaimed to Pequots, “We must have the heads of those persons that have slain ours, or else we will fight with you.”¹⁹ Thus, only when Pequots expressed their explicit refusal to satisfy English demands could the war be possibly justified. However throughout the encounter the Pequot representative never voiced a rejection of English demands.²⁰ Quite the opposite, it was the English force which behaved very aggressively and ultimately started the war without any reasonable justification. First, English colonists followed behind the Pequot representative despite being asked specifically not to, then they again refused to stop marching toward the village after being noticed by the representative.²¹ Underhill admitted that after being asked for the second time, English colonists refused to stop marching because they were located on an upward slope, and “that took our sight from them [Pequots], but they might see us to hurt us [since some Pequots were located above the slope], to our prejudice [disadvantage].”²² Later, as the English reached the top of the slope, they also moved into battle formation.²³ The colonial force provoked tensions with Pequots by marching toward them, yet this act of war lacked justification as the Pequot representative merely asked to deliver the colonists’ demand, and to return later with a response.²⁴

What the representative asked for was a peaceful activity that did not justify acts of war. Nevertheless, the paranoid English force thought he returned to tell Pequots to attack English colonists. In their eyes, this possibility of war justified the English march towards the village and their combat formation to foil the Pequots’ “conspiracy”. Yet no Pequot attack occurred before

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Ibid., 8-13.

²¹ Ibid., 11-12.

²² Ibid., 11.

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

the English started to ravage the food supplies and properties of Pequots.²⁵ Additionally, the aforementioned harmless Pequot request to disarm before negotiating with the *sachem* was similarly distorted by the English as a sinister plot to render them defenseless.²⁶ The same lack of justification manifested itself in the English decision to start pillaging: there was no particular war act of Pequots that prompted them to do so in response. The English force “rather chose to” bring destruction to the Pequot village.²⁷ The start of the war should be viewed as English colonists deliberately provoking a conflict, rather than making a justified and proportional response to the supposed “Pequot aggression.” There were numerous occasions when the colonists could have behaved in a peaceful manner. They could have sent an English soldier to accompany the Pequot representative on his way to the village, while the rest of the English force stayed behind as requested. The English chose not to and instead started a brutal genocide based on imaginary justifications.

It has been established above that the English had no appropriate reason to start the war. What was certain, however, is that English colonists never planned the encounter with Pequots to be a peaceful and diplomatic one, and thus they failed to conceal their aggression. Underhill stated that after he learned of his appointment in the colonial force, he was initially surprised by the “great number of commanders to so few men,” him then realizing that this was done intentionally to counter the fighting strategy of Pequots, who “most commonly divide themselves into small bodies [groups]”, thus compelling English colonists “to subdivide our divisions [into groups containing a captain and some soldiers] to answer theirs.”²⁸ In other words, the colonial authorities knew they would start a war with the Pequots, and they made preparations

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 3.

accordingly in the force sent out to ensure the colonists had an advantage. If this was not the case and the English indeed wished to negotiate, why send out a large force that was prepared for battle, rather than an English negotiator accompanied by one or two soldiers for protection? The English clearly wanted a war with Pequots. But why would they want one? The English had an ulterior motive for doing so.

Based on the deeds of English colonists before and during the first engagement with the Pequots, it can be inferred that their intention for starting the war was to carry out a genocide. According to article II of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, “Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such... deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”²⁹ The actions of English colonists during the first engagement of the war constitute “deliberately inflicting on the group... in whole or in part,” for Underhill admitted that the English set fires to as many *wigwams*, or Pequot shelters, as they could, destroyed corn cultivated or stored by Pequots, and stole “many other necessities” of Pequots; he also stated that the colonists continued the destruction throughout the day.³⁰ Without the protection the *wigwams* offered, Pequots were exposed to the elements (thus more prone to sickness) and the threat posed by wild animals. Corn very likely made up most of the Pequots’ diet, as Underhill only mentioned corn as the food resource which the English destroyed.³¹ Their most important food resource was now destroyed, and the Pequots were now vulnerable to malnutrition, disease (due to weakened

²⁹ UN General Assembly, Resolution 260 A (III), Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (9 December 1948), https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf.

³⁰ Underhill, *News from America*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*

immunity resulting from malnutrition), and starvation. Exacerbating their suffering, other necessities which Pequots depend on in their daily lives were taken away from them. After the English raid, Pequots lost everything that was crucial to their wellbeing. They now had to endure tremendous hardship without shelter, food, and other resources. Under this harsh condition deliberately created by the colonial force, it is reasonable to assume that the Pequot population would decrease drastically. Thus, English colonists were “deliberately inflicting on the [Pequot] group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction” through creating artificial famine and exposure.³²

Mischaracterizing the First Engagement of the Pequot War in English Sources

Though the English started an unprovoked genocide, contemporary English colonists either downplayed or omitted English atrocities and demonized Pequots in their accounts of the first engagement. In *New-Englands Memoriall* written by Nathaniel Morton, a colonial official of Plymouth colony,³³ there was no mention of English atrocities committed during the first engagement and instead, the colonists “went to the Pequots, and had some parly [parley] with them, yet they [the Pequots] did [nothing] but delude them [the English], and the English returned without doing anything to purpose.”³⁴ This account is completely inaccurate. No parley or diplomatic negotiation took place during the first engagement because the English rejected the reasonable requests (to not march toward the village; to disarm before face-to-face negotiation) of the Pequots and started a war.³⁵ Instead of the English being deceived by Pequots, the opposite

³² UN General Assembly, Resolution 260 A (III), Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (9 December 1948).

³³ Nathaniel Morton, *New-Englands Memoriall, or, A Brief Relation of the Most Memorable and Remarkable Passages of the Providence of God, Manifested to the Planters of New-England in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: John Usher of Boston, 1669), title page.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁵ Underhill, *Newes from America*, 8-13.

was the case: English colonists masqueraded their true intention of committing acts of genocide as a diplomatic meeting to solve disputes. The English did not return “without doing anything to purpose,” as they successfully created artificial famine and exposure that devastated the Pequot tribe.³⁶

Similar distortions of the truth, which falsely portrayed Pequots as scheming and the English as innocent, are present in two other works written by contemporaries. William Hubbard, a clergyman from Ipswich, Massachusetts,³⁷ significantly downplayed the genocidal acts committed by the colonists during the first engagement: “However one [English] discharging a gun among them [the Pequots] as they were taking their flight, stayed the course of one, which was all that could be done against them for that time.”³⁸ In other words, according to Hubbard, the only act of war committed by the English during the entirety of the first engagement was when a soldier shot his firearm at Pequots escaping from the colonial force. There was ostensibly no deliberate destruction of Pequot dwellings through arson, nor looting of Pequot properties and spoliation of Pequot food supplies, as Hubbard made no mention of them in his work.³⁹ Yet, although Hubbard misrepresented the events of the first engagement, what he did mention still deserves scrutiny. Hubbard wrote that the English force shot Pequots as they were running away and not actively resisting. They were defenseless non-combatants rather than soldiers, yet the English still attempted to murder them indiscriminately. This further reveals that the English intended to commit genocide against Pequots.

In addition to those written by Morton and Hubbard, another account of the first engagement also attempted to whitewash English behavior, trivializing English atrocities against

³⁶ Morton, *New-Englands Memoriall*, 99.

³⁷ William Hubbard, *The Present State of New-England, Being a Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New-England* (London: Tho Parkhurst, 1677), title page.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Pequots. John Mason, a colonial military commander and “principal actor” in the war,⁴⁰ wrote that the colonists “arriving at [the] Pequot [tribe] had some conference with them, but little effected [from it], only one Indian slain and some *wigwams* burnt.”⁴¹ Like Morton, Mason mentioned the negotiation between the English and Pequots during the first engagement, which in fact never happened.⁴² Mason also sought to downplay English atrocities by using the word “only” to refer to the one Pequot killed. The intended effect of his writing is clear: English colonists did not commit any wrongdoing, as they allegedly gave Pequots a chance to negotiate peacefully. Only when negotiations failed did the English resort to war, and even then, they practiced restraint as they “merely” killed one Pequot and burned a few *wigwams*.

Multiple distortions of the events of the first engagement, as demonstrated above, are apparent in English sources. It should be noted that not all of them were necessarily intentional. For example, Mason wrote in his account that the colonial government of Massachusetts “sent forth... one hundred and twenty men” on the expedition against Pequots.⁴³ In contrast, Underhill, writing in the immediate aftermath of the Pequot War in 1638,⁴⁴ noted that “100 well appointed soldiers” were on the colonial expeditionary force.⁴⁵ Perhaps Mason inadvertently made this factual error when writing from memory. Nevertheless, errors like this should be distinguished from the significant deviations from reality present in English sources, which are very likely intentional. These deviations include the aforementioned omission, or downplaying of English atrocities, as well as the false claim that there was a peaceful meeting between the English and Pequots before the first engagement. English authors distorted the events of the first engagement

⁴⁰ John Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War* (New York: J. Sabin & Sons, 1869), title page.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴² Underhill, *Newes from America*, 8-13.

⁴³ Mason, *A Brief History*, viii.

⁴⁴ Underhill, *Newes from America*, title page.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

to avoid being held accountable as the aggressive party that provoked a genocide. If there had been a failed peaceful negotiation between the English and Pequots before hostilities broke out, the colonists could not be considered as the aggressor, since the war started as a result of the failure of the peace process, rather than an unprovoked English attack. If documentation of English atrocities was omitted, then English colonists could not be held responsible for committing genocide, as there would be no evidence. The English cover-up of the events of the first engagement not only absolved them of any wrongdoing, but also masked the true nature of their actions.

The Massacre at a Pequot Fort as Another Genocidal Act

Later during the war, the colonial expeditionary force decided to attack the “Great Fort” of the Pequot tribe with assistance of friendly Natives.⁴⁶ This attack, especially English behaviors during it, deserves scrutiny as it supports the claim that the Pequot War was in fact a genocide.

According to a contemporary source written by Philip Vincent, as the colonial force and their Native allies approached the Pequot fort, some Natives grew nervous and deserted.⁴⁷ In response, English commander John Underhill told the Natives that they did not have to attack the fort head-on, nor stay within the range of weapons launched from the fort.⁴⁸ Rather, they should “onely [only] surround it afarre [afar] off [*sic*].”⁴⁹ This deployment of allied Native soldiers around the fort was crucial, as Vincent revealed that at the end of the battle, “not one [Pequot] escaped [from the fort]” because “the Narragansets [English-allied Native tribe] beset the fort so close.”⁵⁰ Later, English soldiers gathered around the front gate of the fort, and after some

⁴⁶ Philip Vincent, *A True Relation of the Late Battell Fought in New England, Between the English, and the Salvages* (London: Nathanael Butter and John Bellamie, 1637), 7-8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

fighting, “about half the English entered, fell on with courage, and slew many.”⁵¹ Those who entered the fort numbered approximately 35 soldiers, given the expeditionary force consisted of 70 colonists at this time.⁵² Subsequently, colonial soldiers inside the fort somehow felt that they were “being straitned [straitened] for roome because of the *wigwams*” located in the fort and “they called for fire to burn them.”⁵³ Thus the English committed arson: “[the fire] so raged, that... in little more than an houre, betwixt [between] three and foure hundred of them [Pequots] were killed.”⁵⁴ Any Pequot escapee from the fire was presumably killed by Narraganset soldiers who encircled the fort under English command. Hundreds of Pequots, many of them vulnerable non-combatant women and children, were thus murdered by English colonists.⁵⁵

During the massacre at the “Great Fort,” in addition to “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction” through burning *wigwams* (thus making Pequots suffer from exposure and hypothermia, if they survive), English colonists committed another act of genocide.⁵⁶ They did so by intentionally starting a fire which did not specifically target military combatants but all Pequots in the fort. There is no evidence to suggest that the English tried to target *wigwams* exclusively, while sparing Pequots, nor is there evidence to suggest that the English set the fire exclusively to *wigwams* dwelled by a specific group of Pequots.⁵⁷ It is evident that the English intended to murder Pequot inhabitants inside the fort, rather than conducting a regular warfare against the soldiers among them, and Pequot non-combatants were killed indiscriminately.⁵⁸ Additionally, although Vincent claimed that allied

⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

⁵² Ibid., 8.

⁵³ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9-10.

⁵⁵ Selesky, *War and Society*, 8-9.

⁵⁶ UN General Assembly, Resolution 260 A (III), Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (9 December 1948).

⁵⁷ Vincent, *A True Relation*, 9-10.

⁵⁸ Selesky, *War and Society*, 8-9.

Native soldiers were only deployed around the fort, rather than joined the main assault, because of their nervousness, it was likely that Natives were sent to such positions for other reasons.⁵⁹ Recall Vincent wrote that no Pequots could survive as a result of allied Natives' encirclement of the fort, since Pequot survivors were stopped by them and killed.⁶⁰ Perhaps the English deliberately sent allied Natives to form the encirclement to ensure that no Pequot could escape from the genocide alive. However, the colonists surely did not wish to have their plan to ensure the completeness of genocide exposed. Thus, they would have invented the "nervous Native allies" narrative to conceal it.

Another more detailed account further reveals that the colonists planned for committing genocide, rather than fighting, at the fort. Mason admitted that he and other fellow English soldiers and commanders agreed to indiscriminately kill Pequots inside the fort: "We had formerly concluded to destroy them by the sword and save the plunder."⁶¹ The term "soldier" or "warrior" were not used, but rather the object "them," indicating the colonists wished to kill all Pequots inside the fort, thus committing genocide.

Despite how the English behaved during the "Great Fort" siege suggested that they intended to murder, Selesky chose not to characterize the siege as a massacre. Although Selesky condemned English behaviors during the siege as "uncivilized", he ultimately suggested indirectly that the colonists were merely acting in self-defense.⁶² Selesky wrote "Englishmen slaughtered the Pequots because they thought it was the only alternative to their own destruction" and "In the heat of the moment, they fought... to protect their families from a tribe with which

⁵⁹ Vincent, *A True Relation*, 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶¹ John Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War; Especially of the Memorable Taking of Their Fort at Mistick in Connecticut in 1637* (Boston: S. Kneeland & T. Green, 1736), 8.

⁶² Selesky, *War and Society*, 9.

they could no longer live in peace.”⁶³ However, the complete extermination of Pequots at the “Great Fort” cannot be plausibly considered as something that the English must carry out to prevent “their own destruction”, or “to protect their families.”

Selesky’s characterization of English actions at the “Great Fort” as self-defense is likely due to a Pequot attack that occurred prior to the siege. According to Vincent, some Pequot soldiers raided the colonial settlement of Wethersfield, Connecticut shortly before the siege, where they “fell upon some [colonists] that were sawing, and slew nine more, whereof one was a woman, the other a childe, and tooke two young maids prisoners, killing some of their cattell, and driving some [cattle] away [*sic*].”⁶⁴ In response to this incident, the colonial authorities demanded the inhabitants of the town to ready themselves for further Pequot attacks: “None should go to worke, nor travell, no not so much as to church, without arms. A crops of guard... was appointed to watch every night, and centinels were set in convenient places about the plantations... And every man commanded to be in readinesse upon an alarme [*sic*].”⁶⁵ Furthermore, they sent soldiers commanded by Underhill and Mason on expedition against Pequots, presumably for revenge.⁶⁶ It was this group who later carried out the mass murder at the “Great Fort.”⁶⁷

Given the Pequot raid that preceded the massacre at the “Great Fort,” can English reactions to it be considered as justified self-defense, as Selesky thought? The answer is certainly negative, at least for English behaviors at the fort. The term self-defense contains the word “defense,” indicating aggression from the other side. Those who are acting in self-defense are on the defensive, rather than offensive. Some reactions of the English, such as mandating everyone

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Vincent, *A True Relation*, 5.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

to arm themselves when in public and deploying guards to monitor further Pequot attacks, can be considered as measures of self-defense.⁶⁸ These measures were not active pursuits of Pequots, but were designed to ensure that if Pequots attack again, the colonists would be prepared and as a result, less damage would be done to them. Only if further attacks occurred would the measures above take effect in response. Thus, the measures are passive and for self-defense. In contrast, English soldiers went on the offensive in their march towards, and massacre of Pequots at, the “Great Fort”. At the time of the siege, Pequot inhabitants were not actively attacking an English settlement, but were instead attacked by the English. Thus, the atrocities committed by the colonists at the “Great Fort” cannot be considered self-defense, as the English were clearly on the offensive and caused a disproportionate amount of deaths to Pequot civilians (who could not have possibly attacked the colonists actively).

Aside from the “self-defense” claim, Selesky raised another questionable viewpoint regarding English behaviors at the “Great Fort.” He appeared to have downplayed the wickedness of the colonists when he remarked, “the settlers broke into the enclosure intending to kill the warriors and capture the noncombatants, but this plan quickly went awry.”⁶⁹ In other words, the English never wished to murder Pequot civilians living in the fort. It was the fire, which the English did not expect to burn Pequot soldiers and civilians alike, which caused the English plan to go “awry.” This claim is untenable, because it is considered common knowledge that fire will burn everything, and it will certainly not distinguish between soldiers and civilians. If the English truly wanted to spare Pequot civilians, they would not have used an indiscriminate weapon like fire. The fact that the colonists did start the fire indicates that they had no plan to let Pequot civilians live.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁹ Selesky, *War and Society*, 8.

The Phenomenon of Enslaving Pequot Captives and Its Relation to the English Goal in the Pequot War

In *Brethren by Nature*, Newell focused on the phenomenon where English colonists forced Pequot captives who survived the massacre into slavery. She argued that for the English, the Pequot War was “a conflict whose purpose was securing slaves.”⁷⁰ In other words, English colonists started a war because they wanted to turn Pequots who did not die in fighting into their slaves. She further argued that English colonists wanted slaves “because the English... wanted workers at a time when several empires were engaged in a frenzy of competitive colonial establishment and expansion that pushed labor demands beyond what the supply of European servants could satisfy.”⁷¹ It seemed that expanding enslavement to Pequots served as a solution to colonial labor shortages.

The English enslaved Pequot survivors through forcibly gaining control over Pequots captured by allied Natives. Once soldiers of the Narragansett tribe, which allied itself with the English, found “a large contingent of over one hundred Pequots, mostly women and children” hiding in a swampy area named Ohomowauke.⁷² Narragansett soldiers promptly placed this group of Pequots into captivity, but were later compelled to relinquish them to English colonists, who, after executing all twenty-four male Pequots in the group, “divided the remaining survivors among his own [English] troops, returning twenty to the Narragansetts and three to Massachusetts Indian forces that accompanied him [the English]. This left forty-eight captives to be remitted for sale and distribution in Boston [as slaves].”⁷³ Yet, despite this clear example of

⁷⁰ Newell, *Brethren by Nature*, 18.

⁷¹ Ibid., 42.

⁷² Ibid., 33.

⁷³ Ibid.

how the colonists enslaved Pequots, it cannot sufficiently prove that the English started the Pequot War with gaining slaves as their exclusive goal.

Although some English soldiers and commanders did enslave captured Pequot non-combatants, they did so for their personal economic gain. Turning Pequots into slaves served as an instrument for resolving a financial issue that manifested itself in the war. The colonial authorities, then facing financial difficulties, used opportunities to capture slaves to satisfy colonial soldiers and commanders expecting handsome rewards for their services.

For an average soldier from colonial Connecticut, by participating in the Pequot War, he would lose, rather than earn, money for his service (provided that he did not engage in looting). According to Selesky, a soldier of Connecticut was expected to pay for his own arms.⁷⁴

Furthermore, he must pay “the extraordinary sum of... roughly 5 pounds per adult male” for “the first colony-wide tax” imposed to support the “enormously expensive” war financially.⁷⁵

Although soldiers were paid two pounds per month for their service, this payment was “credited against the [five pounds of] taxes he owed,” and thus the soldier would have to effectively serve for three months without payment.⁷⁶ Colonial military commanders faced a similar situation, as Newell noted that they received “no public pay[ment].”⁷⁷ Yet, English soldiers and commanders did not expect to fight in the Pequot War for free and wanted it to bring them economic benefits: “The many commissioned magistrates, captains, ensigns, and foot soldiers did expect compensation for their efforts.”⁷⁸ They thus turned to captured Pequots, whom they could transform into their personal properties (which they could freely sell to receive cash) through enslavement, to provide the economic incentives and benefits they desired. The same motivation

⁷⁴ Selesky, *War and Society*, 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Newell, *Brethren by Nature*, 32.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

explains why colonial soldiers kept looted Pequot objects from the first encounter of the Pequot War, as mentioned earlier. Meanwhile, New England colonial authorities permitted, and even encouraged, the practice of colonial soldiers and commanders enslaving captured Pequots for their own economic benefits, presumably to appease soldiers and commanders who might be resentful that they did not receive their fair share for fighting in the war.⁷⁹

The phenomenon of English soldiers enslaving captured Native civilians for personal economic benefits is not limited to New England colonies. According to historian Almon Wheeler Lauber, who surveyed Native American slavery in the US, in 1715 English soldiers of South Carolina launched an attack on the Yamasee and the Creek Indian tribes for the sole purpose of obtaining captives, who were then enslaved and later sold to provide economic benefits.⁸⁰ This attack was considered so unacceptable that even an English missionary surnamed Johnston condemned it: “It is certain many of the Yammousees [Yamasee] and Creek Indians were against the war all along. But our military men were so... desirous to enrich themselves by making all the Indians slaves that fall into yr [their] hands... that it is in vain to represent the cruelty and injustice of such a procedure.”⁸¹

Enslaving Native captives and then selling them on the slave market in exchange for cash was how English soldiers “paid themselves” in the Pequot War. However, enslaving Pequots on a massive scale cannot be the ultimate English goal of war, because mass murder of Pequots prevents their mass enslavement. A Pequot can no longer be enslaved after being murdered. If capturing as many Pequots as possible, and subsequently enslaving them for use in colonies was the primary English aim, then why did they indiscriminately murder all Pequots living in the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

⁸⁰ Almon Wheeler Lauber, *Indian Slavery in Colonial Times Within the Present Limits of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), 121.

⁸¹ Ibid.

“Great Fort,” rather than at least capturing some of them, especially non-combatants who were not actively resisting, alive? Slavery cannot explain why English colonists started the Pequot War.

Conclusion

Despite attempts by the English to claim that they started the Pequot War because peaceful negotiations with Pequots failed, they did not succeed in doing so, with one of their own accounts demonstrating that they made no sincere attempt at starting a negotiation. Instead, the behavior of English colonists during the first engagement, as well as the mass killing of Natives at the “Great Fort,” revealed that the English wanted to commit an unprovoked genocide that indiscriminately targeted all Pequots. Although some colonial soldiers and commanders enslaved Pequot captives that came under their control, they did so for their own economic benefits, rather than for contributing to the English goal (proposed by Newell) of establishing Pequot slavery.

Though it has been established that the Pequot War was a genocide, the question of why the English wanted the extermination of Pequots remains. Perhaps the colonists started the genocide because they developed a paranoia that Natives were always conspiring against them, as argued by Selesky.⁸² After the murders of several colonists, the English could have wondered if these were only the beginning of a Pequot plan to exterminate them, just as how Salmon imagined Pequots thought English intrusions into their land must indicate that “they should be extirpated [by the English], or at least enslaved by these strangers” in the near future unless something were done.⁸³ Facing this perceived existential threat, English colonists may have resorted to the most extreme solution. Alternatively, the English could have chosen genocide because it constituted a “disproportionate and overwhelming force” that could “gain [them] the

⁸² Selesky, *War and Society*, 3.

⁸³ Salmon, *Modern History*, 240.

respect of an immense surrounding population.”⁸⁴ Other Native groups who were neighbors of New England colonists would realize that even murdering a single colonist could result in complete extermination of the Native tribe where the perpetrator came from. Regardless of English motives for starting the genocide, the fact that they carried it out proves their complete disregard of Native American lives.

⁸⁴ Parker, *Founding the City upon a Hill*, 97.

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Double Crises: World War I and Modernity From a Chinese Perspective

Jieyuan Chen

In September 1915, in the repercussions of the Sino-Japanese Twenty-One Demands, a revolutionary scholar named Chen Duxiu established the *New Youth* journal in Shanghai to voice his anger at the weak government of the Republic of China. Before long, this journal became the flagship publication of the New Culture Movement, which criticized classical Chinese traditions like Confucianism and instead promoted a Western vision of “modernity” as the nation’s path forward. The Chinese intelligentsia, in particular, believed that emulating the West’s focus on science, democratic society, and humanistic philosophy could free their nation from the shackles of feudalism and enable its rebirth. Historically, scholars of Chinese history and World War I have devoted most of their attention to the May Fourth Movement, a massive student demonstration against the handover of German rights in Shandong Province to Japan. But as Xu Guoqi points out in his book *China and the Great War*, World War I “affect[ed] the fate of China in many unexpected ways.”¹ One of said ways is that it challenged the previously agreed upon concept of “modernity.” Upon seeing the destructiveness of “the European War” and being betrayed by their Western allies, Chinese intellectuals reevaluated, criticized, and in some cases abandoned the western concept of modernity, variously modifying and replacing it with emerging sentiments of nationalism, liberalism, neo-traditionalism, and Marxism.

In order to understand this radical evolution, we must first identify modernity from a Chinese perspective as it existed prior to the outbreak of World War I. In 1895, the First Sino-Japanese War between Qing China and the Japanese Empire ended with China’s

¹ Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War: China’s Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

humiliating defeat. Shocked by the unexpected result and their sudden loss of regional hegemony, Chinese intellectuals started to question the value of their traditional culture, developing over the years into a serious identity crisis.^{2[2]} In other words, they “lost their sense of sameness and historical continuity with pre-1895 China,” and struggled to establish a new national identity in the aftermath.³ After the failure of the Qing court’s Hundred Days’ Reform effort, which aimed to change the absolute monarchy into a constitutional one, and its further humiliating defeat in the Boxer Rebellion, it became even more fashionable to support the abandonment of the past in favor of the pursuit of “newness.”

Before World War I, this idea of “newness” was entirely modeled after Western modernity, and Chinese intellectuals thus aimed to emulate the West’s democratic political system, their pursuit of humanism, and their worship of science. They decided that, in order to achieve these goals, China needed to become a normal member of the world with normal diplomatic relationships rather than an ambiguously defined civilization. In practice, this meant that they had to leave behind old Chinese culturalism and instead build a modern nation-state with a foundation of nationalist philosophy.⁴ An influential late-Qing reformist named Liang Qichao published a series of essays expanding upon this aim, which promoted the concept of the “new citizenship” and called for the transformation of the Chinese people from feudal subjects of the emperor into new citizens of the modern state.⁵ In his and other scholars’ ideal scenario, the new Chinese nation-state would guarantee external sovereignty while internally representing its citizens, who would each identify with the national interest and realize that their individual fates

² Xu, 9.

³ Xu, 9.

⁴ Xu, 15.

⁵ Liang Qichao, *Xin min shuo* [*New citizenship*] (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 20.

were bound with that of their state.⁶ Therefore, the Chinese concept of modernity prior to World War I embraced Western philosophies of statism, and called for the reformation of China on a nationalist foundation.

Another aspect of Western modernity that Chinese intellectuals sought to adopt for their own nation was its focus on democracy and science. Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi, both leaders of the New Culture Movement, were especially active in advocating for these values and proclaiming their importance for China's future. Chen wrote in "A Letter to Youth" in the aforementioned *New Youth* journal that "if Chinese people wanted to break away from the Age of Ignorance," they should "urgently catch up with science."⁷ He also rebutted his critics by stating that the "only crime" *New Youth* committed was to advocate "Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science."⁸ The high value Chinese intellectuals attributed to science is also evidenced by their stance towards imperialism. As Edmund S. K. Fung suggests, imperial powers were seen as oppressors and mentors at the same time; on the one hand, Western and Japanese imperialism at the turn of the century stirred up feelings of humiliation and resentment, but on the other hand, Chinese intelligentsia recognized and appreciated that imperialism had an underlying Social Darwinist ethos, in that only the most powerful nations survived in the face of competition.⁹ At the beginning of World War I, many Chinese intellectuals were both shocked and impressed by Germany's overwhelming power, so much so that they believed Chinese society should follow

⁶ Xu, 26; Xu, 29.

⁷ Chen Duxiu, "Jinggao qingnian" [A letter to youth], *Xin Qingnian* [*New Youth*] 1, no. 1 (September 15, 1915).

⁸ Chen Duxiu, "Xinqingnian zuian zhi dabianshu" [A defensive for *New Youth*'s crimes], *Xin Qingnian* [*New Youth*] 6, no. 1 (January 15, 1919).

⁹ Edmund S. K. Fung, "Nationalism and Modernity: The Politics of Cultural Conservatism in Republican China," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2009): 780; In 1897, Yan Fu, an influential translator and government official, translated Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, thus introducing Darwinism to China for the first time. However, while Huxley opposes Social Darwinism and imperialism and emphasizes ethics, Yan believes in Social Darwinism, deleting most of Huxley's ideas on ethics on purpose. After its publication, this book was considered a guide of national revival, becoming extremely fashionable and influential.

their lead in accepting the philosophy of Social Darwinism and striving for military might. In 1915, for example, Chen Duxiu claimed that the maxim of the survival of the fittest and rationality were the most powerful theoretical guides of development for Western countries.¹⁰ Similarly, Liu Wendian wrote in his essay “The European War and the Youth’s Awareness” that “peace [for the weak] is a naïve dream.”¹¹ He also vocalized his wish that Chinese youth transform China into “the most militant nation in the world,” and thus enjoy the “peace and happiness exclusive to the powerful.”¹² Before 1916, many intellectuals still saw World War I as a superior form of conflict, believing that the pursuit of military power was an integral part of achieving scientific modernity and thus would protect the nation’s future.

This pre-existing conception of modernity began to be questioned even before the end of World War I. In 1916, for example, Chen Duxiu claimed that while “the previous century was the age of pure science,” the twentieth century “will be the age of philosophical science,” with Henri Bergson’s philosophical theory denying mechanism and supporting free will.¹³ However, the rising popularity of nationalism and the general acceptance of Social Darwinism ensured that modernity remained a major theory of national revival in China until the later stages of World War I, even as its application in the West was challenged. In 1917, disagreement over whether China should declare war on Germany caused a series of crises in an already unstable government and quickly escalated to a short restoration of the monarchy and the outbreak of chaotic warlord conflicts. Even in the midst of such societal upheaval, as Chinese masses

¹⁰ Chen Duxiu, “Falanxi ren yu jinshi wenming” [The French and modern civilization], *Xin Qingnian* [New Youth] 1, no. 1 (September 1915).

¹¹ Liu Wendian, “Ouzhou zhanzheng yu qingnian zhi juewu” [The European war and the youth’s awareness], *Xin Qingnian* [New Youth] 2, no. 2 (October 1916).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chen Duxiu, “Dangdai erda kexuejia zhi sixiang” [The thoughts of two contemporary scientists], *Xin Qingnian* [New Youth] 2, no. 1 (September 1916).

continued to be subservient to emperors and warlords, intellectuals did not give up on their belief in the power of Western modernity.¹⁴ In his essay “The Fundamental Difference Between the West and East Civilization,” Li Dazhao, a professor at Beijing University and one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, described Eastern civilization as static and spiritual and Western civilization as dynamic and material.¹⁵ Although he believed that the excess and burden of material life were driving Western countries to suicide and that “the authority of the Western civilization [was] widely questioned because of the war,” he still believed that China needed to adopt that “dynamic and material” lifestyle for its own good.¹⁶ To be sure, cultural conservatives also existed at this time amongst the intelligentsia. However, they shared much common ground with their radical counterparts. They did not wholly reject science, industrialization, and material life as China’s future, but rather rejected it as “the only possible modernity.”¹⁷ Similarly, they shared the radicals’ belief in a strong state and a functional government, values at the core of the Chinese version of modernity.¹⁸ While modernity was criticized by Chinese intelligentsia under Western contexts in response to the predatory and violent nature of the war, it had not been seriously questioned in its application to Chinese society by the end of World War I.

Understandings of modernity began to change in the aftermath of World War I with the Western betrayal of the Paris Peace Conference and exposure to the brutality of the war. These events caused many Chinese intellectuals to seriously challenge the previously accepted definition of modernity and its application to China. As a result of these developments, two

¹⁴ Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 13.

¹⁵ Li Dazhao, “Dongxi wenming genben zhi yidian” [The fundamental difference between the Western and the Eastern civilization], *Yan zhi* 3 (July 1918).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kung, 782.

¹⁸ Kung, 782.

major intellectual currents, the cultural conservatives and the liberals, quickly came into conflict over the definition and efficacy of modernity as a concept. One area of particularly intense debate was the question of science's societal importance. Liang Qichao, who was first a radical and later categorized as a cultural conservative, reflected on the devastation and poverty he witnessed in Europe after the war: "Europeans had a big dream of scientific omnipotence. Now they are saying science is bankrupt. This is a key point to the recent change in thinking."¹⁹ What he gleaned from his discussions with European intellectuals was ubiquitous pessimism; some of them even turned their attention to Eastern civilization and philosophy in the hopes of finding relief. Liang's travels transformed him from an enthusiastic advocate of modernity and science into a critical skeptic. In addition to the direct effects of World War I, he was also struck by Europe's alienated urban landscape, the general mental fatigue, and the stark discontinuity between material and spiritual life.²⁰ Science and modernity, from his perspective, could not provide the meaning of life for the urban population.²¹

According to Liang Qichao, it was a time of double crises for both Europe and China, when "new authority ha[d] difficulty establishing itself, and yet old authority [was] abolished beyond restoration," and society was thus "thrown into skepticism, despair, and fear."²² In other words, it was a time of ideological vacuum; old spiritual lives had been replaced by a worship of modernity and science, which had in turn been questioned by the brutality of World War I. Despite this conviction, Liang Qichao was not categorically opposed to science or modernity. Instead of abolishing or denouncing it, he wished to "overcome its aberration through a

¹⁹ Liang Qichao, "Ouyou xinying lu" [Notes of travels in Europe], *Shishi Xinbao* [*The China Times*] 107, no. 3 (March 1920).

²⁰ Tang Xiaobing, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 181.

²¹ Tang, 182.

²² Liang Qichao, "Ouyou xinying lu."

balancing completion,” a task he believed could be accomplished by Eastern cultures.²³

However, his essay’s publication inspired a wave of conservative thinkers to withdraw their support of Western modernity as China’s best path forward. Liang Shuming, a philosopher who advocated modern Confucianism and Buddhism, famously opposed Liang Qichao’s view of cultural blending, claiming that the Western values of modernity and science did not “come out of nowhere,” but rather had “fundamental roots” in their cultures. Replicating the inventions without their roots, he reasoned, was absurd.²⁴ Thus, he argued that the direction of evolution for China was fundamentally different from that of the West, and therefore that modernity was not inevitable for it.²⁵ His view was a radical, fundamental subversion of the proposed plan for China’s future development that had been growing in popularity since the First Sino-Japanese War.

These conflicting perspectives on modernity are best illustrated in “The Debate between Metaphysicians and Scientists of 1923,” a series of fierce academic debates held at Tsinghua University. There, neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Junmai argued that, while “science has certain principles and evidence that proves them,” human lives have “no standards of truth or false.”²⁶ Therefore, “the most controversial thing in the world...is the view of life.”²⁷ According to him, the fact that the meaning of life is subjective means that science could never find it; instead, one could only seek it in oneself.²⁸ Conversely, Hu Shi argued in his foreword to *Science and the View of Life* that one’s view of life is not entirely subjective, but rather it “changes with

²³ Tang, 182.

²⁴ Liang, Shuming, *Dong Xi wenhua jiqi zhixue* [Eastern and Western cultures and their philosophies] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1923; Beijing: Commercial Press, 2010), 13-4. Citations refer to the 2010 edition.

²⁵ Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-Ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 87.

²⁶ Zhang Junmai, “Rensheng guan” [The view of life], *Tsinghua Zhoukan* [Tsinghua Weekly] 272 (February 1923).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

knowledge and experiences.”²⁹ He questioned the ambiguity of Zhang’s definition of “the view of life,” arguing that publicity and education could render “a minimum of consistency of view of life” to human beings.³⁰ The best candidate for creating this “minimum of consistency,” he claimed, was a “scientific view of life,” an unbiased and empirical consensus of contemporary scientists.³¹ For Hu Shi, then, promoting scientific, rational thought after the Western model was still a vital component of China’s future development.

Another way in which the war challenged China’s accepted conception of modernity was that it tempered the liberals’ nationalistic sentiments. Although they inevitably promoted a certain degree of nationalism in that they wished for a modern nation-state and national revival, they were highly cautious of excessive nationalism and populism, even during the time of the Twenty-One Demands in 1915. Hu Shi and his peers were strongly influenced by John Dewey’s experimental methodology, and they wanted to promote peaceful social reformation through gradual cultural means such as education. For example, Hu Shi and Jiang Menglin in their essay “Our Hopes for Students” acknowledged that the May Fourth Movement had made some significant contributions, such as “arousing students’ interest in society” and “exercising students’ writing, speaking, and organizational skills.”³² However, they believed that the student movement was an “abnormality” and only a “temporary emergency solution” to China’s dysfunctional society.³³ Using strikes as a weapon, they argued, was “the most uneconomic method” because it required students to abandon their studies and thus harm themselves and

²⁹ Hu Shi, foreword to *Kexue yu Rensheng guan* [Science and the View of Life], by Zhang Junmai et al. (Shanghai: Yadong Press, 1923; Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 2012), 21. Citations refer to the Yuelu edition.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jiang Menglin and Hu Shi, “Wo men duiyu xuesheng de xiwang” [Our hopes for students], *Xin Jiaoyu* [New Education] 2, no. 5 (May 1920).

³³ Ibid.

society. In addition, they described those speeches which contained excessively nationalistic phrases, such as “Kill the traitors” and “Patriotism is an obligation,” as empty, and advocated for the spread of more practical messages promoting such ideals as “common scientific knowledge.”

³⁴ Whereas most scholars wholeheartedly embraced nationalist philosophy before the war, many intellectuals after the war promoted a more cautious form of nationalism and a more gradual plan for change.

The idea of Social Darwinism, previously accepted as an integral part of modernity, also came under intense scrutiny from Chinese intellectuals following the devastation of the war. Immediately after World War I ended, Li Dazhao ardently wrote that it was not Germany that had been defeated, but rather “world militarism,” and declared that it was “a victory for the masses.”³⁵ He became explicitly opposed to Social Darwinism, the once-fashionable path to national revival: “From now on, we all know that [Social Darwinism] is a big mistake, and we know that the evolution is not by competition, but by mutual aid. If human beings want to survive and enjoy happiness, they should love and not kill each other with their might.”³⁶ The slogan “justice over might,” proposed by Chen Duxiu, also echoed Li’s view. In reflecting on the brutality of the war, many intellectuals blamed the pursuit of might despite once holding it in high regard, and it was gradually replaced in their minds by the pursuit of justice and mutual aid. The Great War convinced many members of the Chinese intelligentsia that following the West and accepting Social Darwinist philosophy might lead their country not into peace and prosperity as they had previously thought, but rather into war and destruction.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Li, Dazhao, “Shumin de Shengli” [Victory of the masses], *Xin Qingnian* [New Youth] 5, no. 5 (October 15, 1918).

³⁶ Li Dazhao, “Xin jiyuan” [New era], *Meizhou Pinglun* [Weekly Review] 3 (January 5, 1919).

In this time of national ideological uncertainty, Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" seemed promising at first glance to intellectuals as a new potential path for China's development. The agenda's idealistic focus on promoting peace and justice certainly appealed to many thinkers; for example, a month after the end of World War I, Chen wrote that "Since Germany's defeat, the phrase 'justice over might' has become the popular saying of almost everyone."³⁷ He highly praised Woodrow Wilson and his "Fourteen Points," considering him "the best person of the world nowadays."³⁸ However, the betrayal of the Paris Peace Conference shattered the bubble of Wilsonian idealism, and he quickly went from being "the best man in the world" to a hypocrite.³⁹ This again left many Chinese intellectuals without a clear replacement for the previously accepted model of Western modernity.

However, the rise of communism in Russia further challenged this model and provided many scholars with a third potential path for change, between liberalism and cultural conservatism. While the Western powers had gone back on their post-war promises, Soviet Russia backed up its seemingly idealistic vision of societal equality with its *Karakhan Manifesto* in July 1919, which abolished all the unequal treaties signed between the Tsarist government and the Qing Empire, and relinquished all of their privileges in China without compensation.⁴⁰ Following this development and the events of the May Fourth Movement, socialism and Marxism attracted significant attention from intellectuals as a potential alternative for Western modernity.⁴¹ Many socialist organizations were founded, such as the Society for the Study of

³⁷ Chen Duxiu, "Fakan ci" [A statement on the publication of the *Weekly Review*], *Meizhou Pinglun* [*Weekly Review*] 1, no. 1 (December 22, 1918).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Chen Duxiu, "Fakan ci."

⁴⁰ Chow, Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 210.

⁴¹ Chow, 243.

Socialism of Beijing University, which attracted over a hundred students and faculty members.⁴²

While supporters of this third path still supported some elements of modernity, such as the importance of science and material life, they saw them through an entirely different lens. In his foreword to *Science and the View of Life*, Chen Duxiu supports rationalistic thought, but also states his belief that Hu Shi had overemphasized scientific empiricism and ignored “historical materialism,” the idea that social changes derive from both material and scientific conditions.⁴³ For these newly-socialist scholars, science and materialism were no longer simply a means of building national strength, but rather the foundation and rationale behind all human societies.

World War I marked a crucial ideological split in Chinese intellectual history. Before the conflict, the firm consensus among Chinese intellectuals was that modernity after the Western model was the best possible guide to national prosperity, and that if China emulated this model they would achieve the same success as Europe had enjoyed since the Age of Enlightenment. However, when the limitations of this supposedly all-powerful concept were exposed by the devastation of WWI, the zeal for it quickly faded. During a time of double crises and an ideological vacuum, people wanted a new path forward. Some of them turned to the wisdom of old traditions for reassurance; some continued to insist on the power of modernity; and others drew on emerging philosophies to create a different path forward, seeking the promise of a newer, unseen future.

⁴² Chow, 243.

⁴³ Chen Duxiu, foreword to *Kexue yu Rensheng guan* [*Science and the View of Life*], by Zhang Junmai et al. (Shanghai: Yadong Press, 1923; Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 2012), 7. Citations refer to the Yuelu edition.

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An Unexpectedly Arthurian Quest: Judaizing the Prose Vulgate

Caroline Cook

It is no surprise that the Arthurian legends, defined by Christian imagery and the Christian communities who treasured them, are seldom associated with Jewish people. As the British and European individuals who wrote and read these texts became increasingly religious, so too did their iconic stories; titular objects such as the Holy Grail and the Round Table developed into symbols of Christ and the Last Supper, and characters' virtues and their quests' validity came to depend entirely upon their accordance with Christian values. Medieval audiences engaged with the Arthurian legends to popularize and emphasize Christian teachings and substantiate secular and religious events as histories with shared meanings.¹

The romantic legends are almost uniformly set in Ireland, Britain, and Wales. For nearly their entire early modern to contemporary histories, these regions were home to Christian and essentially no Jewish communities, particularly before the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century and after Edward I ordered the expulsion of all Jews from England in 1290.² Though the legends were read by and translated into languages for communities beyond these countries' borders, they were and are still adored especially by those who regard themselves as descendants of Celtic ancestry. The Arthurian legends, therefore, are intrinsically associated with Christianity because of both their Christianized content and their profound significance to medieval and contemporary Christian communities, who understand the stories as part of their cultural heritage. It makes sense, then, that the Arthurian texts are rarely discussed in relation to medieval Jewish communities.

¹ Jeanne Fox-Friedman, "Messianic Visions: Modena Cathedral and the Crusades," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 5 (1994): 83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20166892>.

² Barnett D. Ovrut, "Edward I and the Expulsion of the Jews," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 67, no. 4 (1977): 224, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1454572>.

This understandable assumption is disrupted by the presence of a medieval manuscript containing a Hebrew translation of Arthurian texts from 1279 titled the *Melekh Artus*. The existence of this translation implies that the stories of King Arthur and his court were of genuine interest to medieval Jews, specifically the late thirteenth to early fourteenth-century Northern Italian Jewish community whence the translator came. The Hebrew text includes stories from the *Prose Merlin* and the *Mort Artu* of the Prose Vulgate Cycle, but it is notably not a direct translation of the Old French prose. Instead, the translator consciously eliminates and adds language in order to transform it into a text fit for the Jewish community. Ultimately, the *Melekh Artus* demonstrates that the medieval Italian Jewish community understood the values embedded within the literature of its neighboring Christian society as adjacent to, rather than alienated from, its own. Thus, the assumption that the Arthurian legends were only relevant to a select group of people is challenged by the exceptional appeal of these stories to both Christian and Jewish literary communities in the late thirteenth to early fourteenth-century.

Though the *Melekh Artus* is the only known medieval Hebrew translation of an Arthurian text, the Northern Italian Jewish community for which it was written was not unique in its engagement with contemporary Christian literature. Jews in eleventh-century Spain adored romantic Hebrew poetry, sixteenth-century German Jewish weddings featured a sung Yiddish translation of an Arthurian romance, and even a medieval Ashkenazic rabbi instructed Jews of the Rhineland to be wary against reading these vernacular romances.³ One might assume that since Jews were a minority in these countries and were persecuted by Christian communities all throughout the medieval period, the Jews who engaged with the *Melekh Artus*, or any Christian literature for that matter, would have seen themselves as a community with remarkably distinct

³ Florence Sandler, "A Jewish Encounter with Arthurian Romance," *Arthuriana* 12, no. 2 (2002): 70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870428>.

values from those of the Christianized *Prose Merlin* and *Mort Artu*. The opposite, however, seems to be true.

Though stories of Jewish and Christian relations in the Middle Ages tend to only emphasize tensions and violence, extensive social integration existed between the two groups even in the face of persecution.⁴ When German, English, and French governments attempted to persecute and expel Jews from their homes, some local political leaders and bishops worked to protect their Jewish neighbors by emphasizing, as the Jews did, their ties to the local communities.⁵ Additionally, Jewish cultural and religious practices often mirrored those of Christian society; an increase in Jewish scholasticism paralleled the simultaneous growth of Christian schools and universities, and both Jews and Christians internalized the martyrdom and religious extremism of the Middle Ages.⁶ Jews and Christians also interacted daily with one another through business transactions and personal social experiences.⁷ In Italy specifically, Jewish lenders had a significant impact on medieval economies; Jewish lending was important to both private and public markets, and Italian governments actively turned to Jews for financial matters. The existence of positive social, political, and cultural engagements between medieval Jews and Christians suggests a Jewish interest in Christian society and consequently the values embedded in its literature.⁸

There is increasing evidence that medieval Jewish communities in Italy and elsewhere were actively engaging not just with Christian societies, but also with their Old French Arthurian

⁴ Jonathan Elukin, "Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages," *Jews, Christians, Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World*, no. 31 (2007): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827695>.

⁵ Elukin, "Living Together, Living Apart," 77.

⁶ Elukin, 65-66.

⁷ Elukin, 88.

⁸ Maristelli Botticini, "A Tale of 'Benevolent' Governments: Private Credit Markets, Public Finance, and the Role of Jewish Lenders in Medieval and Renaissance Italy," *The Journal of Economic History* 60, no. 1 (2000): 184-185, doi:10.1017/S0022050700024694.

texts. Frequent expulsions of Jews from France during the thirteenth-century led to the existence of a large French Jewish community in Northern Italy. Though the fleeing Jews found a new life and new level of tolerance in this region, they retained their French literary traditions.⁹ The translator of the *Melekh Artus* included words that imply translation from the original French prose, and specific thematic material in the text is believed to be derived from French literature since it was not yet accessible in Italian. These points illustrate the fact that the Northern Italian Jews frequently and actively engaged with French literary culture at the time the Hebrew translation was written, signaling their interest in the Prose Vulgate Arthurian romances written in Old French.¹⁰

Moreover, Jews in France knew of epic poems and romances such as *Roman d'Alexandre*, *La Chanson de Roland*, and *Tristan and Iseult* and, through intentional translational changes, Judaized elements of these stories for their own Hebrew texts.¹¹ Sometimes these original stories were so adapted for Jewish audiences that they became nearly unrecognizable in the Hebrew versions. The fact that Jews engaged with these stories enough to Judaize them, however, indicates that the Northern Italian Jewish readers of the *Melekh Artus* understood the Arthurian legends as worthy of study for their community, and thus viewed the values embedded within them as relevant and interesting to their own.

Comparing the actual text of these Old French versions of the *Prose Merlin* and the *Mort Artu* with the *Melekh Artus* illustrates this active engagement of Jews with Christian society and

⁹ Caroline Gruenbaum, "The Quest for the 'Charity Dish': Interpretation in the Hebrew Arthurian Translation *Melekh Artus* (1279, Northern Italy)," *Medieval Encounters* 26, no. 6 (2021): 524, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700674-12340087>.

¹⁰ Gruenbaum, "The Quest for the Charity Dish," 524.

¹¹ Rella Kushelevsky, "Jews Reading Arthurian Romances from the Middle Ages: On the Reception of Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, based on Manuscript JTS Rab. 1164," *AJS Review* 42, no.2 (2018): 382, doi:10.1017/S0364009418000454.

its Christianized romances. In the introduction to the *Melekh Artus*, the translator explains: “I have translated these conversations for myself in order to calm my mind, mitigate my grief, and dispel somewhat the bad times I have experienced.”¹² Evidently, he understood the stories not just as entertaining but as healing for the mind, which demonstrates his regard for the entire story, including its distinctly Christian elements. He validates this idea to his readers by reminding them that “sages of blessed memory, such as Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai” read stories similar to the Prose Vulgate, “so that a man who is steeped in Torah-study or in worldly pursuits may derive from the knowledge of these tales a measure of relaxation and relief.”¹³ The consequential relaxation and relief from reading the romances, along with the remark that important Jewish leaders found them to be important spiritually, evidences the translator’s belief that his Jewish community would discover valuable elements germane to its own studies within the Christianized Arthurian stories.

Likewise, the translator writes that “it is possible to learn wisdom and ethics from these fables concerning a man’s conduct toward himself and towards his fellow man,” illustrating his opinion that Christian relational values in these Arthurian texts such as devout faith in God, chastity, chivalry, knighthood, and courtly love were directly relevant to Jewish codes of conduct.¹⁴ This point is expanded upon when he states that the “most important reason for my translation was that sinners will learn the paths of repentance and bear in mind their end and will return to the Name.”¹⁵ The translator’s introductory material, then, invites the medieval Jewish reader to understand the Christianized Arthurian texts as worthy of study for their direct relation

¹² Curt Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279* (New York: KTAV Publishing House Inc., 1969), 11.

¹³ Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, 11.

¹⁴ Leviant, 11.

¹⁵ Leviant, 13.

to Jewish religious practices. Even before comparing the actual narrative of the Old French and Hebrew texts, it is clear that the Northern Italian Jewish community understood works meant to emphasize medieval Christian values as conducive to teaching their own.

With this context in mind, we can now compare the original and translated narratives . The first of the two stories included in the *Melekh Artus*, one from the *Prose Merlin*, depicts in great detail Uther Pendragon's supersession of the Duke and how he transformed into his likeness through Merlin's magic in order to obtain the love of the Duchess Ygerne. Thematically, the story emphasizes relationships and popular medieval virtues such as devout faith in God, chastity, chivalry, knighthood, and courtly love as justifications for these relationships.

The tale describes the love King Uther feels for Ygerne as all-consuming and validates it by repeatedly noting her unmatched internal and external beauty: she is "a very virtuous woman and faithful to both God and her husband."¹⁶ Later in the story, the defeat of the Duke is attributed to Uther's intricate plan and great battle skills, expressing his knighthood.¹⁷ Uther and Merlin's life-long alliance and friendship is justified by Merlin's wisdom, faithfulness to kings, and service to God, all of which are repeatedly noted in detail leading up to Arthur's birth. The *Prose Merlin* culminates in a description of Arthur's birth and how he came into the environment in which he would be raised, emphasizing his inherent relationship to God by repeating Arthur's beauty so often that people ask "whether the child was baptized."¹⁸

The *Melekh Artus* retains the essence of the Old French story, explaining Uther's fathering of Arthur and how he came to marry Arthur's mother Ygerne, but strips the story of its

¹⁶ Samuel N. Rosenberg. "The *Prose Merlin* and the *Suite du Merlin*," in *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and James J. Wilhelm (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 352.

¹⁷ Rosenberg, "The *Prose Merlin* and the *Suite du Merlin*," 354.

¹⁸ Rosenberg, 361.

excess detail to buttress the moral themes. Efficiency of language is prioritized over flowery description, action is emphasized over relationships, and characters are presented without as much dialogue or context regarding their individual relationships and emotions towards one another. For example, the translator writes that after one of Uther's officers told "the Duchess Izerna" of the king's immense love for her, "she related Uter Pendragon's words to her husband, the Duke."¹⁹ In the *Prose Merlin*, by contrast, the officer is actually given a name (Urfin), and his faithfulness to the king as well as Ygerne's faithfulness to her husband is described in significant detail. Although Uther in the original text warns her not to tell the Duke about his advances because "once a woman has said such a thing to her husband, he will never trust her any more," Ygerne does so anyway, telling her husband the exact truth and stating how she "won't hide it from [him], for there is no one [she] love[s] as much as [him]."²⁰ The *Melekh Artus* eliminates these extraneous details of the *Prose Merlin* in order to emphasize the essential Christian moral element: Ygerne's complete honesty to her husband. In the *Melekh Artus*, Ygerne is consequently presented only in regard to her virtuousness as Uther's wife, demonstrating the translator's adaptation of the story to make it more suited for its Jewish audience.

Besides adapting, rather than eliminating, Christian elements of the *Prose Merlin*, the *Melekh Artus* also quotes passages from the Torah which would have been immediately recognizable to its Jewish audience. In four specific sections of the story, main characters recite dialogue that is remarkably similar to biblical verses from the Hebrew scripture. In one instance, "Uter" asks Merlin, "Oh brother, pray help me only this time with your art," just as in Judges 16:28, Samson asks the Lord, "pray strengthen me only this time." Similarly, "Izerna," inquiring about how the Duke could have died in battle while he was copulating with her, states "[n]o

¹⁹ Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, 17.

²⁰ Rosenberg, "The *Prose Merlin* and the *Suite du Merlin*," 348.

sooner had he gone more than a bow-shot's distance away," just as in Genesis 21:16, Hagar "went and sat down a bowshot's distance away."²¹

Moreover, the lineages of each Arthurian character are explained in a very similar manner to lineages in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Arthur is explicitly named after the event of his birth: the *Melekh Artus* states that Arthur "will be called Artusin, that is, born through the power of *art*." This directly parallels the Hebraic tradition of naming children after specific events.²² The presence of these biblically-inspired phrases are additions to the *Melekh Artus* not found in the *Prose Merlin*, indicating that the translator added recognizably Jewish elements to the text in order to make an already pertinent story fit better within the context of Jewish society and literary tradition.

Following the translation of the *Prose Merlin* in the *Melekh Artus* is a translation of part of the *Mort Artu*, another story from the Prose Vulgate Cycle. In contrast to the first text, this translation is unfinished, concluding mid-paragraph rather than at the completion of the Old French story.²³ Though the translator likely intended to include the entire *Mort Artu*, the unfinished translation only includes an episode about Lancelot. The story describes knights battling to prove themselves worthy of replacing the forty-four knights who sat at the Round Table but died during the Quest of the Holy Grail, and it focuses on Lancelot's adulterous relationship with Guinevere, his knightly prowess, and his disloyalty to Arthur.

As mentioned previously, the translator commences his translation of both stories by stating that they are important because one can "learn wisdom and ethics from these fables concerning a man's conduct toward himself and towards his fellow man" and so, in reading

²¹ Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, 19.

²² Leviant, 23.

²³ Leviant, 7.

them, “sinners will learn the paths of repentance and bear in mind their end and will return to the Name.”²⁴ The surviving Lancelot story concerns his and Arthur’s conduct towards themselves, their knights, and their shared lover. Lancelot and Guinevere’s adulterous relationship is a sin which both the characters and the reader must reckon with. Even if only a portion of the intended translation exists, the text that does aligns completely with the elements the translator states are important, suggesting that the missing component would have also accomplished this. The translator must have understood the *Mort Artu*, along with the *Prose Merlin*, as possessing a moral code that was beneficial for his Jewish audience to absorb.

As in his treatment of the *Prose Merlin*, the translator retains the essence of the *Mort Artu* but alters its dialogue by quoting passages directly from the Torah. In an interaction between Lancelot and Guinevere, the translator preserves the relationship and dialogue style observed between the lovers in the original text, but replaces their speech with phrases from the Book of Esther. He writes that “Lanç stood immediately, stretched out his hand” towards Guinevere, which parallels King Ahasuerus who “‘stretched out’ his sceptre” to Queen Esther in Esther 5:2 and 8:4.²⁵ He then writes that Lancelot asks Guinevere “[w]hat is your request and it shall be granted,” which exactly copies King Ahasuerus’s question to Esther in Esther 7:2: “[w]hat is your request and it shall be granted.”²⁶

This practice of quoting biblical phrases in both stories is furthered when, at the moment in which Lancelot’s companion Edelpert is struck down by Estor, Arthur’s knights shout “[p]raised be the living God’,” a verbatim translation of a traditional Hebrew blessing that is not present in the Old French *Mort Artu*.²⁷ That the main textual differences between the *Mort Artu*

²⁴ Leviant, 11-13.

²⁵ Leviant, 39.

²⁶ Leviant, 39.

²⁷ Leviant, 45.

and its Hebrew translation are additions of important prayers and recognizable biblical phrases indicates the translator's decision to modify the original text in order to present the Christian essence as in accordance with Jewish values and literary tradition. This substantiates the historical evidence that Jews did not see themselves as entirely separate from the Christian communities that persecuted them.

Notably, this practice of quoting Torah verse in Jewish adaptations of Christian literature was not exclusive to the *Melekh Artus*. Twelfth and early thirteenth century Hebrew narratives called *exemplum*, which were primarily moralistic stories thought to be grounded in historical facts, made use of Torah and Talmudic verse to express a definable Jewish identity in a predominantly Christian society.²⁸ Rather than Judaize Christianized content as a means of separating Jewish and Christian literary culture from one another, the insertion of biblical verse served to internalize Christian symbols and motifs within the Jewish community in service of an inward acculturation of Jewishness.²⁹ By adopting popular Christian imagery but expressing it in unmistakably Jewish language, the Jewish community simultaneously defended their religious traditions and expressed their belonging in society. That the translator of the *Melekh Artus* continued this literary practice furthers the claim that his Arthurian texts were not understood as relevant solely to his community: incorporating Christian moral codes into popular stories enabled Jewish culture at large to both endure and coexist alongside its Christian counterparts.

The translator of the *Melekh Artus* treated Christian visual imagery in a similar manner when writing about distinctly Christian objects such as the Holy Grail. In miniatures illustrating Prose Vulgate manuscripts, the Holy Grail is a recognizably Christian object. This is illustrated in two images from an illuminated manuscript of *The History of the Holy Grail*, which is also

²⁸ Ivan G. Marcus, "Jews and Christian Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," *Prooftexts* 15, no.3 (1995): 209, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689425>.

²⁹ Marcus, "Jews and Christian Imagining the Other in Medieval Europe," 210.

from the Prose Vulgate Cycle. They are made from ink, gold, and tempera on parchment, associated with either Saint Omer or Tournai of Northern France, and date to 1300-25: right around the time of the *Melekh Artus*'s production. In both images, the first titled *Grail-keepers after Joseph of Arimathea: Josephus -- son of Joseph of Arimathea, and the first Christian bishop -- at table, with Alain le Gros, father of Perceval, kneeling*, and the second titled *Josephus passes the Grail to Alain*, the Grail is pictured as a golden chalice with a cross on its top (fig. 1-2).³⁰ It is an unmistakably Christian object engaged with by important Christian figures in distinctly Christian settings.³¹ By contrast, the Holy Grail is translated in the *Melekh Artus* as the "Dish," which in Hebrew refers to a Jewish charity bowl that was used to distribute food to the hungry.³² Though the Christian chalice and Jewish charity dish would both have fed the hungry, this would have been accomplished in two distinct ways. While the Holy Grail sustained Christians who were spiritually hungry, the charity dish fed actual food to physically malnourished individuals. Thus, the conjured image of the Grail in the *Melekh Artus* is a Judaized version of the painted image in the Christianized Prose Vulgate manuscript, highlighting once again the translator's decision to modify a central Christian element of the French text while still preserving its original role.

Another miniature from a different illuminated manuscript of the Prose Vulgate similarly portrays the Grail as a Christian object. This manuscript dates to 1290-1300 in Théroutanne, France and was possibly commissioned by Guy de Dampierre, Count of Flanders. The image is titled *The Grail Liturgy, with Galahad receiving the wafer from Josephus: a shrine for the Grail is on the table and the Bleeding Lance is behind it*, and it presents the Grail as the central object

³⁰ *Grail-keepers after Joseph of Arimathea: Josephus -- son of Joseph of Arimathea, and the first Christian bishop -- at table, with Alain le Gros, father of Perceval, kneeling*, miniature illustrating *The History of the Holy Grail* (from the Prose Vulgate Cycle), c.1300-25, ink, gold, and tempera on parchment, St. Omer or Tournai, N. France.

³¹ *Josephus passes the Grail to Alain*, miniature illustrating *The History of the Holy Grail* (from the Prose Vulgate Cycle), c.1300-25, ink, gold, and tempera on parchment, St. Omer or Tournai, N. France.

³² Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, 25.

at a table within an important Christian scene and enclosed within a reliquary shrine. This image expands upon the last two, for its position within a reliquary shrine defines it as a Christian relic and thus elevates its status in the text to one of the holiest Christian objects (fig. 3).³³ The translator's choice to transform the Grail into a recognizably Jewish object, in the *Melekh Artus* indicates his attempt to preserve its role within the Old French story while altering its identity for his Jewish audience. Therefore, this Hebrew translation of the *Prose Merlin* and the *Mort Artu* corroborates the textual and historical evidence that the medieval Italian Jewish community understood their neighboring Christian society and its values as adjacent to, rather than alienated from, their own.

As detailed in the introduction to this essay, the association of the Arthurian legends exclusively with Christian communities has endured for centuries. The Old French texts are filled with Christian stories and imagery and were treasured by Christian communities as important forms of entertainment and cultural heritage. Historical evidence regarding the engagement of Jews with medieval Christian societies, however, reveals that other communities engaged with the texts as well. This textual and visual evidence substantiates the argument that late thirteenth to early fourteenth-century Northern Italian Jewish communities did not understand themselves as entirely separated from all art and literature dealing with Christian values, embodied most notably by the tales of King Arthur and his court.

The remarkable 1279 Hebrew translation of the Prose Vulgate Cycle, the *Melekh Artus*, confirms this claim in that the major translational differences between it and the original Old French prose serve to Judaize the text and make its already-relevant material even more digestible to medieval Jewish communities. Rather than eliminate all Christian elements, the

³³ *Josephus passes the Grail to Alain*, miniature illustrating *The History of the Holy Grail* (from the Prose Vulgate Cycle), c.1300-25, ink, gold, and tempera on parchment, St. Omer or Tournai, N. France.

Melekh Artus preserves the essence of the *Prose Merlin* and the *Mort Artu* through Judaized text and images, asserting Jewish individuality in the face of societal pressures to convert and proclaiming Jewish culture's ability to coexist with Christian society. Even without this illuminating preservation of the stories, the translator himself argues for the original text's importance and relevance to his Jewish community. Thus, medieval Jewish communities understood the Arthurian legends as fit for their own religious and cultural traditions.

This surprising yet unmistakable Jewish interest in the Christianized romances acts as a testament to the widespread appeal of these stories. Though new research highlighting Jewish communities' active engagement with Christian communities substantiates the existence of Jewish interest in Christianized Arthurian texts, it does not eliminate the fact that Jews were victims of consistent persecution, and were generally not tolerated as neighbors. Thus, it seems remarkable that Jews viewed these texts, so intrinsically tied to the communities that often harmed them, as capable of disseminating important values and themes. If medieval Jewish communities understood and argued for the merit of these texts in the context of their own traditions, then further inquiry into the global appeal of the Arthurian values should begin at once.

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- Fig. 1: *Grail-keepers after Joseph of Arimathea: Josephus -- son of Joseph of Arimathea, and the first Christian bishop -- at table, with Alain le Gros, father of Perceval, kneeling,*

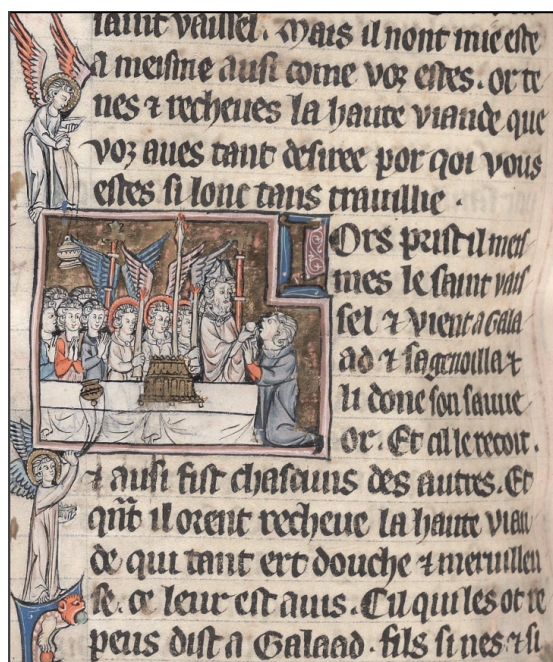
miniature illustrating *The History of the Holy Grail* (from the Prose Vulgate Cycle), c.1300-25, ink, gold, and tempera on parchment, St. Omer or Tournai, N. France.



Fig. 2: *Josephus passes the Grail to Alain*, miniature illustrating *The History of the Holy Grail* (from the Prose Vulgate Cycle), c.1300-25, ink, gold, and tempera on parchment, St. Omer or Tournai, N. France.



Fig. 3: *The Grail Liturgy, with Galahad receiving the wafer from Josephus: a shrine for the Grail is on the table and the Bleeding Lance is behind it*, miniature illustrating *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, from a manuscript of Robert de Boron's works and the Prose Vulgate Cycle, c.1290-1300, Thérouanne, France.



Border, *Machetazo*: Remembering *El Corte* (1937) in the Wake of *La Sentencia* (2013) in the Dominican Republic

Suhail Gharaibeh

“The land of our forefathers’ exile had been made, by that travail, our home. It may have been the popular impulse to keep us at the bottom of the perpetually shifting and bewildered populace; but we were, on the other hand, almost personally indispensable to each of them, simply because, without us, they could never have been certain, in such a confusion, where the bottom was; and nothing, in any case, could take away our title to the land which we, too, had purchased with our blood.”

—James Baldwin, “Princes and Powers”

“Death is another country.”

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

“We’re all dismembered from above by that ultimate machete of memory: borders.”

—Roberto Lovato, *Unforgetting*

Introduction

On September 23, 2013, with eleven justices in favor and two dissenting, the constitutional court of the Dominican Republic reached its ruling TC/0168/13. The decision would become a landmark in Dominican constitutional law—a thorn in the side of the Haitian Dominicans it targeted, a boon for long-established anti-Haitian nationalism—known simply as *La Sentencia*. Its effects were clear: anyone born to undocumented migrants from 1929 to the present day would no longer be considered a Dominican national and would thus be stripped of their right to Dominican citizenship. Civil authorities were to audit the country’s birth records back to 1929 to determine who had been born to “foreigners in transit,” a legal category dating from the 1929 constitution, the definition of which was now widened to include all undocumented residents of the Dominican Republic and their children. The overwhelming majority of these court-ordered “foreigners” were ethnic Haitians, whose ancestors had been

migrating to the Dominican side of Hispaniola for almost a century and whose Dominican-born descendants now numbered over 200,000.¹ According to the findings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the ruling “created the most significant crisis of statelessness in the history of the American hemisphere.”²

Over and over again, reporters, researchers, activists, artists, academics, and “regular folk” reflecting on *La Sentencia* reached back in their historical memories to October of 1937, when around 17,000 ethnic Haitians living in the border regions were systematically slaughtered by machete under the command of dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo.³ (In Hispaniola, this massacre is remembered bilingually as “The Cutting” or “The Cut”: *El Corte* in Spanish; *Kout Kouto a* in Kreyol.) This paper will explore historical memories of the 1937 *Corte* that were triggered by the 2013 *Sentencia*. I will begin by offering an abridged history of the 2013 decision, followed by a description of its aftermath. I will then analyze sources from international organizations, news media, artists, scholars, and activists. In doing so I will be contributing to a growing body of literature historicizing the 2013 decision as part of a lineage of *anti-Haitianismo* in the Dominican Republic. In particular, this paper will describe a widespread boom in memory of *El Corte* that followed *La Sentencia*, analyzing the historical-political dimensions of this boom through the lens of collective memory and historical consciousness.

¹ See the Dominican National Statistics Office cited by Amnesty International in “Dominican Republic must retract ruling that could leave thousands stateless,” October 18, 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/10/dominican-republic-must-retract-ruling-could-leave-thousands-stateless/>.

² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Dominican Republic” (Organization of American States, December 31, 2015), 114, <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/DominicanRepublic-2015.pdf>.

³ The death toll remains unclear in large part due to the deliberate actions taken by the Trujillo government to hide and destroy evidence of the atrocities, to censor the press, and to control the historical record in October 1937. Joaquin Balaguer, a Trujillo apologist and long-time statesman, put the death toll at 17,000, while Dominican historian Bernardo Vega has put the number as high as 35,000.

On one level, the history-makers whose memories I will analyze bore witness to the material reality of anti-Haitian “cuts” being sanctioned or committed by the Dominican state. On another, they experienced the cutting of the allegorical national body in collective imagination. In both 1937 and 2013, the border was itself a “founding wound,” to borrow a phrase from John E. Drabinski. Or, more particularly, a *machetazo*, or machete-wound, as the machete is a recurring motif that has come to emblemize this (living) history from multiple angles. Postcolonial literary theorist April Shemak described the metonymic or metaphorical power of the machete in her 2002 analysis of Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*, writing:

The machete, the canecutter’s tool, becomes the *modus operandi* of the massacre...The altering of Haitian bodies by the machete serves as the culmination of the many previous attempts to contain race and nation...If the body is a metonym for the island, that this dismemberment takes place at the border also symbolizes Trujillo’s attempt to reify the division of the island.⁴

The emergence and re-emergence of the machete in 1937 and 2013 therefore points to the political parallels between the two moments. The 2010s, like the 1930s, was a decade that saw the multinational rise of right-wing nationalist movements. Projects of political power were grounded in ideologies of racial, sexual, ethnic, linguistic, national, spatial, and cultural decline. These projects took as their focus the “national body,” which they subjected to procedures of state design. (As a metaphor of political power, the body reflects idealized visions of the human, the citizen, the national subject. It also signifies land—the national body as the whole of the territory, and the inhabitant body politic over which the state claims sovereign power. That which is extraneous or, worse, threatening to the state is to be cut from the whole.) In right-wing nationalist visions, certain migrant and ethno-national populations are targeted as degenerate or

⁴ April Shemak, “Re-membling Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 1 (2002): 85.

diseased elements to be excised or cut off from the national body. Attacks on migrants and ethno-national Others became central to the rhetorical strategies and political platforms of a variety of actors on the far right particularly in the later 2010s—Orban in Hungary, Le Pen in France, Trump in the United States, Salvini in Italy, Strache in Austria, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and so forth. British historian of fascism Aristotle Kallis analyzed the importance of the border in contemporary far-right movements, writing:

The sovereigntists of the populist radical right have come to view [the border] as a bulwark of a nativist, homogeneous community against incursions from people, ideas, commodities, and any other flow from the perceived “outside” that could threaten the identity and welfare of the bounded community. Their conception of sovereignty is inextricably linked with the physical, legal, and symbolic performance of sovereignty at the border.⁵

But as the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde has noted recently, we ought not forget that the decade was opened by “softer” liberal, centrist, and center-right politicians who nonetheless pandered to a resurgence of nationalism, nativism, xenophobia, and racism.⁶ In 2011, conservative British politician David Cameron gave a startling speech at the Munich Security Conference, saying, “We have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism...segregated communities [behave] in ways that run completely counter to our values.”⁷ During the 2012 French presidential campaign, incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy—another established conservative politician long known for racist dog-whistling—promised France would leave the Schengen Area if the European Union did not clamp down on “illegal” immigration, reminding voters boastfully of his administration’s

⁵ Aristotle Kallis, “Populism, Sovereigntism, and the Unlikely Re-Emergence of the Territorial Nation-State,” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11, no. 3 (May 2018): 295.

⁶ Cas Mudde, “The 2010s’ grim legacy: the decade of the far right,” *The Guardian*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/06/2010s-legacy-far-right-politics>.

⁷ David Cameron, “PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference” (speech, Munich, Germany, February 5, 2011), Gov.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

record-breaking deportation rates and its forced displacements of Roma people from camps in suburban Paris. “We have too many foreigners in our territory,” Sarkozy declared at a campaign rally in Paris attended by thousands.⁸ In the United States, President Barack Obama’s Democratic administration deported over 300,000 undocumented immigrants every year for eight years, more than any other administration in the history of the nation, including Obama’s fascistic successor Donald Trump.⁹

With the *Sentencia*, this pattern of anti-migrant nationalism (re-)embraced by various national elites in the 2010s came home to roost on the island of Hispaniola under centrist Dominican President Danilo Medina (2012-2020). In the Dominican Republic, *anti-Haitianismo* had long been fueled by a unique blend of class hierarchy, anti-Blackness and white Hispanic ethno-nationalism—what Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons has described as an “ideological superstructure of Hispanicity.”¹⁰ The frontier zone on the country’s western land border with Haiti was the site of operation—or injury—in both the 1930s and 2010s. In both decades, Haitians were the Others, the borderland scapegoats whose presence, mass, and migration stimulated the deep anxieties that drove Dominican right-wing nationalist movements and brought about state policy that forcefully severed the ties of ethnic Haitians to Dominican soil.

The *Sentencia* formerly known as TC/0168/13: An Abridged History

⁸ Gabriel Borrud, “Sarkozy intensifies anti-immigration rhetoric,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 12, 2012, <https://www.dw.com/en/sarkozy-intensifies-anti-immigration-rhetoric/a-15703843>.

⁹ John Gramlich, “How border apprehensions, ICE arrests and deportations have changed under Trump,” Pew Research Center, March 2, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/02/how-border-apprehensions-ice-arrests-and-deportations-have-changed-under-trump/>.

¹⁰ *Black in Latin America*, Episode 1, “Haiti & the Dominican Republic: An Island Divided,” produced by Henry Louis Gates, aired April 2011 on PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america/featured/haiti-the-dominican-republic-an-island-divided-watch-full-episode/165/>.

In 2010, a fault running deep beneath the earth of western Hispaniola slipped and, on the surface, Haiti—the nation-state whose territory runs directly along this fault zone up to its origin at Lake Enriquillo on the western border of the Dominican Republic—was struck by a massive earthquake. Corpses piled up in the streets of Haiti as rescue workers searched the rubble; unimaginable and then-unknown numbers were buried, unnamed and unclaimed, in mass graves.

¹¹ Many Haitians lived in camps that materialized wherever there was a clearing of even ground. The maimed were rushed across the border to hospitals in the urban Dominican Republic. But according to Dominican government policy, Haitian refugees were not permitted to stay on the Dominican side. Once they received medical treatment for injuries sustained during the quake, they were to be bussed back to Haiti.¹² Just a couple weeks after the earthquake, on 26 January, the Dominican Republic ratified a revised constitution containing some consequential new features.¹³ A new Constitutional Tribunal was formed, parallel to the country's high court, the Supreme Court of Justice, to adjudicate questions of constitutional law.¹⁴ Section II of the 2010 constitution reaffirmed that the “border regime” (*régimen fronterizo*) was “of supreme and permanent interest,” and added a new clause mandating that real estate and property in the borderlands be regulated so as to “privilege the property of Dominican men and women, and the national interest.”¹⁵ Reaching far beyond the scores of Haitian earthquake refugees, the new

¹¹ Days after the quake, one such worker from an Israeli rescue unit described a “Shabbat from hell,” writing: “Everywhere, the acrid smell of bodies hangs in the air. It’s just like the stories we are told of the Holocaust—thousands of bodies everywhere...You have to understand that the situation is true madness, and the more time passes, there are more and more bodies, in numbers that cannot be grasped. It is beyond comprehension.” See Marcy Oster, “Israeli medical, rescue workers help Haitians,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 17, 2010, <https://www.jta.org/2010/01/17/global/israeli-medical-rescue-workers-help-haitians>.

¹² See Fanny Fascar, “Haitians ‘needed but not wanted’ by neighbor,” *CNN*, April 1, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/03/31/haitians.dominican.republic/index.html>.

¹³ Congress of the Dominican Republic, *Constitución de la República Dominicana* (Santo Domingo: CARMJ, CONARE, February 2010), <https://semma.gob.do/media/1579/constitucion-de-la-republica-dominicana-2010.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Constitución*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37

constitution put the estimated half-million to one million already-existing Dominican residents of Haitian descent—including over 200,000 people born and raised in the Dominican Republic—at risk of denationalization. The definition of Dominican nationality (and by extension, citizenship) set out in the constitution was the result of years of incremental, inconspicuous court rulings and constitutional amendments. Article 18, titled “Nationality,” excluded anyone born to undocumented parents from the fundamental juridical principle of *jus soli*. This meant that, rather than territorial birthright, citizenship was based on the documented or undocumented status of one’s parents:

Dominicans are: (1) Sons and daughters of a Dominican mother or father; (2) Those who enjoyed Dominican citizenship before this constitution’s entry into force; (3) Persons born within national territory, *with the exception of the sons and daughters of...foreigners [extranjeros] who are in transit or residing illegally in Dominican territory. A person in transit is any foreigner defined as such under Dominican law.*¹⁶

The revisions crystallized decades of ultranationalist ideology espoused by Dominican elites and cemented policies regarding migration and border security that were *de facto* anti-Haitian.¹⁷ A pair of Pulitzer grantees working for *USA Today* summarized the anti-Haitian context of the changes rather early on, as they reported from Batey Esperanza in the southeastern Dominican Republic in December 2010:

The National Assembly said the change would ensure that a rush of impoverished Haitians fleeing the quake would not claim permanent residence in the Dominican Republic. It was also a response to a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights...which concluded that the Dominican constitution granted citizenship to Haitians

¹⁶ Ibid., 40; emphasis added.

¹⁷ See Daly Guilamo, “Dominican Attitudes Toward Haitian Immigrants Following the 2010 Earthquake and Before the 2013 Sentencing,” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 12, no.4 (October 2018): 488-508. At the ceremony held for the ratification of the new constitution, Dominican President Leonel Fernandez said, “It constitutes a great paradox of fate that the Republic proclaimed its independence not in a fight against a European colonial power, but against the neighboring country of Haiti. That act of separation and independence led us to war with our neighbor that would extend for about seventeen years; which, has perhaps been the deepest and most remote cause of some of our historical disagreements and misunderstandings. Today, however, as a result of the devastating earthquake that shook them exactly two weeks ago, our Haitian brothers are buried in the ruins, mired in tears and beaten down by pain.”

born here...[and which] was seen by many here as an affront to national sovereignty and an attempt by foreigners to force the Dominican Republic to shoulder responsibility for a poverty-stricken country.¹⁸

In September 2013, the Dominican government made good on the ominous potential of the 2010 constitutional changes when the Constitutional Tribunal reached its judgment TC/0168/13 in the case of Mrs. Juliana Deguis Pierre. Some years earlier, Deguis had gone to a municipal documentation office (*Centro de Cedulación*) in Yamasá, the town where she was born, to apply for her identification card and a voter registration card. But, to her dismay, her original birth certificate was immediately seized by the government staffers on the grounds that because she was the daughter of “Haitian nationals,” her inscription into the birth registry was “illicit and irregular” and thus constitutionally void.¹⁹ Her bid to win documentation and to have her original Dominican birth certificate returned to her ultimately reached the Constitutional Tribunal in its second year as an active court. As one analyst writing in *The Atlantic* put it, “the new loophole had a loophole”: the newly minted Constitutional Tribunal was being used to entrap hundreds of thousands of Dominican residents of Haitian descent within the juridical net of statelessness.²⁰ Not only did Deguis lose her bid, with the court ruling that she never should have been considered a Dominican national in the first place, but now a precedent was set for “all cases of a similar kind.”²¹ Based on the court’s interpretation of Dominican-ness as defined in the 2010 constitution, the decision TC/0168/13 held that anyone born to undocumented parents after 1929, the year that the Haitian-Dominican border was officially demarcated via bilateral treaty, was

¹⁸ Stephanie Hanes and Steve Sapienza, “Dominican Citizenships Put into Doubt,” *USA Today*, December 17, 2010, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/dominican-citizenships-put-doubt>.

¹⁹ Constitutional court of the Dominican Republic, *Sentencia TC/0168/13*, Santo Domingo, September 23, 2013, 30, <https://www.refworld.org/es/pdfid/5d7fcd99a.pdf>.

²⁰ Jonathan M. Katz, “What Happened When a Nation Erased Birthright Citizenship,” *The Atlantic*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/dominican-republic-erased-birthright-citizenship/575527/>.

²¹ *Sentencia*, 99

considered constitutionally “in transit” and was thus no longer entitled to Dominican nationality. “Foreigners who remain in the country without a legal residence permit or who have illegally entered [*penetrado*] the country are in an irregular migratory situation,” the ruling declared. “In this sense, these persons cannot invoke for their children who were born in the country a right to obtain Dominican nationality ... It is juridically inadmissible to base the birth of a right [*el nacimiento de un derecho*] on a situation that is illicit as a matter of fact.”²²

The decision, which became widely known as *La Sentencia*, was never framed as a judicial targeting of Haitians, but the text of the ruling itself exposes its obvious fixation—the words “Haitiano,” “Haitiana,” “Haitianas,” “Haitianos,” and “Haití” appear more than one hundred times. The term “foreigners,” in this case, had a clear ethno-racial significance —of the 244,151 people registered as children of “foreign” parents by the National Statistics Office (ONE) in 2013, 86 percent (almost 210,000) were of Haitian origin.²³ It goes without saying that the ruling makes no mention of the history of *anti-Haitianismo* in the Dominican Republic, or of the fateful year 1937.

But many of the same features that Trujillo’s forces used in 1937 to identify people for murder were used to justify the denationalization of Haitian Dominicans following the 2013 ruling: “national origin or migratory status of their parents, skin color (especially those with a dark-colored skin), language ability or surnames.”²⁴ The operation of 1937 was euphemistically

²² Ibid., 66.

²³ Amnesty International, “Dominican Republic must retract ruling that could leave thousands stateless,” October 18, 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/10/dominican-republic-must-retract-ruling-could-leave-thousands-stateless/>.

²⁴ This is the gloss provided by the IACHR at Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Dominican Republic,” December 31, 2015, <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/DominicanRepublic-2015.pdf>.

known to the Dominican political elite as the “Dominicanization” of the borderlands, even though many of those killed had been born on Dominican soil to families that had lived and labored in the Dominican Republic for generations.²⁵

“They are only thinking about the past”: Memory triggers in the wake of the *Sentencia*

In December 2013, Dominican constitutional expert Nassef Perdomo joined Dominican American scholar Edward Paulino and others on a panel at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City titled “(Un)making a Dominican: The Context for Denationalization.”²⁶ Audience responses filmed after the event and later uploaded to YouTube highlighted the high historico-political stakes of *La Sentencia* in terms of past, present, and future. A Dominican American woman named Ivonne and her young daughter stopped in front of the camera to express a mixture of frustration and resolve:

They are only thinking about the past, what the Haitians did to the Dominicans, what the Dominicans did to the Haitians. I came here to see what solutions are possible. What measures should we take in the future to resolve the problem happening right now? Because, really, Dominicans—and they are Dominicans—are going to be deported. Deport them where, if they live in their own country? It’s a very difficult situation. But I’m going to keep coming here to see what we can do.²⁷

But the past seemed unavoidable across a number of discursive planes. Rather than organizing mass murder by security forces as it had in 1937, the Dominican state in 2013 codified the “symbolic annihilation” (to appropriate a term from feminist media studies) of people of Haitian

²⁵ Richard Lee Turits, “A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002), 616.

²⁶ City University of New York, The Graduate Center, “(Un)Making a Dominican: The Context for Denationalization,” (event, December 5, 2013), <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/programming/unmaking-a-dominican-the-context-for-denationalization>.

²⁷ “Dominicans in NY react to citizenship ruling: Ivonne,” YouTube, December 9, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DEzVdWHKrE>

descent via judicial means. As one Dominican woman of Haitian descent named Elena Lorac put it in a 2013 interview with Amnesty International:

This has ruined my life. I wanted to study but now I can't do that, nor work. I can't even buy a mobile phone. This has paralyzed my life completely...I would like to be able to study and help my family because they live in a very precarious situation, but without my identity card [*cédula*] I cannot do anything. It's like I'm dead.²⁸

And beyond the symbolic annihilation of denationalizing thousands of ethnic Haitians, there were several well-documented instances of anti-Haitian ultranationalist rallies, pogroms, and lynchings after the 2013 decision, which served as sporadic but deeply disturbing reminders of 1937. On 4 November 2013, the Dominican fascist group National Network for the Defense of Sovereignty (*Red Nacional por la Defensa de la Soberanía*) held a rally in the center of the capital Santo Domingo, where it showed its *anti-Haitiansimo* and support for *La Sentencia* with signs reading: "A fusion between Dominicans and Haitians is not possible" and "The constitution must be respected and defended...Period!" They chanted "Us here, and them there," "Sovereignty is non-negotiable," and "Death to the traitors; Duarte said it!"²⁹ Juan Pablo Duarte, the Criollo founding father of the Dominican Republic, was reconstituted as an icon of anti-Haitian liberation. Other fascist groups like the Ancient Dominican Order and the Independent Patriotic Movement publicly called for the mass deportation and "ousting" of

²⁸Amnesty International, "'Without my identity card, it's like I'm dead,'" October 18, 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/10/without-my-identity-card-it-s-i-m-dead/>. In a video interview with the evangelical Christian organization World Vision, an eighteen-year-old named Federico Sidé echoed Lorac's sense of death, of life being cut short: "I've had to stop my studies. I've been practicing baseball in the hopes of being a professional ball player. But I can't be a professional ball player either, because they are cutting off [*tronchando*] my future. I am Dominican!" See "Testimonies of young Dominicans of Haitian Descent," YouTube, 12 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-59YPMu74SM>.

²⁹ "Miles de dominicanos se manifestaron este lunes en apoyo a sentencia del TC," *UltimasNoticias.com.do*, November 4, 2013, <https://www.ultimasnoticias.com.do/2013/11/04/cientos-de-dominicanos-en-apoyo-sentencia-tc-en-el-parque-independencia/>.

Haitians from “the homeland.”³⁰ A few weeks after the RNDS rally, in Neyba city near Lago Enriquillo, a Haitian man known as Codito was lynched, allegedly in retaliation for the robbery and murder of two elderly townspeople.³¹

Rallies organized in Santo Domingo on Dominican Independence Day in 2015—a holiday marking the February 27, 1844 insurrection that toppled Haitian rule in western Hispaniola—featured signs reading, “We reject the Haitianization of the country.”³² In November of the same year, a Haitian Dominican man was found hanging from a tree in downtown Santiago de los Caballeros in the northern Cibao region, his hands and feet tied. Groups of locals gathered to look at his body. He was known in the area as Tulile, and he worked shining shoes in the streets surrounding the small park where he was killed. The night before, according to the Dominican daily *Diario Libre*, a group of people in a nearby neighborhood had burnt a Haitian flag while chanting, “Out with the Haitians! If they want war, war is what they’ll get!”³³ A *VICE News* video dispatch from Malpasse, Haiti in 2015 included an interview with a deportee named John, who gave a disturbing account of his forced displacement from the Dominican Republic:

I’ve lived in the Dominican Republic for twenty years. Now they’ve deported me to Haiti...On Tuesday night, a group came to my house, threatening me. They said that if

³⁰ “Nacionalistas piden muerte de Danilo Medina acusándolo de ‘traidor a la patria,’” *Acento*, February 27, 2015, <https://acento.com.do/actualidad/nacionalistas-piden-muerte-de-danilo-medina-acusandolo-de-traidor-la-patria-8226513.html>.

³¹ Faustino Reyes Díaz, “Linchan a haitiano acusado de crimen,” *Listin Diario*, November 23, 2013, <https://listindiario.com/la-republica/2013/11/22/300688/Linchan-a-haitiano-acusado-de-crimen>.

³² Human Rights Watch, “We Are Dominican: Arbitrary Deprivation of Nationality in the Dominican Republic,” July 1, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/01/we-are-dominican/arbitrary-deprivation-nationality-dominican-republic>.

³³ See Narciso Pérez, “Hallan haitiano colgado de un árbol en parque Ercilia Pepín de Santiago,” *Diario Libre*, November 2, 2015, <https://www.diariolibre.com/actualidad/hallan-haitiano-colgado-de-un-rbol-en-parque-ercilia-pepn-de-santiago-IADL1008541>. In Susan Beraza’s film *Massacre River*, we meet Erzilia Celuma, widow of “Tulile,” who she says was actually named Henri Claude Jean. She says of his killing: “The morning after, I got a call saying he was sick, and that he was in the hospital. But they didn’t say he was dead. I didn’t know anything. The police didn’t...tell me anything about what happened. That they hung him in the park in Santiago. Who can say what happened, or who killed him? The only one who can tell me is him. But he’s dead. And the dead can’t speak.” See Susan Beraza, *Massacre River: The Woman Without a Country* (New Day Films, 2020), Kanopy.

the Haitians didn't leave their houses, they would pour gasoline on them and burn them down. They were threatening us with machetes and knives...I think it was the military, because they had military clothes.³⁴

Another alarming show of anti-Haitianismo came with a video that circulated online in 2015.

The video seems to show people of Haitian descent in Moca, a town near Santiago, being rounded up and forced to leave their houses. Based on the gray fatigues of officers in the video, it appears that the Dominican National Police were involved in perpetrating this forced eviction. Townspeople then steal what they like from the houses of the victims and destroy the rest. Men with bats and wooden planks force a dark-skinned woman down a road, throwing her to the pavement, where she wails in anguish; others, wielding belts, machetes, and axes, detain and beat dark-skinned men, cutting one young man's dreadlocks off with knives and machetes, to screams of "Kill him, kill him!"³⁵ Similar events were documented by local journalists (who themselves were threatened with murder) in the Cibao towns of Boruco and Loma de Cabrera. Unexplained murders of ethnic Haitians continue to occur to this day.³⁶

Remembering 1937: Post-*Sentencia* sources from International Organizations, Press, Artists, Scholars, and Activists

In this context, pangs of remembrance of 1937 broke through the surface of collective memory on a transnational scale. The *Sentencia* and the twenty-first-century context that surrounded it revived historical memories, which were in turn recast by those who bore witness to these pitched crises—one in the present, one from the past—at the border between Haitian and

³⁴ "A Haitian Halfway House for Deportees: Dominican Deadlock (Dispatch 4)," *VICE News*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23XkRqC3-o8>.

³⁵ "Sacan haitianos a la fuerza en Moca y destruyen sus pertenencias," *DuoMedio RD*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGgGmjNJ-IE>.

³⁶ In 2019, for example, an unnamed Haitian woman thought to be around 25 years old was found beaten to death and dumped unceremoniously in the brush in the northern town of Esperanza. See "Encuentra cuerpo de mujer de nacionalidad haitiana con signos de violencia en Esperanza," *CDN 37*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1BIq3ysAO0>.

Dominican identity. The most centralized response by the “international community” to the *Sentencia* was an investigation by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR; an organ of the Organization of American States connected to its Inter-American Court of Human Rights), the results of which were released in a report in 2015 accompanied by an interactive webpage.³⁷ A scrollable timeline on the web page provides the historical context for Haitian-Dominican statelessness from the Haitian Revolution to the *Sentencia*. It includes a marker for the 1930s, when Trujillo came to power as part of a military coup against the democratically-elected president and, in 1937, ordered *El Corte*. The written report makes explicit that, in understanding *La Sentencia*, 1937 should be considered within the historical lineage of Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic.³⁸ Before publishing the report, the IACHR allowed the Dominican OAS delegation to review and respond to the findings. The debate between the two is worth quoting at some length for its evocations of historiography as a site of political and legal contestation. First, the IACHR summarizes the Dominican reaction to the report:

The Dominican State voiced its surprise at how the events of 1937 were established as the “backdrop” for the Haitian migratory situation in the Dominican Republic, without taking into consideration that said events “took place under a brutal dictatorship against which *the Dominican people themselves* had to fight...The continuous mention of these events, oftentimes deliberately magnified to indelibly brand the Dominican people as bearers of the worst character and values, is offensive and unacceptable for both the Dominican Government and the Dominican people themselves...Oftentimes the way history is interpreted conditions or predisposes how present events are appraised and this

³⁷ Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Denationalization and Statelessness in the Dominican Republic,” Webpage, <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/multimedia/2016/DominicanRepublic/dominican-republic.html>.

³⁸ In the section on historical context, the IACHR wrote: “Between September 28 and October 8, 1937, the dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo ordered a massacre in which thousands of Haitians died. The scene of the massacre was mainly the border provinces, such that the event is known as the ‘Dominicanization of the border.’ Trujillo gave orders to track down and kill any Haitian in Dominican territory; the only ones spared were those working in the U.S.-owned sugar mills. The massacre was clearly racist and anti-Haitian. The soldiers were ordered to kill anyone who did not have his or her identification papers or who was assumed to be Haitian because of his or her physical appearance or command of the Spanish language.” IACHR, “Report,” 55.

is what, to a large extent, has occurred with this report, which is replete with judgments about historical events which, at the least, require qualifications, additional information, or more rigorous and objective analyses.”

The IACHR then responded within the body of the report by defending the relevance of the history of 1937 within the context of the *Sentencia*. Far from decontextualized “judgments” of the Dominican people, as the Dominican delegation might have it, the IACHR argued that its historical analysis of 1937 was part and parcel of its legal and political analysis of 2013:

The Commission deems it is important to point out that...the facts examined in the present report have been established in a context of discrimination against the Haitian population and persons of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic...In some situations, a review of the historical context has made it possible to characterize the facts as part of a systematic pattern of human rights violations. Likewise, review of the historical context is crucial in the present report, since the Commission considers that the criterion established in judgment TC/0168/13, as well as the measures that have been adopted to enforce this judgment, has been a crucial stage in the process of historical revisionism promoted by Dominican authorities, aimed at consolidating an interpretation that establishes that persons born in the Dominican Republic of Haitian parents with an irregular migratory status do not have the right to Dominican nationality pursuant to application of the *jus soli* principle.³⁹

Sources in the press also went back to 1937 in discussing the 2013 ruling. On 24 October 2013, the *New York Times* published a front-page story that detailed the *Sentencia* and alluded vaguely to historical memory:

Given the history of the Dominican Republic and Haiti—a sometimes cooperative, often tense and occasionally violent relationship between two nations sharing one island—the decision has brought to the surface a unique set of racial tensions and resentment toward the waves of impoverished Haitian migrants that fill menial jobs on this side of the border.⁴⁰

³⁹ IACHR, “Report,” 38-39; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Randal C. Archibold, “Dominicans of Haitian Descent Cast Into Legal Limbo by Court,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/24/world/americas/dominicans-of-haitian-descent-cast-into-legal-limbo-by-court.html>.

A few weeks later, on 31 October, in an Opinion column titled “Two Versions of a Dominican Tale,” the *Times* published a pair of dueling letters to the editor, each written in response to the October 24 article. In the first, Aníbal de Castro, the Dominican Ambassador to the US, echoed Ivomne’s desire to let go of the past. While “the Dominican Republic and Haiti may have a fractious history,” de Castro wrote, “recent events, including the solidarity shown by Dominican society after the earthquake of 2010, have shown ... [that] the countries are looking to the future, engaged in the hard task of finding joint solutions to common challenges.”

Four American writers signed the opposing letter: Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez, two Dominican Americans known for their fiction about the diaspora and, in the case of Alvarez, the *Trujillato*; Haitian American Edwidge Danticat, whose *Farming of Bones* is perhaps the most widely read book dealing with *El Corte*; and the nonfiction writer Mark Kurlansky. The authors minced no words in their explicit references to 1937:

Such appalling racism is a continuation of a history of constant abuse, including the infamous Dominican massacre, under the dictator Rafael Trujillo, of an estimated 20,000 Haitians in five days in October 1937. One of the important lessons of the Holocaust is that the first step to genocide is to strip a people of their right to citizenship. What will happen now to these 200,000 people — stateless with no other country to go to?⁴¹

Three opinions published in the Spanish daily *El País* in autumn 2013 also expressed condemnations of *La Sentencia* based on historical memory. The first was a short but chilling essay called “Black Magic,” penned by Rita Indiana, the queer Dominican writer and musician better known in the Dominican Republic as “La Monstra.” She wrote of a “legal ethnic cleansing”:

These necromancers will disappear the rights of a people who have done more for the country than the thousands of ghosts who cash checks without clocking into work in the great haunted house that is the Dominican bureaucracy; they will sacrifice to the idol of

⁴¹ “Two Versions of a Dominican Tale,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/01/opinion/two-versions-of-a-dominican-tale.html?_r=1&.

racism children and young people, who are not the protagonists of local criminality; but above all, they will close the lethal cycle (as all curses are cyclical) in which the spirit of violence and death orbits, that portal of blood opened in October of 1937.⁴²

A few days later, the Argentinian scholar Pablo Gentili published his take, titled “The Persistence of the Parsley Massacre,” using the name for *El Corte* that most international readers recognize.

Gentili wrote, “The Parsley Massacre persists. Today, perhaps, it’s become more hygienic—or, literally, more eugenic ... The river that cuts, that divides, that bleeds this Caribbean island ... is still called Massacre. And you, how do you pronounce *perejil*?”⁴³

The Peruvian politico, scholar, and writer Mario Vargas Llosa published his opinion, titled “The Pariahs of the Caribbean,” in early November, writing:

One of the major crimes committed during the tyranny of Generalísimo Trujillo was the indiscriminate killing of Haitians in 1937, during which it is said that several tens of thousands of these wretched immigrants were murdered by a mass inflamed with the apocalyptic fabrications of fanatic nationalist groups. No less grave from a moral and civic point of view is the scandalous ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal.⁴⁴

Outside of international organizations and coverage in the press, a broad range of artists, scholars, activists, and those in-between have drawn attention to *El Corte* as a political and intellectual response to *La Sentencia*. The Movimiento de Mujeres Dominico-Haitianas (MUDHA), founded in the 1980s by pioneering transnational feminist Sonia Pierre, was heavily involved in collecting testimonials from Haitian Dominican people, particularly women and children, before, during, and after the 2013 ruling. They are among the dozens of rights groups with which the Inter-American Commission said it consulted during its visit to the island.⁴⁵

⁴² Rita Indiana, “Magia Negra,” *El País*, October 9, 2013, https://elpais.com/internacional/2013/10/09/actualidad/1381345925_372245.html.

⁴³ Pablo Gentili, “La persistencia de la Masacre del Perejil,” *El País*, October 12, 2013, https://elpais.com/elpais/2013/10/12/contrapuntos/1381598942_138159.html.

⁴⁴ Mario Vargas Llosa, “Los parias del Caribe,” *El País*, November 2, 2013, https://elpais.com/elpais/2013/10/31/opinion/1383233998_965346.html.

⁴⁵ IACHR, “Report,” 26.

MUDHA was supported in its efforts to lobby before the US Congress by the American Jewish World Service, which wrote:

During the Great Depression, when [the Dominican Republic] suffered a sharp economic decline, a few elites in the government blamed the country's woes on Haitian migrants. This boiled over into violence in 1937...The anti-Haitian sentiment fostered under Trujillo's decades-long rule continues to fester in today's Dominican Republic. Politicians and elites continue to portray Haitians as a strain on the Dominican economy who hold the country back from advancing its ambitions.⁴⁶

Following Pierre's death in 2011, the migrant rights organizing scene on the island began looking directly at 1937. In 2012, the Border of Lights project held its inaugural ceremony. The collective, conceived by Dominican Americans Silvio Torres-Saillant, Edward Paulino, and Julia Alvarez, sought to commemorate the victims of *El Corte* with an annual event. Alvarez, who says she was motivated by the political mobilizations of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, imagined a performance of transnational solidarity whereby the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, often marked by guarded concrete bridges crossing the Massacre River between border towns, would be lit up with lights and candles. Paulino and fellow organizer Scheherazade García published a short essay on the Border of Lights project in the Fall 2013 issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. They wrote:

Regardless of the fact [that] the history of the Massacre was and still remains taught in Dominican schools, it is not accepted as an inheritance of a cultural and political history whose legacy is seen today in cases like the 168-13 ruling in the Dominican Republic that strips many Dominicans of Haitians descent of their Dominican citizenship—retroactively to 1929...Dominicans do not feel shame about the Massacre, and there is a vocal minority that, in fact, praise the killings as a patriotic response by Trujillo in defending the nation from a 'silent invasion.'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ American Jewish World Service, "Background: A Citizenship Crisis in the Dominican Republic," <https://ajws.org/who-we-are/resources/background-citizenship-crisis-dominican-republic/>.

⁴⁷ Edward Paulino and Scherezade García, "Bearing Witness to Genocide: The 1937 Haitian Massacre and Border of Lights," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 32, no. 2 (2013): 112-13, JStor.

In a later essay, “Bearing Witness to a Modern Genocide,” which reflects on the founding of Border of Lights, Paulino wrote:

Neither Trujillo himself nor any high government officials were ever punished for this crime against humanity. No truth and reconciliation committee was ever assembled. In the absence of official efforts to preserve historical memory and recognize the victims and survivors of the massacre, the Border of Lights social collective has been carrying out annual commemoration activities on the Dominican-Haitian border since 2012...The nation’s failure to carry out a historical reckoning informed by the 1937 Massacre came to a head in 2013, when the Dominican Republic’s Constitutional Tribunal issued Ruling 168-13...In 1937, Haitians and their Dominican-born descendants were excluded from the Dominican border by the knife; today, they are excluded from the nation by the judicial pen.⁴⁸

A few months after the *Sentencia* in 2013, a Haitian civil society group calling itself the 4 December Collective was formed under the leadership of Jean-Robert Argand, former president of the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Collective called for a boycott of all Dominican commerce on Haitian soil, saying that the *Sentencia* “marks a direct continuation of the well-documented genocidal project of purification and whitening of the Dominican race that was crystallized before the world’s eyes in 1937.”⁴⁹

In October 2013, a group of Haitian and Dominican students, educators, scholars, artists, and activists living in New York City formed the transnational activist group We Are All Dominican (WAAD). In 2015, WAAD put out a digital pamphlet called “10 things you should know about the civil genocide in the DR...And what you can do to help,” writing:

The government of the Dominican Republic is currently carrying out an orchestrated campaign to rid the country of its population of Haitian descent, including both Haitian migrants who have lived in the country for decades and their Dominican-born children and grandchildren. It has legalized and bureaucratized anti-Haitian and anti-black

⁴⁸ Edward Paulino, “Bearing Witness to a Modern Genocide,” *Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies* (Spring-Fall 2016): 54-55, Center for Latin American Studies, UC Berkeley, <https://clas.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/shared/docs/tertiary/BRLAS2016-PAULINO.pdf>.

⁴⁹ “Le Collectif du 4 décembre appelle au boycott des produits dominicains,” *La Nouvelliste*, December 18, 2013, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:teYKdBqgYRIJ:https://lenouvelliste.com/article/125342/le-collectif-du-4-decembre-appelle-au-boycott-des-produits-dominicains+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.

practices and discourses that have been pushed by Dominican politicians and elites for more than a century. In 1937, Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo tried to physically eliminate Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent through a bloody massacre that led to the deaths of thousands of people in a matter of days. Today, the country's leaders are using immigration laws and legal manipulation to expel Haitian migrants and their Dominican-born descendants.⁵⁰

Most recently, Suzan Beraza's documentary film *Massacre River: The Woman Without a Country*, released in 2019, highlighted many of the deleterious effects of *La Sentencia* and illustrated its historico-political dimensions.⁵¹ The film follows a 23-year-old woman, Maria Luisa "Pikilina" St. Dic, as she engages in a Kafkaesque bureaucratic struggle to stake her claim to Dominican citizenship following *La Sentencia*. The film opens with Pikilina narrating a visual dramatization of the 1937 massacre as a historical memory triggered by *La Sentencia*:

It happened a long time ago. It was in the time of Trujillo. He was a dictator. That night they wanted to know who was Haitian, Black [*moreno*]. They couldn't tell who was Dominican. They were forced to say the word *perejil*. If you spoke Kreyol, you pronounced it differently. They killed the Haitians by machete. Innocent. Just for being Haitian. They threw them in the river, and the river turned to blood. Now it feels like everything is happening all over again. We're afraid to go out in the streets.

Pikilina explains that she was born in Altagracia Maternity Hospital in Santo Domingo and now lives in the beach town of Sosúa north of Santiago. She earns a living as a sex worker, saying that her johns are mainly "Gringo" tourists. Sex tourism (including, in some cases, the trafficking of children) had long been popular in the Dominican Republic, particularly in beach towns where Haitians are overrepresented in low-paying service jobs, and where poor, darker-skinned, and/or ethnic Haitian sex workers are pushed into street and bar strolls that make them vulnerable to

⁵⁰ "10 things you should know about the civil genocide in the DR...And what you can do to help," June 19, 2015, <https://wearealldominicannyc.wordpress.com/2015/06/19/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-civil-genocide-in-the-dr-and-what-you-can-do-to-help/>.

⁵¹ Beraza, *Massacre River*.

harassment and deportation by Dominican authorities.⁵² Pikilina, like many sex workers in the Dominican Republic,⁵³ uses the euphemism *buscarsela* (a reflexive conjugation meaning roughly “to look for it”) to describe her work, saying: “Most of us work in the streets. I’m a girl who looks for it [*me la busco*]. I live off of that. I take care of my kids with that.” She has also witnessed the racism and mob violence with which ethnic Haitian communities were treated following the *Sentencia*: “Dominicans are racists. I mean, some of them, not all. It depends. Here, our neighbors are good to us, they treat us well. But in other places, they come after us with machetes, remove us from where we are, hurt us.” For Pikilina, her sister Lilina, and her mother Kokota, this mob violence is intimately tied to the workings of the Dominican bureaucracy and to the history of anti-Black, anti-Haitian violence in the country. As the three family members sit and discuss Pikilina’s undocumented status, they remember the historical conditions under which Kokota immigrated to the Dominican Republic decades earlier, and again the machete appears:

Lilina: “But mommy, I want to know... Why don’t you have Pikilina’s papers? Now she’s struggling.”

Kokota: “It’s not my fault. I’m Haitian. Before Pikilina was born, you had to go to the Haitian embassy to get a birth certificate.”

Lilina: “But when she was registered at the Haitian embassy, they just wrote, ‘Born in the Dominican Republic?’”

Kokota: “In the Dominican Republic, yes.”

Lilina: “But they didn’t give you a birth certificate from here?”

Kokota: “No.”

⁵² See Brad Bullock, “Sex Traffic and Trafficking in the Caribbean” in Kimberly A. McCabe and Sabita Manian, eds., *Sex Trafficking: A Global Perspective* (Lanham, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), 124.

⁵³ See Mark Padilla, “‘Me La Busco’: Looking for Life in the Dominican Pleasure Industry,” in *Caribbean Pleasure Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 58.

Lilina: “My god. It’s going to be difficult, then.”

Pikilina: “In that time, there were a lot of racists.”

Lilina: “There were racists, they didn’t want to hear anything about Blacks. That’s why you don’t have a birth certificate.”

Pikilina: “Back then they attacked Blacks with machetes. In those times, they attacked you with machetes [*machetazos te daban*]. It was all machete-blows [*machetazos*]. If you didn’t know how to fight, you couldn’t stop it.”

Lilina: “My kids have to have Dominican birth certificates, because they were born here.”

Pikilina: “Mine too.”

Lilina: “We’re not in the old times anymore... Now, we have to fight.”

Massacre River also features talking-head interviews with Paulino, Díaz, and Alvarez.

During an interlude featuring black-and-white archival footage from the Trujillato, Junot Díaz speaks on the significance of the history of the 1937 *Corte* in discussing the 2013 *Sentencia*:

This group of people reading the constitution in this perverse way does, in the recent era, what our dictator Rafael Trujillo attempted to do—which was that he takes a legal machete and cuts the Dominican body, and tries to slice off the darker parts, and claims that they are not part of us, that these are dangerous, foreign Others.

Julia Alvarez echoes Paulino, Díaz, and others in saying that the instrument of the machete used during *El Corte* has been replaced with a new iteration of itself:

[Trujillo] said, ‘We’ve begun to solve the problem.’ And what he had done was send out an order that any Haitians on the border were to be massacred. You didn’t really know that this had happened. It wasn’t in the history books. It wasn’t taught, in this country or, really, abroad. And we all know that unless you know your history, you’re going to repeat it. In 1937, we killed them with knives and machetes, and now we’re killing them with laws. Underneath all this political agenda and identity-building, these are the results of a dictatorship. And it was thirty-one years. He’s gone physically, but what he planted in the minds, it’s like the dictatorship...is still with us.

At the end of the film, Pikilina, Kokota, and Lilina walk arm in arm with Alvarez as part of a Border of Lights march after hearing from an organizer about the history of *El Corte*. “Let’s go toward the border,” Alvarez says, and dozens of people carry candles to the Massacre River, sticking the wax to the chain-link fence and the barbed wire topping it. They meet with a crowd of candle-bearers on the Haitian side of the border, and the two groups call out to each other in Spanish and Kreyol.

Conclusion: Beyond Borders

The forced statelessness faced by Dominicans of Haitian descent, based on the Constitutional Tribunal’s decision to summarily deprive an entire group of its nationality, should continue to disturb those who value the right to exist without persecution based on one’s migratory or ethno-national identity. We should also continue on a global level to sabotage and deconstruct the systematized oppression of migrant workers, women, queer people, sex workers, children, and others via various “border regimes.” The juxtapositions we have seen between *La Sentencia* and *El Corte* bring to the fore questions about the roles of the border and the nation-state in history, including not only memories of the past, but also visions of the near and distant future. Recent scholarship has posited alternative frameworks beyond the forms of colonial modernity (translated formally into the border-system of Westphalian sovereignty) that historically grounded the right-wing nationalist projects we saw in the 1930s and again in the 2010s. It was precisely the long historical project of colonial modernity, in seeking voraciously to exploit resources via racial capitalism, that brought Spain and France to occupy opposite (and opposing) sides of the island they called Hispaniola. New formations of the colonial/imperial project were to be found in the fascist and ethnonationalist genocides of the twentieth century,

including the Nazi policy of *Lebensraum* (literally “living space”), derived directly from the nineteenth-century imperialism of European and Euro-American states. In these modern/colonial visions, land and the body were conflated as sites of operation, of cutting. As Hitler put it in chilling proceedings from a 1941 meeting on the *Generalplan Ost*:

There is only one task: Germanization through the introduction of Germans [to the East] and to treat the original inhabitants like Indians...I intend to stay this course with ice-cold determination. I feel myself to be the executor of the will of history. What people think of me at present is all of no consequence. Never have I heard a German who has bread to eat express concern that the ground where the grain was grown had to be conquered by the sword. We eat Canadian wheat and never think of the Indians.⁵⁴

Trujillo’s systematic massacre by machete of tens of thousands of Haitians in October 1937 in the name of the “Dominicanization” of the borderlands was, in this same vein, a formation derived from the practices and ideas of colonial modernity at large. A new echo still was to be found in the targeted denationalization of Dominicans of Haitian ethnicity in 2013. Part of what these projects have in common on a deeper historical level is their reduction of territorial “space” into a stable medium for national power and sovereignty, arbitrarily cutting and containing complex ecological systems (including systems of human migration) that radically exceed and transcend the strictly anthropocentric confines of biopolitics and geopolitical borders.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Czesław Madajczyk, ed., *Generalny Plan Wschodni: Zbiór dokumentów* (Warszawa: Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce, 1990), 69-70, republished in English at <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/GPO/gpo%20sources.htm>.

⁵⁵ Posthumanist theorist Timothy Morton critiques this conception of space as an outgrowth of colonial modernity in *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, writing: “‘Space’ has revealed itself as the convenient fiction of white Western imperialist humans, just as relativity theory revealed Euclidean geometry to be a small human-flavored region of a much more liquid Gaussian spacetime. The Euclidean concept that space is a container with straight lines is good enough to be getting on with if you want to voyage around the coast of Africa to reach the Spice Islands. *Space* in this sense has collapsed, and *place* has emerged in its truly monstrous uncanny dimension, which is to say its nonhuman dimension. How? Now that the globalization dust has settled and the global warming data is in, we humans find ourselves on a very specific planet with a specific biosphere...The concept *space* was always a constant-presencing machine for making things appear consistent and solid, to make them easier to colonize, enslave, and plunder.” Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 10.

Postcolonial theorist Mina Karavanta has discussed the border in terms of an ethical and ontological sense of being “human together” beyond nationalism:

If the post in posthumanism promises anything new, it does so by attending to this human together in complexity and unevenness without the vantage point of a particular human and her history as the measure; it tries to attend to a new vocabulary of concepts, new “root metaphors” that make up the grammar of a political imaginary that is regional but also transcultural, critical of the transcendental recoding of the local; it examines the knowledge production and political practices of communities, collectivities of beings...past the borders of nationalism and at the boundaries of the national community questioning the limitations its axiomatics of ontopology sets as the only acceptable political formation of a commons for those who do not always belong but keep arriving with the claim to belong.⁵⁶

These are the questions and problems fomented by the historical continuum between 1937 and 2013. What are the viable alternatives to hegemonic ideas of sovereignty and space that say borders must cut and mark our world? Where border regimes cut through space occupied or traversed by indigenous people, or by migrant laborers, or by climate or conflict refugees, how can we maintain an oppositional sense of unity or reassembly?

⁵⁶ Mina Karavanta, “Human Together: Into the Interior of Auto/OntoPoiesis,” *symplokē*, Vol. 23, No. 1-2, *Posthumanisms* (2015): 169. JStor.

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Honestly, Good for Her: The Triumph of White Womanhood in the Trial of Pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read

Eliane Guyader

Introduction

On November 28, 1720, the pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read, two English women, sat imprisoned in St. Jago de la Vega, now known as Spanish Town, Jamaica, waiting to stand trial. They were accused of stealing items adding up to 1330 British pounds, in the form of “Fish,” “Fishing Tackle,” and “goods and Chattels” from fishermen in Harbour Island, Hispaniola, and Jamaica.¹ Nicholas Lawes, Governor of Jamaica, called forth witnesses who claimed that the women used violence to cause “corporal fear” among subjects of the British crown.² They were convicted and sentenced to death, but unlike the men, these women did not meet the hangman’s noose. Instead, they “plead their bellies.”³ Bonny and Read claimed pregnancy to escape a death sentence.

These two women subverted the gender roles seventeenth-century society prescribed to them, rejected traditional occupations available to women in the British Caribbean, and claimed agency over their lives by joining a violent, male profession. Piracy existed in the Caribbean during the early colonial period as a semi-legal means of warfare between European powers as they battled for control of the Caribbean and the seas. But as the Caribbean economy formalized, piracy became a nuisance to European powers.

The life of a pirate was a fascinating case of choice within a world that demanded its people to abide by strict social conventions. During their years as pirates, Bonny and Read were not ostracized for their womanhood. Rather, they were accepted because their skills served the

¹ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” Held before Nicolas Lawes, Kt. November 16th, 1720.- March 22, 1721. (Jamaica: Robert Baldwin, 1721). 16.

² “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 16.

³ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 16.

greater purpose of crime. Yet, at the moment that they could have been executed for their criminal rebellion, the women chose to use the same expectations that they had spent years undermining to save themselves. They knew that despite all they had done to reject traditional gender expectations, law and society could not see past their own limitations as women. Bonny and Read were women first and criminals second.

It cannot be ignored that this escape is something that was only accessible to white women. Indigenous and enslaved women would not have been afforded the same respect for their body or their child, and would have most likely been killed immediately. The trial of Bonny and Read reveals how white womanhood could be weaponized to manipulate legal consequences for serious crimes, and generally illustrates the choice available to some white women to act within and outside of staunch gender roles as per their desire for independence or self-preservation out of fear of persecution. This essay considers the irony of Bonny and Read's ultimate decision and therefore their role — not as just pirates — but as white, women pirates in the early 18th century West Indies.

Primary source documents — “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” a transcript of the trial, and the book by Captain Charles Johnson: *A General History of the Pyrates, from their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the present Time* — reveal a microhistory that critically analyzes the abilities and power of white women in 18th century British Jamaica. In 1724, Johnson compiled stories of pirates in the golden age of piracy that valorized the life of Caribbean pirates in the early 18th century. This essay samples sections of his writing in conjunction with actual trial notes since both chronicle the same events.

Persecuting Piracy

Bonny and Read operated as pirates in the Caribbean sea during the golden age of piracy. To understand the circumstances leading to Bonny and Read's decision to claim pregnancy in

order to avoid death, the harsh legal treatment of piracy during this time must be examined. The Caribbean, in the 17th and 18th centuries, was home to thousands of pirates, many of whom were once necessary tools in the battles of warring, imperial nations during the War of Spanish Succession. To understand the historical turning point of piracy trials in 1715, it is important, first, to understand the historical context of colonial Jamaican political attitudes toward piracy in the early 1700s.

Captain Jonathan Barnet, a pirate hunter employed by the British crown, was instructed by the then-governor of Jamaica, Lord A. Hamilton, on November 24, 1715 “to bring into your commission port all such pyrates.”⁴ Barnet was paid 1500 British pounds to command the ship *Tyger* with the explicit purpose of capturing pirates.⁵ Bonny and Read were arrested in October of 1720 alongside their captain, John Rackam, and his crew. Two weeks later, Governor of Jamaica, Nicholas Lawes, wrote on November 13, 1720:

About a fortnight ago a trading sloop belonging to the Island being well manned and commanded by a brisk fellow one Jonathan Barnet did us a very good peice of service he was met by a pirate vessel at the Leward part of this Island commanded by one Rackum in which were 18 pirates more whom he took and are now in goal, this week I intent to have them tryed by a Commission which was sent me some time agoe grounded on the Statute of the 11th and 12th of King William which by an Act of Parliament passed the last Sessions I find is made perpetuall.⁶

On November 28th, Bonny and Read were charged for “feloniously and wickedly” colluding with John Rackam and engaging in piracy under his leadership.⁷ Ten days earlier, Rackam and his male crew had been executed. They had produced no witnesses for the defense. They simply claimed that they had “never committed any Acts of Piracy, that their Design was against the

⁴ “America and West Indies: October 1717, 1-15.” *British History Online*, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol30/pp50-68>.

⁵ “America and West Indies: October 1717, 1-15.”

⁶ “America and West Indies: November 1720, 1-15.” *British History Online*. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol32/pp187-195>.

⁷ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 16.

Spaniards, and other.”⁸ Rackam was not denying acts of piracy, but rather his defense rested on the notion that they were allowed to pillage the Spanish.

For many years Britain engaged in “semi-piratical assaults on Spanish ships and ports,” in Jamaica where they operated with “secret-governmental blessing.”⁹ During the War of Spanish Succession, privateers in the employ of the British crown were deemed necessary to protect planters and communities of white British people from “hazardous settlement,” “foreign invasion,” or even “buccaneer harassment.”¹⁰ The sea belonged to no one, the West Indies were a foreign battlefield, and laws of international trade had not yet been established. Both the Spanish and the British governments accepted privateering as semi-legal protection technique because it meant that they could deny culpability for harassment and theft from other empirical powers. They also turned a blind eye to pirates as they too aided in raiding enemy ships. It is likely that Rackam hoped that his defense would stand because of this legal and political precedent. Unfortunately for him, by the end of the war in 1715, piracy was becoming more problematic as the British government increased trade regulations and formalized the economy.¹¹

Unlike in the early age of colonization, piracy in an organized economy “endangered maritime trade and presented notions of aggressive social mobility considered dangerous to gentry leaders on land.”¹² Piracy was no longer an asset to the British crown because they could now act against rival nations on their own volition, empowered by their now-strong foothold in the Caribbean. The America Act of 1708 created a system of privateering that rendered pirate

⁸ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 15.

⁹ Lucille Mathurin Mair, Hilary Beckles, and Verene Shepherd, eds, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655–1844*. Kingston: (University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁰ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 9.

¹¹ Mark G. Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 366-367.

¹² Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740*, 367.

activities illegal, and by 1713, the Peace of Utrecht ended piracy as an unofficial arm of the British colonial effort.¹³

In 1655, Jamaica was not only the first British conquest, but also the first state-sponsored “colonizing experiment.”¹⁴ With no precedent, British rule was disorganized and remnants of the Spanish colony permeated many aspects of government — especially so in the case of the Catholic Church and the establishment of plantation slavery — and contributed to the British mainland’s painting of Jamaica as a wayward colony. Rackam did not account for the fact that Nicholas Lawes, the Governor of Jamaica, was eager to prove himself tough on crime while maintaining peace with the Spanish.¹⁵ In 1720, Lawes oversaw the prosecution and conviction of most of the pirates in the Caribbean. Despite helping the British colonize the Caribbean and antagonize Spanish colonies, pirates were developing permanent settlements and unchecked piracy was causing too many problems. After Rackam’s execution, his body and those of his male crew were “carried to Plumb-point, Bush-Key and Gun-Key; where they were hung on Gibbets in Chains, for public Example and to terrify others from such-like evil Practices.”¹⁶ Piracy was over and examples were to be made of all those tried by Governor Lawes.

Rackam hoped that historical animosity against the Spanish would have been enough to save him — alas, it was not. Instead, Rackam and his men were sentenced to death. Bonny and Read were witnesses to the brutal example Lawes’ made of Rackam — a dare to any pirates wishing to follow in his footsteps. It comes as no surprise, then, that Bonny and Read took a different approach in their own defense. Piracy, when Bonny and Read were caught, was punished with a heavy hand. Desperate for their lives, the two women had to find an excuse that

¹³ Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740*, 367.

¹⁴ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 8.

¹⁵ Marcus Rediker, “When Women Pirates Sailed the Seas,” in *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 17, no. 4 (1993): 102-10, 103.

¹⁶ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 15.

would save them. It is necessary to note that, when piracy was a crime most unforgivable, two white women were able to escape execution by weaponizing their womanhood. Despite the systemic persecution of pirates in the Caribbean, Bonny and Read knew that invoking pregnancy as white women would protect them whereas a legal or political defense would not.

White Women in Jamaica

The social rules in British Jamaica were similar to what they would have been for white, middle-class Europeans. Social circles were largely dictated by class, family associations, and marriage, which acted as a means for wealthy white women to retain “their exclusive position” in society.¹⁷ British society in Jamaica was designed to mimic society in England. Despite the newness of British rule in Jamaica, European influence was not new. Many white, European social expectations about family and gender roles were ingrained into the colonial psyche.¹⁸

Despite their criminal behavior and activity, Bonny and Read were theoretically valuable to the British government as they continued to settle Jamaica. In 1655, there were approximately 2,194 healthy men, 2,316 sick men and only 173 women and children in Jamaica.¹⁹ This gender imbalance continued into the 18th century, making white women and white children a necessary physical representation of white supremacist colonial power. Bonny and Read took advantage of their position as white women and were able to develop a strategic defense. The expectation that white women were not capable of violence combined with white, European notions of family in Jamaica worked to Bonny and Read’s advantage. Here, Bonny and Read’s existence as white women reflected “not the typical, but the strongest side of popular womanhood.”²⁰ This section examines the role of white women in colonial Caribbean society.

¹⁷ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 12.

¹⁸ Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740*, 102.

¹⁹ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 9.

²⁰ Rediker, “When Women Pirates Sailed the Seas,” 107.

English women living in Jamaica during the 17th century were almost entirely dependent on the men around them. Marriage was the easiest and most acceptable way white women could move to the Caribbean. By the time England conquered Jamaica in 1655, white women on the island primarily functioned as nurses and were soldiers' wives. In contrast to the later years of British Jamaican society, policies of the early years were focused on "transporting those wives desirous to go to their husbands in Jamaica."²¹ In England, married white women lost all legal rights. This is not true in colonial Jamaica. By the 1670s, three women were listed as owning significant sections of land granted to them by the British Government, separate from that owned by their husbands or fathers. By 1680, three of the nine largest plantations in Jamaica were owned by white widows.²² White women in Jamaica had already been granted significant socioeconomic power as well as independent legal standing by the time of Bonny and Read's trial.

Why Bonny and Read Could Choose Piracy

Bonny and Read could turn to piracy because it offered them an opportunity to gain financial wealth, power, and status without becoming widowed. It was also an option given their race. While piracy was an occupation that could afford wealth and status to more than just white people, the majority of pirates in the Caribbean were white men.²³ Most acts of piracy were not radical redistributions of power and wealth, but consistent with the larger colonial context in which pirates actively participated in the exploitation of Black and Indigenous people. Illegal piracy contributed to the slave trade. Many pirates also engaged in violent, nonconsensual sexual relationships with Black and Indigenous women. These relationships were "temporary and often predatory in nature," and were based on "the wider context of Caribbean slavery, especially as it

²¹ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 9.

²² Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 11.

²³ Peter Earle. "Chapter 9: The Golden Age of Piracy." Essay. In *The Pirate Wars*, 159–80. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Griffin, 2006).

was developing in Jamaica.”²⁴ Women of color often played an essential role in the pirate economy via the commodification of their bodies. Despite their own subjugation under English patriarchy, the stories of Ann Bonny and Mary Read are those of white, English women — colonizers who lived in the Americas and benefited from systems that actively exploited Black and Indigenous women.

The difference in experience between white female pirates and non-white women was significant. The roles afforded to white women would have been very different from those of Black and Indigenous women, who made up the majority of the female population of the Caribbean at the time. For white women, there were certain opportunities — unobtainable to women of color — which “depended on the new community’s concepts of its economic aims, its social responsibilities, and its religious ethos.”²⁵ Thusly, Bonnie and Read used piracy as an escape from traditional gender roles available to white women in the Atlantic world.

The Trial: Escaping Death and Fictive Pregnancy

By analyzing their non-normative life of piracy and gender expressions, the absurdity of Bonny and Read’s claims of pregnancy reveals their ability to manipulate the court in a way that present-day readers can look back and think, “Honestly, good for her.” After the trial of Rackam, Bonny, and Read, the pirates John Eaton, Edward Warner, Thomas Baker, Thomas Quick, John Cole, Benjamin Palmer, Walter Rouse, John Hanton, and John Howard, former associates of Rackam, were tried on January 24th, 1721.²⁶ The other members of the crew claimed “not guilty”

²⁴ John C. Appleby, *Women and English Piracy, 1540-1720: Partners and Victims of Crime*. Rochester: (Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 97.

²⁵ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 3.

²⁶ In the trial records it says 1720, but based on the reading of other primary sources, I believe this is a misprint. This brings up an issue of accuracy in court documentation. According to Charles Johnson, Eaton, Warner and Rackam were arrested at the same time, which would suggest that Eaton’s trial took place in 1721, not 1720 as is shown in the records. Also, the pages are listed chronologically up until the point of what is meant to be January 1720, where it somehow remains 1720 rather than the new year. Therefore, I believe that it was a typo in the trial records, and the pirate trials recorded on pages 21 and following were meant to have taken place in 1721 and not 1720.

stating that they only engaged in piracy under threat of violence.²⁷ When asked to provide a defense, Eaton, a crew member, spoke for the prisoners at the bar. He explained that they simply took a “pettiauger” (a type of boat) to go turtling. A group of “Englishmen” — Rackam and his crew — desired to come aboard, and Eaton’s crew was persuaded to let them on their ship for a drink.²⁸ When Captain Barnet’s ship appeared on the horizon, Rackam “Ordered the Prisoners at the bar to help weigh the Sloops Anchor immediately, which they all refused; That Rackam used violent means to oblige them; and that when Captain Barnet came up with them, they all readily and willingly surrendered themselves.”²⁹ They tried to argue that they only acted as pirates under duress from Rackam. Nonetheless, Eaton and his colleagues were condemned to death and executed on February 17th and 18th.³⁰

Unlike Eaton and his men, Bonny and Read were, according to court records, acting of their own free will. The women were against forming a stronger argument — that they were held against their will and forced to service the men aboard the ship. In fact, Bonny and Read were proud of their occupation. Through the testimonies of Thomas Dillon, John Besneck, Peter Cornelian, and Dorothy Thomas it can be concluded that there was really no question as to whether or not Bonny and Read were acting of their own free will. Dillon described Bonny’s behavior by saying, “Bonny, one of the prisoners at the Bar, had a Gun in her Hand, That [Bonny and Read] were both very profligate, cursing and swearing much, and very ready and willing to do anything on Board.”³¹ Besneck and Cornelian said that “[Bonny and Read] were very active on Board and Willing to do anything... That they did not [seem] to be kept, or detain’d by Force, but of their own Free-Will and Consent.”³² Thomas said the two women, “cursed and swore at

²⁷ “America and West Indies: April 1721.”

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol32/pp281-297>.

²⁸ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 33.

²⁹ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 33.

³⁰ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 33.

³¹ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 19.

³² “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 18.

the Men to murder the Deponent; and that they should kill her, to prevent her coming against them.”³³ Bonny and Read were violent members of Rackham’s crew. Despite having the option to ensure their safety by claiming captivity alongside pregnancy, Bonny and Read wanted to be known as pirates. Why claim pregnancy alone if a more viable defense, unwilling captive mothering their rapists’ children, was available?

Well into the trial, Bonny and Read had lost their leader, Rackham, and they needed a new defense to explain their presence aboard his ship to prevent their execution. They accepted their sentence and provided no witnesses for their defense, but they asked for a stay of execution because “both the Prisoners inform’d the Court, that they were both quick with Child, and prayed that execution of the sentence might be stayed. Whereupon the Court ordered, that Execution of Said Sentence should be respiced, and that an Inspection should be made.”³⁴ Pregnant women could not be executed until after the child was born, according to English law.³⁵ In order to prevent execution, and perhaps stall for time, Bonny and Read took advantage of this law created to protect the unborn children of criminals. An investigation would be made to determine if they were pregnant and then they were to be held in custody until the time that a child was born. These two women were proved through this trial to have been active and violent participants in frustrating the colonial experiment for the British who hoped to co-exist with Spanish settlements in the Caribbean. They certainly seemed to understand exactly what they were doing and yet when it came time to be held accountable for their actions, they took a step back and reclaimed their role as women in society.

³³ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 18.

³⁴ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 19.

³⁵ “Prison And Pregnancy.” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 5551 (1967): 582.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20388211>.

Women on board pirate ships were often prostitutes or captives; they existed to merely service male pirates' sexual desires.³⁶ Pirates generally discouraged women's presence onboard ship. Since Bonny and Read were neither prostitutes or captives, they would have not likely engaged in sexual activities with any of the men on board — not because the men did not want to, but because the men had already deemed as worthy and respectful enough to exist on the ship as coworkers not concubines. The absurdity of Bonny and Read's claim was exacerbated by the fact that they were routinely seen fighting, drinking, swearing, and wearing mens' clothing.

Johnson suggests that Bonny and Read dressed in “men's Clothes” so that she could remain on the ship, with her womanhood concealed from the rest of the crew.³⁷ But according to the witnesses at her prosecution, those aboard Rackam's ship were well aware that she was a woman. Bonny and Read chose to wear men's or women's clothing, not to hide their womanhood since it was obvious. Dorothy Thomas testified that though Read and Bonny “wore Mens Jackets, and long Trousers, and Handkerchiefs tied about their Heads;” she knew they were women “by the largness of their Breasts.”³⁸ Bonny and Read, like their choice to turn to piracy, chose the clothes they wore as self-expression. It is possible that Bonny and Read dressed in men's clothing because they did not adhere to heterosexuality, which only further undermined the believability of their pregnancies. Historically, queer women often pretended to be men, and sometimes chose men's clothes as not an extension of their gender but an expression of their sexuality — especially so in the Atlantic world. One such example can be seen in the case of Catalina de Erauso, who found fame and stature from her adventures across Spanish America as a man and was even accepted as a lesbian once she returned to identifying as a woman.³⁹ Though

³⁶ Laura Sook Duncombe, *Pirate Women: The Princesses, Prostitutes, and Privateers Who Ruled the Seven Seas*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2017), 1.

³⁷ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 18.

³⁸ “The Tryals of Captain John Rackham and other Pirates,” 18.

³⁹ Catalina de Erauso. *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World*. Translated by Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.)

Bonny and Read may have tried willingly to conceal their womanhood in order to present their queerness, their bodies betrayed their womanhood to other pirates they worked alongside.

Furthermore, it was the self-victimization of their white, female bodies that saved them.

Pregnancy for non-white women would not have been the same defense as it was for white women. Black people greatly outnumbered white men and women in Jamaica in the census of 1673, and most likely this trend continued well into the 18th century.⁴⁰ The dehumanization of Black women meant that there was a strong connection between physical labor and motherhood, where enslaved women working in the field “did not obliterate a recognition of their ability to also produce wealth in the form of enslaved children.”⁴¹ Children were valuable in all aspects of the colonial effort in Jamaica, but only for white women could pregnancy truly save a woman from death and ensure a type of freedom. For enslaved women, bondage and even death would continue.

What became of these two women after their stay of execution can only be speculated about. Their attempt to undermine the legal repercussions of their actions could have been a stalling technique. Johnson suggests that Mary Read died of natural causes and Anne Bonny escaped to find bliss in a domestic life in South Carolina. But the records of their lives after this trial are lost to history. If they were in fact pregnant, their lives were not going to be easy. Pregnancy was extremely dangerous and especially in jail, where sanitary conditions were not ideal for childbirth. But the fascination with their story seems based on the fact that they were women. On the cover of Johnson’s book the advertisement reads, “With the remarkable Actions and Adventures of the Two Female Pyrates: Mary Read and Anne Bonny.”⁴² Their names are the

⁴⁰ Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*, 25.

⁴¹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, 148.

⁴² Captain Charles Johnson, ed. *A General History of the Pyrates, from their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the present Time*. (London, 1724.) Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/files/40580/40580-h/40580-h.htm.

largest on the page. The world was not yet ready in 1725 to accept fluidity in gender roles, but it was not so prudish or restrained in imagining a world where there is a “willingness to interrogate the material reality of the family body, its uses and contains, its social meaning.”⁴³

So what happened to them after their execution was halted?

There is no record of them being executed. But Johnson makes a guess. He writes that after their trial Read “was seiz’d with a violent Fever...of which she died in Prison.”⁴⁴ But for Bonny, even he says that she “was continued in Prison, to the Time of her lying in, and afterwards reprieved from Time to Time; but what is become of her since, we cannot tell; only this we know, that she was not executed.”⁴⁵ Johnson also suggests that her father may have come to see her before Rackam was executed. He wanted to help her, but “the Action of leaving her Husband was an ugly Circumstance against her.”⁴⁶ She could have been saved by her father, but her recklessness in love and in life defeated even his influence.

But, as is evidenced in their trial, Bonny and Read were able to present themselves as they saw fit. Johnson’s insistence that they hid their womanhood was meant to “reinforce the immoral profligacy Of the actors”.⁴⁷ The assertion made by Johnson of their perverseness was untrue. Their wearing of men’s clothes did not hinder their defense because of how ingrained white supremacy as well as how white womanhood superseded any and all identities Ann Bonny and Mary Read might have held. Yes, they wore men’s clothes, committed heinous crimes of piracy during the Golden Age, and abandoned all notions of ladylike propriety — but they were always white women first. They could cry pregnancy and avoid execution.

⁴³ Sally O’Driscoll, “The Pirate’s Breasts: Criminal Women and the Meanings of the Body.” *The Eighteenth Century* 53, no. 3 (2012): 357–79. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2012.0024>, 359.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates, from their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the present Time*.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates, from their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the present Time*.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates, from their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the present Time*.

⁴⁷ Appleby, *Women and English Piracy, 1540-1720: Partners and Victims of Crime*, 87.

Conclusion

Anne Bonny and Mary Read lived a life of contradictions. A life in which their identities as women limited their social mobility and pushed them to piracy, while also saving their lives. As white women, they were not forced into a life of enslavement like Indigenous and Black women. Instead, they were able to join forces with pirates in search of freedom. But when their life was threatened as a consequence of the life they chose, they donned their truest and foremost identifier of white womanhood and pleaded pregnancy to save themselves. These women broke the norm for most of their life — even still, they could not and did not want to abandon it entirely. Bonny and Read's story is not a complete subversion of gendered expectations but an ironic, inevitable fulfillment of white womanhood.

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A Fading Disaster: Examining Chernobyl as a Historical Event

Muyao “Selina” Ma¹

The Chernobyl disaster holds an interesting position as an “event” in world history. Though commonly recognized as the “worst, most disastrous” nuclear accident, its name seldom appears in the Google search result for “the most important events of the 20th century.” The disaster’s relevance to modern conversations about clean energy development is disproportionately marginal, given the prevalence of current debates on the viability of nuclear energy compared to other sources of non-renewable energy. Furthermore, when examined through a historical lens, Chernobyl does not seem to fit the definition of “events” as “occurrences that have momentous consequences” that directly “change the course of history.” Instead, its importance is often derived from the reactor meltdown’s magnitude in comparison to other contemporary nuclear accidents such as Three Mile Island and Fukushima.² What is the cause of Chernobyl’s pedagogical invisibility in modern history? This essay will explore how the Chernobyl disaster’s significance as a historical event is limited both geographically and temporally as a result of its particular properties as a nuclear accident.

Sewell’s Definition of “Historical Events”

In order to examine the Chernobyl disaster’s historical significance, it is necessary to first establish the premises of a “historical event.” In his article “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” William Sewell, a Professor of History and Political Science at the University of Chicago, defines historical events as “sequences of

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Anne O’Donnell for her invaluable guidance and encouragement.

² William H. Sewell. “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille.” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 6 (1996): 841-81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657830>, 842.

occurrences that result in transformation of structures.”³ Sewell conceptualizes structures through their interwoven relationship with social practices: “structures” are multi-nodal systems “composed [of] cultural schemas, distribution of resources, and modes of power,” which provide individuals in society with “meanings, motivations, and recipes for social action,” “means and stakes of action,” as well as methods of regulating the actions based on their viability.⁴ Given this definition, it then follows that “transformation of structures” implies consequential changes to the connotations, viability, and legitimacy of one or many previously established social practices. Moreover, as the outcome of an event, the dimension of a structural transformation ultimately determines the impact of the event itself, and thus its historical importance.

Sewell asserts that the structural transformation’s magnitude is dependent on several crucial elements which are characteristic of all historical events’ progression. A historical event, argues Sewell, is a longitudinal process that features an initial rupture which incites a series of “interrelated ruptures [that] disarticulate[s] the previous structural network,” which “makes a novel rearticulation [of the event] possible.”⁵ The ruptures often manifest in the form of ideological conflicts between the old and the new and contest the authority of previously established structures. In order to “result in a durable transformation of structures,” the ruptures must be “recognized as notable by contemporaries,” an act that grants them contextual legitimacy and gravity.⁶ Finally, Sewell points out that a historical event is usually associated with heightened emotions, such as “anxiety, fear, or exhilaration,” caused by uncertainty

³ Sewell, 843.

⁴ Sewell, 842.

⁵ Sewell, 844.

⁶ Sewell, 844.

resulting from the rupture.⁷ This emotional intensity “stimulate[s] bursts of collective cultural creativity,” which perpetuates the process of resignification and rearticulation.⁸

Defining the “Chernobyl Disaster”

When analyzing Chernobyl’s significance following Sewell’s dissection of “historical events,” it becomes evident that the disaster’s “initial rupture” requires distinction. In Sewell’s essay, the storming of the Bastille — the people of Paris’ violent dismantling of the state prison — is used to exemplify the rupture. The people’s action then led to a state of uncertainty and heightened emotions, which later provided motivation for the resignification of this event. In the case of Chernobyl, it may be tempting to consider the explosion itself as the initial rupture. However, this definition proves incomplete, given the criteria that the initial rupture must function as a disruptor of preexisting “articulation between different structures” and result in a state of heightened emotions.⁹ Instead, it is more appropriate to define the “initial rupture” as the explosion’s irradiation of inhabitants and the natural landscape surrounding Chernobyl.

Before the events of Chernobyl, public perception of nuclear physics reflected a shared sense of confidence in “scientific and technical progress,” which was promoted as a path of innovation under the policy of *uskorenienie* (“acceleration”).¹⁰ The fact that most of the informed Soviet population—including the government officials and nuclear scientists—believed that the RBMK reactor design “could not possibly explode” demonstrates this collective faith in science.

¹¹ Even as concrete evidence was gathered proving that an explosion had actually occurred, a

⁷ Sewell, 845.

⁸ Sewell, 845.

⁹ Sewell, 845.

¹⁰ Serhii Plokhyy. *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*. (Basic Books, 2018), 10.

¹¹ Plokhyy, 19.

plant worker observed that “few dared to challenge the belief that the reactor could not possibly have exploded,” since “[their] belief that the reactor could not explode was too great.”¹² This account serves as evidence of the fact that the reactor’s physical explosion may have been shocking, but it was not adequate in eliciting a structural dislocation.

Alternatively, the recognition of the explosion’s health consequences resulted in a greater structural disruption, which manifested in the public’s sense of disillusionment in science and resigned distrust of nuclear power. These sentiments are clearly present in the narrative of Valentin Borisevich, the former head of the Laboratory of the Institute of Nuclear Energy at the Belarussian Academy of Science, as he commented “[i]t was the cult of physics, the era of physics!...it’s only now that nuclear energy has fallen so low and been shamed...[w]e were all so careless! We lived with such belief! ... [M]an does not actually accommodate science very much—he gets in the way of it.”¹³ Borisevich’s lamentations are representative of the sharp decline of public faith in science and technology, which highlights the dislocation of science’s previously positive cultural significance in Soviet society. It cannot be denied that the explosion itself negated public belief in humans’ absolute control over technology. However, the examples above demonstrate that the emotions of betrayal and fear, which led to the process of disarticulating and rearticulating the relationship between science and the human society, stemmed from the recognition that contrary to previous belief, technological development could potentially cause considerable harm to humans. The involvement of human suffering in inciting the process of resignification demands that the definition of Chernobyl’s initial rupture includes

¹² Plokhy, 112-113.

¹³ Svetlana Alexievich. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Translated by Keith Gessen. (Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 170, 171, 172.

its immediate impact on nearby environments. The Chernobyl disaster is not only the power plant's explosion, but also its collective human cost.

Geopolitical Ramifications

Defining Chernobyl's "initial rupture" as the explosion and its irradiation of surrounding habitats creates a division between the communities directly affected by the explosion and the rest of the Soviet and the world population. This division could be better articulated through the language of the "zone," as discussed by Kate Brown in her book *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*. In the context of nuclear radiation, Brown defines "the zone" as an arbitrary "spatial [re]arrangement" of areas surrounding a site of radioactive contamination, often used by state officials for policy making and population management.¹⁴ An assessment of official documents delegating resource and information in the explosion's aftermath proves that the language of the "zone" was widely used following the explosion at Chernobyl.¹⁵ Chernobyl's "zone" separated those whose lives were directly impacted by the explosion from both the greater Soviet society and the rest of the world, a division that became significant in determining the two groups' distinctive processes of rearticulation.

As objects of radiation, those inside the zone experienced a much more passive process of rearticulating the event. The explosion directly impacted their relationship with the land they inhabit; while they experienced heightened fear and anxiety caused by uncertainties in the

¹⁴ Kate Brown. "Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters." 165-269: (Oxford University Press, 2015), 219.

¹⁵ Soviet Union. Committee for State, Security. Inventory of Information Subject to Classification on Issues Related to the Accident in Block # 4 of the Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station (Chaes). <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/134306>.

medical implications of their irradiated bodies and by difficulties that come with making a living on contaminated land, they could not control the professional conclusions or official process of decision-making related to their condition. Before the explosion, the lifestyle of people living in areas around Chernobyl was heavily dependent on land and nature. They surrounded their houses with fruit and vegetable patches, kept “chickens, cows, goats, sheep, and pigs,” “gathered mushrooms, berries, and herbs,” and “cut wood from the forest.”¹⁶ The explosion violently disrupted their symbiotic relationship with the land, as inhabitants were warned to avoid the natural landscape that had once been the source of their livelihood.¹⁷ In many cases, inhabitants were placed in direct opposition to their environment during Chernobyl’s liquidation, as individuals were enlisted to deconstruct contaminated areas by removing topsoil and shooting domestic animals that remained in the thirty-kilometer zone.¹⁸ Many used alcohol to distance themselves from their new identity antagonistic to the land that had nourished them; others sought to justify their actions through the symbolism of war, as one liquidator tasked with killing contaminated animals commented, “we were punishers. It was [...] a military operation.”¹⁹ This wartime tension was shared by many within the zone. Numerous inhabitants commented on the event’s resemblance to military wars when recalling the explosion’s aftermath.

In “Monologue About What Can Be Talked About With the Living and the Dead,”

Zinaida Yevdokimovna Kovalenko described her experience of Chernobyl’s evacuation:

People got scared. They got filled up with fear. At night people started packing up their things. I also got my clothes, folded them up. My red badges for my honest labor, and my lucky kopeika that I had. Such sadness! It filled my heart. Let me be struck down right here if I’m lying. And then I hear about how the soldiers were evacuating one village, and

¹⁶ Brown, *Manual for Survival*, 109.

¹⁷ Brown, 109-110.

¹⁸ Alexievich, 91, 71.

¹⁹ Alexievich, 93.

this old man and woman stayed. Until then, when people were roused up and put on buses, they'd take their cow and go into the forest. They'd wait there. **Like during the war, when they were burning down the villages.** Why would our soldiers chase us? [Starts crying.] It's not stable, our life. I don't want to cry.²⁰ [...] I'll remember everything for you. The planes are flying and flying. Every day. They fly real-real low right over our heads. They're flying to the reactor. To the station. One after the other. While here we have the evacuation. They're moving us out. Storming the houses. People have covered up, they're hiding. The livestock is moaning, the kids are crying. **It's war!**²¹

Oleg Leontyevich Vorobey, a liquidator, remarked on his impression of wartime when he first entered the thirty-kilometer zone, "We rode in—there was a sign that said, Zone Off Limits. **I'd never been to war, but I got a familiar feeling.** I remembered it from somewhere. From where? I connected it to death, for some reason . . ." ²² The same sentiment was shared by Major Oleg Leonodovich Pavlov, a helicopter pilot, "[a]t first there was disbelief, this sense that it was a game. **But it was a real war, an atomic war.** We had no idea—what's dangerous and what's not, what should we watch out for, and what ignore? No one knew."²³ In "Monologue About How We Can't Live Without Chekhov and Tolstoy," Katya P. reflects on her experience of Chernobyl in relation to the older generation's experience of the two World Wars, "[a]t the movies I saw the war. My grandmother and grandfather remember that they never had a childhood, they had the war. **Their childhood is the war, and mine is Chernobyl.**"²⁴

The descriptions above reveal that the process of rearticulation within the zone focused itself on the population's last memory of insecurity related to their land. Because of radiation's ability to saturate its surrounding landscape, the structure dislocated by the explosion was the inhabitants' relationship with their environment. Just like World War II, radiation made their land

²⁰ Alexievich, 33. (Emphasis Added.)

²¹ Alexievich, 34. (Emphasis Added.)

²² Alexievich, 66. (Emphasis Added.)

²³ Alexievich, 72. (Emphasis Added.)

²⁴ Alexievich, 98. (Emphasis Added.)

inhospitable; just like the German troops, radioactive particles forced them to abandon their traditional way of living. As a result, they redefined the explosion as an invasion of radiation.

Since those outside the zone did not experience the urgency of living on irradiated land, the most immediate structural dislocation was related to the authority of the Soviet state. In the aftermath of Chernobyl, the uncertainty experienced by those outside the zone was a result of the lack of credible official information regarding the explosion; consequently, they experienced heightened political anger, as well as fear against those coming from inside the zone. As the Soviet regime restricted free political discourse through censoring pamphlets and artistic creations, people's fear and anger fueled "collective cultural creativity" in the form of jokes. The Chernobyl jokes are studied in László Kürti's article "The Politics of Joking: Popular Response to Chernobyl", in which he cites Hans Speier's consideration of "clandestine jokes, publications, and even dreams ... as forms of resistance to modern totalitarian regime[s]."²⁵ An examination of the article's list of jokes shows that a number of them poke fun at radiation's effect on the human body by exaggerating the explosion's effect on those inside the zone.²⁶ Although these jokes could be interpreted as a reflection of the joke teller's perceived "seriousness of [radiation's] danger" to the human body and their feelings of insecurity regarding their own health, the jokes dehumanized the population inside the zone by portraying them as abnormal and foreign.²⁷ Over time, the jokes facilitated a detachment of fundamental identity from those inside the zone. Additionally, the retelling of the explosion through jokes rearticulated the event into a farcical failure of the Soviet state, a redefinition that inadvertently reduced the event's gravity related to

²⁵ László Kürti. "The Politics of Joking: Popular Response to Chernobyl." *The Journal of American Folklore* 101, no. 401 (1988): 324-34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/540473>. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/540473>, 235.

²⁶ See jokes 3, 18, 41, 47 in Appendix.

²⁷ Kürti, 326.

radioactive contamination outside of the zone. This reframe of the explosion greatly undermined the explosion's contemporary significance. When combined with the alienation from inhabitants inside the zone, the disaster's presence in the collective public memory lost its gravity as an epoch-defining event. As a result, the explosion did not cause a definitive structural transformation.

Other than limits imposed by the construct of the zone, the Chernobyl disaster's reduced significance as a historical event is also the result of the lack of contemporary recognition. The severity of the explosion was downplayed since its initial announcement. After two days of secrecy about what had happened, "[t]he Soviet media finally broke its silence [about the disaster] ... on Monday, April 28" with a brief, outwardly disinterested announcement on an evening news program.²⁸ Because the Soviet government feared "'the spread of alarmist rumors and tendentious information'" related to the explosion, national outdoor parades for International Workers' Day on the first of May were carried out as usual, despite their potential to expose thousands of participants of all ages to radioactive particles.²⁹ This intentional suppression of information within the Soviet Union, as well as the prioritization of the May Day parade over the accident, undermined the explosion's gravity and legitimacy as a national affair. This dispersed collective public discontent towards and criticism of the accident, thus preventing the heightened emotions from causing the formation of social groups that would have effectively facilitated structural transformations. Furthermore, despite their initial skepticism towards the downplayed magnitude of the explosion, Western agencies eventually adopted a narrative of the disaster that features Chernobyl as a one-time accident caused by human errors. In the Nuclear Energy

²⁸ Plokhy, 175-176.

²⁹ Plokhy, 183, 184.

Agency's (NEA) executive summary of Chernobyl, the disaster is described as an "uncontrollable power surge [which] resulted in violent explosions and almost total destruction of the reactor." The report portrayed the explosion as the result of a series of human errors including "[improper] exchange of information and co-ordination between the team in charge of the test and the personnel in charge of the operation safety of the nuclear reactor", "a number of actions [that] deviated from established safety procedures," and "the existence of significant drawbacks in the reactor design."³⁰ The NEA concluded that because "the Chernobyl accident was very specific in nature," "it should not be seen as a reference accident for future emergency planning purposes."³¹ The international agencies' narrative reduced Chernobyl's generalizability, which limited its opportunity of connecting with the greater narrative of nuclear energy safety. This detachment of Chernobyl's significance prevented it from resulting in substantial local or global structural transformations in nuclear power development.

In addition to intentional neglect and strategic rationalization, two characteristics associated with the nature of radiation also contributed to the Chernobyl disaster's lack of structural transformation. First, the source of radiation is geographically localized. Although wind or water currents can carry unpredictable amounts of radioactive particles to distant locations, the epicenter of the disaster—the explosion—is permanently fixed. Given the Cold War period's contemporary global political division, the explosion is inevitably attached to the geopolitical landscape of the Soviet Union. As a result, the disaster's prevalence and relevance are both weakened with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the political and

³⁰ NEA. "Chernobyl: Executive Summary." https://www.oecd-neo.org/jcms/pl_28265/chernobyl-executive-summary, 2.

³¹ NEA, 11.

geographical context of the explosion limits its modern perceived generalizability, a phenomenon exemplified by a professor's remark in his lecture titled "Chernobyl—How It Happened", "we're lucky to live here in the U.S., where our worst act in the Three Mile Island was not actually really that much of an accident."³² Similar to the construction of the "zone", the geographic location of the explosion perpetuates a division between Chernobyl and the international history of radiation. As the product of a deceased state, the disaster loses its relevance required for facilitating structural transformation.

Second, exposure to radiation is a time-dependent event. The latency period of disease in those exposed to low doses of radiation removed the sense of urgency from Chernobyl's human cost; as a result, the structural dislocation caused by the explosion occurred overtime. This reduced contemporary perception of radiation exposure's gravity, which blunted the sense of uncertainty associated with the event. Moreover, after the fire and the explosions were brought under control, the disaster became self-contained, as its focus became the subjects of radiation—the people of Chernobyl. Because radiation's effect is only observable through organic subjects, the only means of assessing the explosion's severity was through the health status of those within the "zone" and the condition of its surrounding ecosystem. Consequently, the disaster's existence became dependent on the "hosts" of radiation and of memories related to its effects. While the event's importance immediately after the explosion was weakened by radiation's socially isolating nature, its long-term historical importance is undermined by the impermanence of human lives. The Chernobyl disaster is disappearing from history with the

³² Michael Short. "26. Chernobyl — How It Happened." MIT OpenCourseWare. September 20, 2019. Video, 54:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ijst4g5KFN0>, 2:14-2:20.

passing of each “Chernobylite”. An inhabitant inside the zone commented on this paradoxical transience of the disaster’s human impact in comparison to radiative particles’ permanence, “[w]e’ll die, and then we’ll become science ... We’ll die and everyone will forget us.”³³ Due to its temporally delayed effects and time-dependent existence, the accident loses its historical intensity as an unprecedented event. As a result, the event’s rearticulation was not prioritized following the explosion. The drawn-out timeline of the Chernobyl disaster—a unique byproduct of radiation—restricted its ability to initiate structural transformation.

Conclusion

Taking a future perspective, the association of the name “Chernobyl” with “nuclear accident” will likely be enduring. Although radiation made the Chernobyl disaster memorable with its peculiarity and longevity, its geographic and temporal characteristics localized the explosion’s potential for subsequent structural transformation. The current analysis proves that Soviet and global reaction to Chernobyl limited the explosion’s societal impact, neutralizing it as a rupture and reabsorbing its connotations into the preexisting structures. However, as Sewell contends, “[d]efining the boundaries of a historical event requires an act of judgement.”³⁴ Although the explosion is an event of the past, it is not unreasonable to argue that the Chernobyl disaster is not yet over. Perhaps a future rupture will remind the world of Chernobyl’s story again and renew its significance in world history.

³³ Alexeivich, 213.

³⁴ Sewell, 877.

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The Effects of the Spanish Conquest on the Indigenous Nahua's Bodily and Sexual Sovereignty

Bryan Duran Rodriguez

The Spanish conquest of Mexico in the early 1500s brought many cultural changes to the Indigenous population. A mixture (albeit forced) of European and Indigenous influences gradually created an entirely new social hierarchy and culture, much of which is still present in Mexico. While there are many Indigenous communities throughout Mexico today, the majority of their original culture from before the conquest has been forgotten or has mixed with European culture. Think of the famous Mexican figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe: originally an object of Indigenous devotion known as Tonantzin, she became a symbol of Mexican Catholicism as Our Holy Mother the Virgin Mary. This transformation allowed the Indigenous Nahua to hold on to their pre-conquest faith in local deities while simultaneously practicing Catholic worship.¹ Of the many Indigenous groups in the central valley of Mexico, I will focus on how the spiritual, physical, and ideological sovereignty of the Nahuas was negatively affected by the ideas implemented by the Spanish during their conquest. The pre-conquest history of the Indigenous LGBTQ+ population in Mexico has long been overlooked. As a member of the Nahua community and the LGBTQ+ community, I have personally translated several Nahuatl sources in this paper in order to gain more insight into their pre-conquest beliefs and to investigate how the arrival of the Spanish negatively affected them. Ultimately, I argue that the Spanish stripped away and condemned pre-conquest concepts of homosexuality and gender fluidity, ingraining homophobia into Nahua society for future generations.

¹ Bernadino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de nueva España: The Florentine Codex* (New Spain, 1577) 3:352. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667837/>.

Some scholars in the Mesoamerican field claim that there was no place for homosexuals in the Aztec Empire, and that any sort of homosexual behavior was met with the death penalty or severe forms of punishment. Historian Alfredo Lopez Austin states that the Nahuas had an extremely negative image of homosexuality. He writes, “The death penalty was imposed on both female and male homosexuals.”² Other scholars like Mauricio Gonzalez Arenas and Cesar Gamboa claim that homophobia was already instilled in Indigenous societies and that the Spanish had no effect on their views. As Arenas and Gamboa state, “Homophobia was not inaugurated with the arrival of the Spaniards ... on the contrary, it was already rooted among indigenous people.”³ However, judging by a variety of studies by modern-day academics and by first-hand accounts from Indigenous and Spanish authors and historians, one can see that the concepts of homosexuality and gender fluidity were not as taboo in pre-colonial Mexico as previously believed. Some of these modern-day academics include Peter Sigal and Zeb Tortorici. In *The Flower and the Scorpion*, historian Peter Sigal offers insight into how sexuality was portrayed in the Florentine Codex. Similarly, in Zeb Tortorici’s *Sins Against Nature*, Tortorici explores the many cases of sex crimes in colonial New Spain. Both works show how dramatically views on homosexuality have changed from the 16th century to now. Prior to the conquest, gender and sexuality played a role in some aspects of Nahuas’ spiritual and daily lives. A variety of sources written before and after the conquest demonstrate how the arrival of the Spanish altered Indigenous perspectives of homosexuality and gender identity.

² Alfredo Lopez Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas* (Utah: University of Utah Press, 1988), 305.

³ Mauricio González Arenas and César Gamboa, “Actitudes Homofóbicas Entre Los Indígenas Del Nuevo Mundo: Los Casos Azteca, Inca y Mapuche En Fuentes de Los Siglos XVI y XVII,” *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 45, no. 2 (2017): 359, <https://doi.org/10.5209/REAA.54931>.

Scholarly Work Regarding Queerness in Pre-Colonial Mexico

Much of what is known from Nahua culture comes from codices written by Spanish and Spanish-influenced Indigenous writers during the sixteenth century. It is for this reason that I state that the Spanish conquest had an effect on Indigenous perspectives of homosexuality and gender identity. Because Indigenous writers were taught by the Spanish and had most likely been influenced by Catholicism, they wrote about homosexuality with extremely negative attitudes. We cannot know for sure if these codices reflect the true feelings of the Indigenous people because identifying with those concepts could be met with death. As a result, we must be wary of how certain themes are engaged by the Spanish and by Nahua scholars taught by the Spanish. For this paper, I draw from the work of Sigal, Tortorici, and several other authors who have all explored sexuality and gender in pre-colonial Latin America in depth. Though there are limited primary sources available regarding the topics of homosexuality and gender identity/fluidity, I will use codices like the Florentine Codex and the Codex Barbonicus, various songs and poems in Nahuatl from pre-conquest Mexico, and correspondence between Spanish officials. I will also use oral history from pre-conquest Mexico, as some post-conquest Nahua scholars have preserved the attitudes of their predecessors. These few primary sources are the majority of what we have to reconstruct the Nahuas' pre-conquest view of homosexuality, seeing as a vast amount of material from before the arrival of Cortes was destroyed by the Spanish. We must also keep in mind that modern understandings of sexuality and gender identity are different from what Nahuas believed at this time. We should try not to impose twenty-first century views on historical sources from a time that can never be perfectly known.

In *The Flower and the Scorpion*, Sigal examines “the many Spanish-language reports that distorted the meaning of sexuality in early Nahuatl culture.”⁴ Rather than focusing on the written meaning of the various primary sources, Sigal considers the “‘difference’ that the Spanish never understood, blinded as they were by Christian cosmological principles.”⁵ The Spanish viewed any deviation from their sexual and gender norms as a moral indicator, proof that someone needed redemption through God, whereas the Nahuas did not hold such strict expectations. This new perspective allows us to attempt to view Nahua beliefs without the influence of the Catholic Church. One can see a stark difference between how the Nahua and Spanish engaged the issue of homosexuality. In the Florentine Codex, for example, the Spanish translated the Nahuatl word *cuiloni*, a passive, feminine man, as *puto* or “faggot” in Spanish.⁶ It is curious to see that the Spanish would translate this word into loaded, derogatory language, when the context for this scenario was a sacred conversation between deities. Evidently, they used this language to delegitimize the gods of native religion to show that the Catholic Church was morally above them. In comparing and analyzing works from before and after the conquest, one can begin to see a shift in Indigenous perspective from their pre-conquest beliefs to a new mindset influenced by Spanish colonization.

Homosexual Incidents and Societal and Religious Beliefs in Pre-Colonial Mexico

Some important aspects of pre-colonial Nahua religion that were linked to notions of homosexuality and gender were the gods Omoteotl, Tlazolteotl, and Xochipilli and the *temazcal* ceremony. The natural world was also a part of Nahua religion, with the flower being a symbol

⁴ Peter Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), x.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, Book 3, 12.

of feminine as well as sexual energy. While Ometeotl, Tlazolteotl, and Xochipilli are not explicitly marked as homosexual deities, various roles and activities that they take on in the world of Nahua religion can be associated with homosexual activity and/or gender fluidity.

While there is no record of the Nahuas explicitly stating that the flower possesses feminine energy, various Nahuatl works seem to link the two together. The *Cantares Mexicanos* is a collection of 91 traditional Nahuatl songs and poems. Within this collection are numerous instances in which the flower is used as a metaphor. In one instance, a woman refers to her vagina as *noxochinenetzin*, or my little flower doll, as she attempts to seduce a local *tlatoani*⁷. In another, a declaration of femininity is proclaimed proudly. David Bowles, a Nahuatl instructor at the University of Texas, translates this song as follows:

*With my rainbow skirt,
O mother dear,
I hold myself tall and proud,
No nieces, girlfriends in my way —
I'm a precious flower,
And I'm everlasting!*

*I've come to live a different life
Away from all the servant girls.
I'm a Huastec woman —*

⁷ Miguel León-Portilla, *Cantares mexicanos. II-tomo 2. Del f 42v al 85r*. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Coordinación de Humanidades, Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas e Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas/Fideicomiso Teixidor, 2011), LXXXV. <https://www.historicas.unam.mx/publicaciones/publicadigital/libros/cantares/cm03.html>

*My popcorn buds are beautiful!*⁸

In this song, the singer's "popcorn buds" (originally *izquixochitl*, a type of flower) are a metaphor for her breasts. These two songs establish a connection between the flower and femininity.

Homosexual relations existed in pre-colonial Mexico and were recorded through oral history, preserving the pre-colonial attitudes towards them. In *Relaciones*, Nahua historian Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanintzin compiles various Indigenous testimonies from pre-colonial Mexico. One of these testimonies involves the musician Quecholcohuatl from Chalco and Axayacatl, the 6th *tlatoani* (ruler) of Tenochtitlan. Quecholcohuatl sings a song to the *tlatoani* to bring peace between their cities. In his song, a woman says to the *tlatoani*, "Will you ruin my body painting? / You will lie watching what comes to be a green flamingo bird flower... / It is a quetzal popcorn flower, a flamingo raven flower."⁹ The ruining of the "body painting" connotes sexual contact between the *tlatoani* and the woman. Similar to previous songs and poems, there is a connection between the flower and femininity. According to Chimalpahin's testimonies, Axayacatl came out from his chambers to see the musician Quecholcohuatl for himself. Initially, Quecholcohuatl believed Axayacatl took offense, and feared that he was about to be executed. He began to plead for mercy and did various actions to show reverence to the *tlatoani*. To his surprise, Axayacatl was greatly pleased with his performance. He states to his wives, "Women, he has done it; he made me dance, he made me sing, this Quecholcohuatl ... I'll take him, and make him my singer ... Women, stand up, receive him well and sit him among you. Your rival

⁸ David Bowles, *Flower, Song, Dance: Aztec and Mayan Poetry* (Texas: Lamar University Press, 2013), Song 87-G.

⁹ Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 61.

has come!”¹⁰ The “taking” of Quecholcohuatl, the announcement to welcome him among his wives, and the fact that Axayacatl gave Quecholcohuatl various precious gifts (like dyed garments and precious jewelry) all suggest that they engaged in sexual relations.¹¹ The oral testimonies passed down to Chimalpahin were from before the Spanish conquest, with the interaction between Quecholcohuatl and Axayacatl occurring in 1479, forty years before the arrival of the Spanish. This story shows that there were homosexual interactions in pre-colonial Mexico. Unlike Spanish accounts, Chimalpahin did not condemn the activity in *Relaciones*; rather, he kept a neutral tone. This may demonstrate that even though homosexuality was not encouraged, it was not completely removed and ostracized from society.

Now that we have established a connection between the flower and femininity, as well as the possibility of same-sex attraction and intimacy, I will link religious elements to homosexual activity and gender identity. Ometeotl is the deity of creation from which the universe was born, according to the codices that describe the Nahua faith.¹² Their name comes from the Nahuatl words *Ome*, meaning two and *teotl*, roughly meaning deity or god. The reason that their name is “two gods” is because they split themselves into two parts, the male Ometecuhtli and the female Omecihuatl, to reproduce and create the world.

This concept of “gender duality” is very common among the Nahua gods, and many have been shown to change their gender identity depending on what activity they perform. Other deities show other types of “gender duality.” Tlazolteotl is the goddess of “filth,” vice, purification, lust, and the *temazcal* (steam bath). Her name comes from the Nahuatl words

¹⁰ Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanintzin, *Séptima relación de las Diferentes historias originales*. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2003), 149.

¹¹ Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 59-71.

¹² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 6.

tlazolli and *teotl*. *Tlazolli* roughly translates to filth, trash, or garbage, but it has a much more complex meaning. For the Nahuas, this was a moral concept that related to purity and impurity, moderation and excess, cleanliness and filth. The Nahuas believed everyone, at one point, encounters *tlazolli* and it is up to them to make sure they absolve themselves of it so the “filth” does not affect the community. As Sigal states, “The *tlazolli* complex links closely with the notion that while excess is necessary for the continuation of the community, ritual practitioners must always work to control the nature of the *tlazolli*, or else the community will become infused with excess and disease.”¹³ To rid themselves of the *tlazolli*, the Nahuas would visit the *temazcal*. The *temazcal*, or steam-bath, served as a way to purify oneself through rituals and by physically cleaning one’s body. Sigal further explains, “The Nahuas did not distinguish between the metaphorical and literal cleanings, because when one cleaned oneself, one also kept at bay all of the other things signified by the term *tlazolli*”.¹⁴ It is clear that the *temazcal* was an important part of Nahua religion, as physical cleanliness played a vital part in keeping their society clean from impurity. While sex sometimes occurred in the *temazcal*, it was thought of as a place where one could absolve and rid oneself of any excess, including sexual excess which would be regarded as “filth”.¹⁵ In future Spanish accounts, however, chroniclers would refer to the *temazcal* as a place of impurity where Indigenous people committed sexual sins.¹⁶

It is important to note that while Tlazolteotl brought people to vice and filth, she could also absolve and cleanse them of any *tlazolli*. In the Codex Magliabechiano, Tlazolteotl is shown to be guarding the *temazcal*, making the goddess of filth the same one who can clean you.

¹³ Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹⁶ Museo de América, *Codex Tudela* (New Spain, 1553).

¹⁷ It is also interesting to note that in various codices, Tlazolteotl is seen to be sporting both female and male items. In the Borgia Codex, there is a painting that shows Tlazolteotl giving an unborn child to a female death figure as she was associated with childbirth and the dangers involved. When one takes a closer look at Tlazolteotl, her depiction shows a woman's skirt and a man's loincloth. She also has a snake as a belt, which the Nahuas view as a phallic symbol as well as a symbol of sexual excess. In the Codex Fejevary Mayer, Tlazolteotl is wearing two snakes, one coming out of the mouth and the other coming out beneath the skirt. The snake coming out beneath the skirt has a phallic connotation.¹⁸ It should be noted that certain deities usually wore a particular article of clothing to signify their gender. Male deities were usually depicted with a loincloth and a snake (to symbolize the penis), and women wore a skirt and were topless. These visual depictions of Tlazolteotl signify a sort of gender ambiguity the Nahuas had towards the deity. Visually, this shows that pre-colonial Nahuas conceived of gender fluidity as a part of their religious beliefs. We only refer to Tlazolteotl as a "goddess" because of the attributes given: "Thus Tlazolteotl primarily marks particular aspects of Nahua life associated with femininity... childbirth, cleaning, and sex."¹⁹ The way the Nahuas depicted Tlazolteotl suggests that gender identity was not entirely set in stone. Fluidity between the male and female identity was religiously tolerated, for if it were not, Tlazolteotl would not have been depicted as such and given such importance in their lives.

Another dual-gendered god is Xochipilli, the god of dance, art, songs, and flowers. His name comes from the Nahuatl words *xochitl*, meaning flower, and *pilli*, meaning prince, together

¹⁷ Elizabeth Hill Boone and Zelia Nuttall, *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans: The Codex Magliabechiano* (California: University of California, 1985), 156.

¹⁸ Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, 36-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 37.

making “the flower prince.” Xochipilli’s origin is interesting, as he traversed through various Mesoamerican societies. According to historian David Greenberg, “He may have been taken over from the earlier Toltec civilization, which had a reputation for sodomy among both the Mayans (whom the Toltecs conquered), and the Aztecs (who conquered the Toltecs).” Because of Xochipilli’s previous relation to “sodomitic” societies like the Toltecs, he is interpreted by some as the god of homosexuals or as the god of male prostitutes.²⁰ The word for prostitute, *xochihua*, means “flower bearer,” a linguistic link between sexual energy and the flower. One could also interpret the *xochihua* as a person with feminine aspects. In the Florentine Codex, Xochipilli has a counterpart Xochiquetzal (meaning “quetzal flower”).²¹ Like Omoteotl, many consider Xochipilli to be one deity with a dual gender form, once again showing that gender fluidity in Nahua culture was historically tolerated more than previously believed.

The Arrival of the Spanish and Their Impact

Once Hernán Cortés and the conquistadors of Spain arrived in Mexico around 1519, imposing the influence of Christianity and subsequent laws onto Indigenous communities, attitudes towards homosexuality and gender identity in Nahua society would forever be negatively affected. The Spanish implemented cruel punishments for those who participated in the *pecado nefando*, or the “nefarious sin.” This is a complicated term, as there were multiple actions that can be interpreted as the nefarious sin. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will be using sexual acts between the same gender as the definition for the nefarious sin, which many secondary sources refer to as sodomy.

²⁰ David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 165

²¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 8:34

To understand why the Spanish condemned, persecuted, and repressed homosexuality, we must look at their beliefs. The Spanish saw sodomy as sinful due to their adherence to traditional Catholic values.²² In fact, they viewed sex itself as sinful, but heterosexual intercourse for reproductive purposes was seen as the least sinful form of sex. While other Catholic countries, such as Italy, viewed the sin of sodomy as the fault of one participant, Spanish society attributed the blame to both the “active” and the “passive” participant. This reflects how the Spanish had an overall negative view of sodomy. While both participants would receive the blame, the Spanish would condemn the passive partner as a *puto* or faggot. According to Sigal, “The *puto* was defined primarily by his effeminacy and his passivity, and only secondarily by the gender of his sexual object choice. Nor was he seen as an equal partner to the active.”²³ Thus, we can see that feminine traits in men and homosexual acts were repulsive to the Spanish and therefore were repressed and persecuted. It also gives us an insight into the gender differences the Spanish had, as they treated an effeminate man harsher than a masculine man and noticed their expression of gender first rather than their sexuality. Given that the Spanish saw femininity as a negative trait, this would explain some of the lasting views of gender in Latin American societies colonized by Spain, such as machismo.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, a Spanish historian, wrote the *Historia general y natural de las Indias* in 1526 to describe the flora, fauna, and Indigenous people, as well as the colonization and conquest of the Americas. In it, he states:

Among the Indians the practice of the nefarious sin against nature is common, and it's known that the older Indians and reigning Indians who commit this sin have male servants with whom they commit the damned [maldito] sin; and those male servants, the ones who fall into this vice, they put on naguas [traditional clothing for Indigenous

²² Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 185.

²³ Peter Sigal, *Infamous Desire: Male Homosexuality in Colonial Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 103.

women] like women... they put on sartaes [a type of necklace]... and other items which, for the most part, women use; and they do not participate in masculine activities, rather they participate in house chores, like sweeping and scrubbing and other things women are used to.²⁴

It is interesting to note that Oviedo uses the Spanish word *maldito* when referring to the nefarious sin. In Spanish, the word *maldito* has a slight religious connotation, often meaning damned or cursed. Oviedo's description of the nefarious sin as *maldito* places a Christian moral judgment on what he observes, illuminating Spanish attitudes towards the Indigenous people's homosexual practices and deviation from gender roles. The Spanish imposed their strict gender binary on Indigenous culture, and it is shown by the negative language used in the text when talking about the male servants who dressed or did the job of a woman at the time. It is also interesting to see the difference between Oviedo and Chimalpahin when it comes to the homosexual activity of noble Indigenous people, as Chimalpahin did not use any words of disgust or assign moral value when it came to the encounter between Quecholcohuatl and Axayacatl.

Oviedo was not the only Spaniard who spoke of Indigenous sexual practices. In a letter to King Charles V, Cortés wrote, "We have known and been informed for certain that they are all sodomites, and commit that abominable sin."²⁵ Bernal Diaz, another conquistador, described men who "had no women, but instead participated in that damned [*maldito*] sodomy."²⁶ Once again, the Spanish placed a strong Christian moral value upon the act. The accounts of Catholic conquistadors are notable to examine, as any "sinful" activities the Indigenous Nahua participated in became justification for their conquest.

²⁴ Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdez, *Sumario de La Natural Historia de Las Indias* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1950), 243-44

²⁵ Hernan Cortes, *Carta Enviada a La Reina Doña Juana y al Emperador Carlos V, Su Hijo, Por La Justicia y Regimiento de La Rica Villa de La Veracruz, a 10 de Julio de 1519* (Spain: Editorial Nueva España, 1945), 125. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/IbrAmerTxt.Spa0015>.

²⁶ Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de La Conquista de La Nueva España* (1632), Ch. LII, 36.

The Spanish also assigned a Christian moral value to the *temazcal*, a central part of the Nahua way of life. There are various accounts in which the Spanish condemn the *temazcal*. In condemning such an important aspect of Nahua life, the Spanish imposed on the bodily sovereignty of the Indigenous population, as they were no longer able to cleanse themselves in the traditional way. The Codex Tudela describes the *temazcal* in a negative manner:

And they went into this bathroom (temazcal), many men and women, and inside, with the heat, they used each other illicitly, men with women and women with men and men with men. In Mexico there are men dressed in women's attire, and they are sodomites, and they did a woman's job, like sewing and spinning, and some Indians had one or two of them for their vice.²⁷

Once again, we see the negative reactions the Spanish had towards Indigenous practices. The Spanish attempted to prohibit the use of the *temazcal* because of how close naked male and female bodies were, as well as the instances of same-sex encounters in this space. Many religious officials in colonial Mexico tried using the *temazcal* as a way to teach Indigenous Nahuas the Christian concepts of sin and absolution.²⁸ *Tlazolli* is more complicated than the simple binary of good or bad that the Spanish had, and so their attempts at colonizing and removing the religious, bodily, and sexual sovereignty of the Nahua and the *temazcal* were not as successful as they hoped. According to Sigal, "Tlazolli did not simply signify vice, excess, or perversion, despite what the friars may have wished. Still those very friars worked to use the tlazolli complex."²⁹ It is remarkable that something the Spanish considered so toxic and sinful survived destruction by colonial powers, as the *temazcal* is still in use by various Indigenous groups to this day. The communities that the Spanish feared and persecuted for using the *temazcal* are now using it

²⁷ Museo de América, *Codex Tudela*, 62f.

²⁸ Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, 20

²⁹ Ibid.

freely with no barriers to gender interactions. While it may be a simple steam bath to some, it has a very dark and real history that demonstrates the resilience of Indigenous practices.

Modern Indigenous Queerness and the Effects of the Colonized Mind

In contemporary academic work regarding homosexuality in pre-conquest Mexico, some scholars argue that homosexuality was not part of Nahua life, or that it was heavily repressed and persecuted. Academics like Alfredo López Austin and Noemi Quezada argue that homosexuality was not tolerated and was met with great punishment. In particular, Quezada states that the Nahuas punished male and female homosexuality by death.³⁰ Although there are various primary sources like the poems and songs written for the *tlatoanis*, the various mentions of homosexuality within deities themselves, or the various oral stories passed by Chimalpahin that disprove such claims, many people characterize pre-conquest Nahua society as fully homophobic. As an Indigenous person, I feel it is important to point out that Spanish colonization not only changed the way we spoke, what we ate, how we dressed, and other aspects of our daily lives – it also changed the way we think about the people around us. Through the forced conversion of the Nahuas, the original attitudes towards homosexuality and gender identity were stifled. Over time, Catholicism became the new main religion, replacing our own spiritual and religious beliefs. Communities with a history of being colonized are predisposed to view the world through the lens of their oppressor, thereby vilifying certain concepts and notions for which their predecessors had no ill-regard. As a result, discrimination and violence towards LGBTQ+ members of the Indigenous community have persisted since the arrival of the Spanish, evolving into a systemic issue.

³⁰ Noemi Quezada, *Amor y magia amorosa entre los aztecas* (Mexico: Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropologicas, 1984), 139-40.

The treatment of homosexuals and gender-nonconforming individuals in Mexico has only worsened since the arrival of the Spanish. The consequences of colonial times have impacted the modern day. In the past five years, 459 LGBTQ+ individuals in Mexico were reported to have had a violent death, most likely in hate crimes. To some, those statistics may not seem like a large number. However, these numbers may be even higher as, according to Albinson Linares (a journalist from Telemundo):

Official crime and violence figures do not differentiate victims according to characteristics such as sexual orientation and gender identity, which makes it difficult to make the problem visible. Prosecutors have not incorporated these variables into their records, and LGBTQ victims of homicidal violence are included in other categories such as robbery, assault and simple homicide, among others.³¹

The simple fact that sexual orientation and gender identity are not characteristics that are considered when it comes to identifying victims is an act of violence against the LGBT community, as the statistics for us become skewed and underreported making LGBT issues seem unimportant. Could this be a result of centuries of moral bias by the Spanish being passed down through the judicial/law-enforcement side of society? There are various Spanish court cases in which homosexual Indigenous men were given the worst punishments (such as burning, strangulation, and public humiliation before execution).³² It would not be far-fetched to assume this thinking has stayed in place within the court system, as Mexico is still one of the leading Catholic countries in the world.

The *Consejo Nacional Para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED)* reported that 40.3 percent of Indigenous people have faced discrimination. Of them, 27 percent state that they have faced physical aggression in school and 9 percent state that they have suffered from some kind of

³¹ Linares, “*We Are Invisible*”: *Discrimination and Risks Multiply for Indigenous LGBTQ in Mexico*.

³² Tortorici, *Sins against Nature*, 49.

abuse or sexual violence by those in their own communities.³³ These factors have a negative effect on Indigenous LGBTQ mental health: “Suicidal ideation was present in 73 percent of trans men, 58 percent of trans women, 51 percent of bisexual women, 48 percent of bisexual men, 43 percent of gay men and 42 percent of lesbian women.”³⁴ Ostracization from the community also plays a part in violence towards Indigenous LGBTQ individuals. Wilter Gómez, an Indigenous Honduran gay man living in a shelter in Tijuana, states:

My only sin was being who I am, a gay person. My people are very discriminated against because we don't speak Spanish well, and we only live off the sea and the mountains. But inside, among the Indigenous people, there is a lot of *machismo*. It's like living a curse because they cut us, they beat us, that's why I had to leave.³⁵

This *machismo* is a type of toxic masculinity that is very prevalent in Latin American communities. It enforces the notion that a “real” man must have certain characteristics such as dominance, strength, aggression, pride, or nurturance, and that any man who does not possess these qualities is inferior. These ideals are instilled into young boys at an early age. As a result, discrimination has become the norm for many men. This results in deadly consequences for marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community.

While pre-colonial Nahua society contained some gender roles as well as a “warrior-culture” of dominance and aggression, the arrival of the Spanish certainly exacerbated negative attitudes towards Indigenous LGBTQ+ people. The Spanish moralization of societal and personal factors like sexuality and gender negatively influenced the Nahua’s perception of these concepts. This can be seen in the way that machista men view feminine men as lesser than

³³ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, *Encuesta Nacional Sobre Discriminación 2017*. https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/enadis/2017/doc/enadis2017_resultados.pdf

³⁴ CONAPRED, *Encuesta sobre Discriminación por motivos de Orientación Sexual e Identidad de Género, 2018*. 25. https://www.conapred.org.mx/userfiles/files/Presentacion_ENDOSIG_16_05_2019.pdf

³⁵ Linares, “*We Are Invisible*”.

masculine men. Over time, these new colonized mindsets manifested themselves into physical and mental aggression towards the Indigenous LGBTQ+ community, which can be seen by the rise in violence and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Mexico. While there are many activists calling for change, the effects of Spanish colonization on Indigenous sexual and bodily sovereignty have set in, and it will take much effort to undo them, if at all possible.

Conclusion

With the help of scholars who specialize in queer society in colonial Latin America, especially Peter Sigal and Zeb Tortorici, I have navigated this rarely documented aspect of pre-colonial life, and compared my own understanding and interpretations with theirs. I have argued that there was some tolerance of homosexuality in pre-colonial Mexico. The oral histories transcribed by Chimalpahin, especially the story of Quecholcohuatl and Axayacatl, provide an uncolonized view of homosexuality, one without derogatory words or negative connotations towards the homosexual act. While I am not arguing that homosexuality was fully accepted in pre-colonial Mexico, Chimalpahin could have chosen to describe it in a negative way, or even ignore this encounter completely. Instead, he chose to keep it in his annals, and left it without biased comment. In Chimalpahin's case, it seems plausible to suggest that there was some degree of homosexual tolerance in pre-colonial Mexico as there was a 40-year gap between the event described and his recording of it, meaning that various people had to have told the story throughout the years. My review of the various Spanish accounts shows there was a very noticeable difference in how homosexuality was treated. Colonial Mexican authorities now punished severely anyone who committed sodomy, condemned those who did not adhere to their masculine roles, and rejected and twisted various Nahua religious elements for their benefit.

When we look back at pre-conquest Mexico, we imagine the jaguar warrior, the great city of Tenochtitlan, and human sacrifice, among other things. Rarely do we focus on the mundane or marginalized aspects of life. As historians, it is our job to uncover these hidden histories and analyze the lives of people who were “othered.” Often, queer history is forgotten because of the limited resources pertaining to the topic, both primary and secondary, and because for the most part historians and the society of which they are part have stigmatized it. This obscure piece of history includes Nahua society and attitudes on homosexuality and gender. It is unfortunate that because of colonization and the Spanish impeding on the Indigenous Nahua, modern Mexico has become plagued by intolerance. A mix of forced beliefs on the Indigenous peoples as well as the need to assimilate to survive has created new waves of homophobia in every passing generation, as statistics show. By scrutinizing the various codices, pre-conquest Nahuatl poems and songs, oral histories, and various Spanish accounts relating to Indigenous beliefs and society, it becomes readily apparent that the Spanish violated the bodily autonomy, sexual sovereignty, and belief systems of the Nahua.

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