



DEBILITY AND DOMINATION IN *RECOGIMIENTOS DE MUJERES* IN LATE COLONIAL MEXICO

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In December 1790, a doctor in Mexico City was sent to the *casa de recogidas*, a prison-like establishment for “fallen” women, to check on Estefanía Castro, a prisoner there. He wrote a letter to the Viceroy of New Spain, the Count of Revillagigedo, alerting him that Castro had smallpox and should be rushed to the Hospital of San Antonio Abad. The case took an unexpected turn when the doctors at the hospital declared she did not have smallpox, but rather, scabies. What’s more, she was not the only woman with scabies. Doctors noted that the skin condition was “abundante” in the *recogimiento*, as was syphilis (AGN Indiferente Virreinal Caja 1241 Exp. 17 f. 5v).¹ However, no action was taken to treat these diseases after the fear of smallpox had been dispelled. The fact that illness was so common among prisoners, and so often left to fester untreated, makes it an important point of departure to analyze the institution of *recogimiento de mujeres*.

Recogimientos de mujeres were Spanish institutions exported to New Spain and other Spanish colonies.² The 1726 *Diccionario de autoridades* defines *recogimiento* as “el lugar o casa en que viven retiradas en clausúra algunas mugeres, por penitencia, o voluntaria o forzada;” these women were called *recogidas*.³ They served to punish and reform women accused of crimes ranging from moral offenses like public drunkenness, concubinage, and prostitution, to violent offenses such as murder. While in *recogimiento*, women were engaged in uncompensated labor, including spinning wool and washing hospital linens. This paper examines illness in the *recogimientos* that operated in late colonial Mexico (1700-1821) through the lens of debility and state control, performing a close textual analysis of the case of Juana María Rodríguez, a *recogida* who was left to suffer from scurvy in spite of her increasingly desperate petitions to authorities for her release to a hospital. I

¹Archival sources are cited using the organizational criteria of the specific archive where the source was located.

² Since I use both the terms *recogimiento* and *recogida* throughout the article, I will no longer italicize them.

³ When citing from historical sources, I follow the original orthography. For ease of reading, I have written out abbreviated words (i.e. q^e becomes que; R^l is Real, etc.).

contend that understanding the recogimiento, and how the state disciplined women through gendered, racialized, and class-based mechanisms of biopolitical control like debilitation, is crucial to more thoroughly conceptualize state violence and the role of normative womanhood in Spanish colonialism.

While other authors have documented the history and cultural aspects of epidemic disease in Mexico City, I hope to push beyond the idea of illness as a natural phenomenon and consider how government (in)action transformed illness into debility, a tool of state control (see Cooper). The term debility was coined by Julie Livingston to encompass, not just disability, but other forms of impairment, including aging and long-term illness (113). Jasbir Puar, who puts Livingston's term into conversation with biopolitics, uses debility to problematize the binary between ability and disability, noting that debility "foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations" (Puar xiii-xv). I argue that the debilitating progression of Rodríguez's scurvy was framed by the state as a "normal consequence" of the recogimiento and was thus left to fester through neglect. The extended waiting to which Rodríguez was subjected after each of her four petitions to the viceregal government produced not only physical debilitation, but also the psychological effects of "dependency and subordination" (Auyero, *Patients* 8). With each failed attempt to prove herself worthy of state aid, Rodríguez was slowly shaped into what Javier Auyero terms a "patient of the state," a member of the urban poor who has been taught, via prolonged waiting, that they must show political subordination to those in power (*Patients* 9). Recogimientos as institutions allowed the colonial government to manage and subdue "scandalous" and "public" women as part of the larger project of colonial control. This control was of particular concern in the late colonial period during which Rodríguez was sentenced, as Bourbon reformers attempted to address the increasing instability of Spanish colonial rule in part by prosecuting the "unruly and polluting" activities of the lower classes (Glasco 2).

My work is in conversation with Josefina Muriel's *Los recogimientos de mujeres: Respuesta a una problemática social novohispana* (1974) and Nancy Van Deusen's *Between the Sacred and the Worldly: The Institutional and Cultural Practice of Recogimiento in Colonial Lima* (2001). While these authors present a history of the institution of recogimiento, I apply a literary methodology, analyzing archival documents as "rhetorical and symbolic texts" (McKnight and Garofalo xviii). Muriel's monograph is a vital source of historiographic information on the founding, locations, and functions of casas de recogidas in colonial New Spain. Van Deusen's project traces the multiple and changing meanings of "recogimiento" as a religious principle, a feminine virtue, and a practice of enclosure in colonial Peru from 1500 to 1713. Originally conceived of as a spiritual retreat through which to achieve union with God, by the 17th century, recogimiento was also associated with the practice of

ensuring women's honor through their physical containment or rehabilitating the honor of "fallen" women (Van Deusen xi, 79). Whilst men increasingly took advantage of the institutions to control their wives' movement, women availed themselves of *recogimientos* to escape abusive husbands and renegotiate the conjugal relationship (99). The fact that some women were coerced into entering *recogimientos* to punish or prevent their "worldliness" while others entered voluntarily to solidify their connection with the sacred became a point of tension in the early 1700s (Van Deusen 151-2). By the late 18th century, Van Deusen notes, *recogimientos* were frequently utilized as correctional facilities to punish crime and sexual transgressions (156).

This article builds on Van Deusen's conclusions while focusing exclusively on carceral *recogimientos* in late 18th century Mexico. Given the evolution of the term and practice, carceral *recogimientos* functioned simultaneously as spaces of punishment and spaces to practice piety (Van Deusen 8, 12). Debilitating marginalized women through *recogimiento* was, in fact, one means to achieving the "penitential discipline" that authorities hoped would "ameliorate sexual misconduct" and reform *recogidas* while deterring women outside the institution from engaging in similar behaviors (Van Deusen 59). I argue that the simultaneously corrective and protective qualities of *recogimientos* functioned as complementary aspects of state control in late colonial New Spain.

However, power is not unidirectional; as Foucault writes, "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93). Though I argue that debility formed part of the "reformatory" strategy of the state, this case also demonstrates Rodríguez's agency via multiple strategic attempts to access and become visible to colonial power structures. While many archival sources documenting illness in the *recogimiento* were written by viceregal officials, Rodríguez's case includes four letters in her name. Her letters testify to both the shifting strategies of resistance she employed during her imprisonment and her familiarity with the bureaucratic institutions which sought to subdue her. Unfortunately, in the case of Rodríguez, the flurry of bureaucratic action mandating her release once she sufficiently demonstrated herself to be a penitent patient of the state was ultimately unsuccessful in preventing her death.

Crucial to my understanding of debility in *recogimientos* is that *recogimientos* were spaces of raced, classed, and gendered marginalization. While few comprehensive lists of prisoners exist in the archive, those that exist point to the disproportionate presence of non-Spanish women. For example, in the Santa María Egipcíaca *recogimiento* in Puebla there are 133 women documented in 1772 (AGN: Presidios y Cárceles Vol. 15 Exp. 2 f.

24f-26v).⁴ Of the forty-five identified by race, 82% of the population was of some indigenous descent (mostly *indias* or *mestizas*); the remaining 18% was Spanish. In the 1789-91 list of prisoners for a privately-run recogimiento, also in Puebla, of twenty-nine total prisoners, there were twelve *indias*, nine *españolas*, four *pardas*, and one *criolla* (Muriel 163-5). Given that an estimated one-third of the population at the time was Spanish, one-fifth was *indio*, and the remaining half was *mestizo*, these prisoner lists indicate the overrepresentation of women of indigenous descent, with women of African descent forming a notable minority (Díaz Hernández 315).⁵

Even when the race of the recogida is not explicitly mentioned, the crimes most frequently punished by recogimiento were racialized. Of the remaining eighty-eight women listed in the 1772 List of Prisoners from Puebla, twenty-four were imprisoned for crimes related to the illegal indigenous beverage *tepache*.⁶ A common stereotype associated with the lower classes, and particularly those of indigenous descent, was drunkenness (Haslip-Viera 57-8). Thus, women punished for drinking or selling tepache were “contaminated” with indigeneity through association with an indigenous beverage and negative indigenous stereotypes.

Of the remaining sixty women neither charged for *tepache* nor identified by race, forty-five were charged for crimes of morality, such as prostitution or being “escandalosa” or “incontinente,” a euphemism referring broadly to “el vicio opuesto a la castidad” (*Diccionario de autoridades*).⁷ Even though these

⁴ Santa María Egipcíaca was, according to a version of her life story printed in 1755, “a slave to sensuality” whose lust was so noteworthy that she refused money from clients, “lest the desire of lucre should be thought to influence her criminal prostitutions” (Sadler 9-10). After boarding a ship of pilgrims headed for Palestine for the sole purpose of seducing them, she was finally enlightened by God as to her sinful ways, and became “a perfect penitent” (Sadler 14). She lived a life of asceticism and was canonized upon her death.

⁵ Prisoner lists in Veracruz and Mexico City —cities with higher populations of African descent— did not include racial identifiers. However, a significant number of individual cases identify recogidas as *mulatas* or *pardas*.

⁶ *Tepache* currently refers to a mildly alcoholic beverage made from fermented pineapple and sold in markets or roadside kiosks, but in the 18th century it referred to what is now called *pulque curado*. *Pulque* is an indigenous alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant. One recipe from the period for *tepache* listed the ingredients as “*pulque*, honey, water, and a root they call *yerva* [herb]” (AGN: Criminal Vol. 674 Exp. 7 f. 68v).

⁷ Incontinence also referred to “el defecto o debilidad que ocasiona no poder retener la orina” (*Diccionario de autoridades*, Tomo IV). This secondary meaning highlights the

remaining women were not explicitly identified as black, black women were seen as more sexually promiscuous and available by colonial authorities (Socolow 133). Finally, in other morality-policing institutions, scholars have found that officials “often took a special interest in investigating situations where it appeared that nonwhite women were corrupting Spanish women” (von Germeten 139). It is therefore unsurprising that more women of indigenous or African descent would be investigated and sentenced to *recogimiento*.

Ultimately, I argue that *recogimientos* were both *racialized* and *racializing* spaces. The minority of Spanish and *criolla* women sentenced to *recogimiento* were far more likely to be members of the lower classes, given that women with social connections could more easily withdraw to the protection of a *depósito particular*, the house of a reputable family member or acquaintance, if convicted of a crime (Lavrin, “In Search” 35). Spaniards of low social class, who were more likely to be tried in criminal court, were seen as racially suspect by virtue of association with members of other *castas* (Haslip-Viera 59-60). For example, in *Alboroto y motín de los indios de México* Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora notes that the common people of the capital were “la más infame [...] por componerse de indios, de negros, criollos y bozales de diferentes naciones, [...] y también de españoles que, [...] degenerando de sus obligaciones, son los peores entre tan ruin canalla” (113, emphasis mine). Sigüenza y Góngora identified Spaniards who associated with members of other castes as more despicable than any other group, since they had abandoned their correct place in the social hierarchy. He used the verb *degenerar*, a word associated with theories of New World racial degeneracy, to describe these low-class Spaniards. Even though indigenous people and members of other marginal castes were thought to be more criminal than Spaniards and American-born *criollos* since they were “‘naturally vice-ridden,’ and inclined toward [...] activities considered a threat to the social order,” all women sentenced to *recogimiento* were associated with the racially-mixed “masses” (Haslip-Viera 57). *Recogimientos*, which were preponderantly non-Spanish, racialized Spanish and *criolla* women as members of the more marginal castes.

Such was the case of Juana María Rodríguez. In spite of describing herself as an *española* and being addressed with the honorific *Doña* throughout her case files, the racializing space of the *recogimiento*, combined with her precarious financial situation and the hypersexual nature of her crimes, caused her to be seen as a racially suspect, “degenerate” Spaniard. Once she had been placed in the *recogimiento*, her reputation and racial privilege were tarnished. Regardless of her title of *Doña*, her lower-class, outsider status was

ways in which criminality, or perceived moral deficiency, was tied to ideas of illness and bodily “deficiency” (Gilman 54).

implied by her alias, La Paya, a term the *Diccionario de autoridades* defined as “agreste, villano, y zafio o ignorante.” This nickname likely referred to her small-town origins in the then largely indigenous town of Juchitepec, located in contemporary Estado de México.

Nevertheless, Rodríguez’s status as a *criolla* woman fluent in Spanish helps explain how she was able to access the means to petition her release. Her case file includes testimony by doctors and the recogimiento’s rector, as well as intercession by the Procurador de Pobres, a sort of colonial public defender. Her ability to leave such an extensive paper trail of her contact with the viceregal government is what makes her case so rich for analysis, but it also speaks to her relative racial and linguistic privilege (Schwartz and Cook ctd. in Tortorici 19). I hope to shed light on the case of Juana María Rodríguez, a *doña criolla*, so as to demonstrate the system of racialization and debilitation deployed against even the minority of recogidas who experienced relative privilege.

Complementing the framework of racial degeneracy that marked colonial discourse on criminality was the analogy of illness for making sense of crime and vice. Recogimientos were established to prevent women considered to be contaminated with moral sickness, the supposed cause of their criminal activity, from transmitting the disease of their poor example. For example, in 1772 an official from San Luis Potosí wrote to Viceroy Bucareli about the town’s need for a recogimiento (AGN: Presidios y Cárceles Vol. 26 Exp. 6 f. 40f). Bucareli responded that recogimientos were of great benefit, “utilissimas, y necesarias ... para separar en ellas a las Mugerres provocatibas, y Mundanas, a fin de quitarlas del pecado, y que no contagien a las otras con su mal ejemplo” (f. 41f). Here, marginalized women were seen as vectors of disease, capable of “infecting” others with their sins unless they were kept away from the public sphere.

Subtextually, the call for separation of the sick from the healthy hearkens back to calls for racial separation to prevent degeneracy. In his book *From Body to Community: Venereal Disease and Society in Baroque Spain*, Cristian Berco notes that the fears attached to women’s diseased bodies, particularly those of the “bad women” who had contracted syphilis, mirrored fears associated with the presence of crypto-Jews in Spanish society (Berco 30). Although Berco highlights the crypto-Jew as the Other in Golden Age Spain, late colonial discourses of racial difference stemmed directly from earlier peninsular discourses of anti-Semitism (Martínez 13). Thus, documents regarding the purpose of recogimientos as being to separate women “infected with sin” from respectable society engaged in both moralizing discourses about women’s sexuality and coded racial discourse. To protect the moral and racial purity of upper-class creole women, it was important to “quarantine” women “infected with sin” in recogimientos.

But recogimientos were not just places of symbolic illness; as the case of Estefanía Castro indicates, they were also places of rampant physical illness.

This is partially since outbreaks of disease were commonplace in urban centers, particularly in Mexico City (Cooper 185). Sickness abounded in *recogimientos* due to chronic underfunding and the practice of overworking and underfeeding *recogidas*. In fact, much of the archival documentation originating from within *recogimientos* consists of petitions by *recogidas* for medical attention or release from work duties due to illness. Although the persistent presence of illness caused frequent hand-wringing on the part of government officials, disease was generally considered “just punishment” for women accused of sexual sins, and few overarching changes were implemented to improve conditions (Berco 30). Given the gendered and racialized nature of the *recogimiento* population, the way in which these marginalized women were exploited for their labor, and the fact that their rampant illnesses were rarely adequately addressed, I argue that the *recogimiento* functioned as a space of racialized, classed, and gendered debilitation.

Jasbir Puar frames debility as a critique of neoliberal discourse of disability inclusion, which belies the violence and harm first caused by capitalism and imperialism and then naturalized to specific populations (xvi). Though Puar analyzes the contemporary period, drawing examples from Israeli control over Palestine, many of her theoretical interventions are applicable to the Spanish colonization of Mexico as well. Puar asserts that “creating injury and maintaining [...] populations as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them” is one of many “tactical calculations of settler colonial rule;” such tactical calculations in the context of Spanish colonialism ranged from forced labor and extortionary tribute systems to territorial displacement and forced social reorganization (9). Puar frames the right to maim as occupying a space different from both biopolitics and necropolitics: “maiming...does not proceed through making live, making die, letting live, or letting die” (137). Rather, it operates as “will not let die” and “will not make die,” tactics which have the added benefit of appearing to be “humanitarian” because they do not result in death (Puar 139, 9).⁸ This false humanitarianism is seen in the purported goal of the *recogimiento* to “reform” *recogidas* through forced penitence and labor. While supposedly providing pious care for *recogidas*, *recogimientos* largely benefitted the colonial hierarchy by securing free labor and controlling “unruly” populations.

I turn to Puar’s more nuanced framework of debility and the right to maim, rather than Foucault’s biopolitical make live/let die, for several

⁸ For example, the Israeli Defense Forces’ policy of shooting at the knee to cause lasting injury without taking life, thereby sidestepping international censure by keeping casualties to a minimum (131).

reasons.⁹ Clearly, being sentenced to the recogimiento was not being “let live,” and although some recogidas *did* die within recogimientos, they were not sentenced to death in the way “make die” connotes. As Rodríguez’s case demonstrates, the government initially delayed action, but eventually went to great lengths to intervene in order to (attempt to) prevent her death from scurvy. Thus, the colonizing state oscillated between hyperaction, or Puar’s “will not let die,” and intentional inaction, or “will not make die.”

The case of Juana María Rodríguez gives a personal look at the experience of debility because it involves four separate letters dictated by the recogida herself. The fact that the letters were penned by European-educated scribes does present the issue of mediation, since her words would have been structured to fit the general template for petitions. However, none of the letters was written by the same scribe, lending to my conclusion that the shifting strategic approaches taken in each petition were largely her own.¹⁰ In order to read Rodríguez’s voice through scribal mediation, I consider the choice of information relayed in each letter, discrepancies between two narrations of the same event, and “shifts from a formulaic quality of language to [...] orality” in her statements (McKnight and Garofalo xx). For example, I understand her frequent interjections of emotional phrases as moments of spontaneous orality. Although her petitions are indicative of the narrow bureaucratic framework to which she had access, they permit an appraisal of her reactions to imprisonment and her shifting approach to obtaining release from the recogimiento.

Using Rodríguez’s case, I argue that government authorities were shaping her into a docile, penitent subject by forcing her to endure a prolonged process of waiting that exacerbated her physical debilitation from scurvy (Auyero, “Patients” 25).¹¹ As part of “the population available for injury,” Rodríguez was “capacitated for settler colonial occupation through [her] explicit debilitation;” namely, her worsening scurvy was utilized to

⁹ In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Foucault describes how, starting in the 17th century, “the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138, emphasis in the original). He described this power as exercised via both the discipline of the body and the management of the population; that is, biopolitics (Foucault 139).

¹⁰ I have eliminated the possibility of repeated interventions in Rodríguez’s case by a single scribe through paleographic comparison of each petition in her file; none present the same handwriting. Additionally, while Rodríguez may have been advised by the rector of the recogimiento and the Procurador de Pobres, neither man’s handwriting matches that of any of the petitions.

¹¹ She ultimately died of scurvy. While 18th-century doctors did not understand that Vitamin C deficiency from poor nutrition caused (and still causes) scurvy, they had documented its four stages and proposed several remedies of mixed efficacy.

capacitate her as an acceptable female citizen-subject (Puar 158). It was only upon submitting to the patriarchal power of the church and state and assuming a passive female role that Rodríguez was ultimately granted release – four months after her death.

While many sick women petitioned for medical release from *recogimiento*, Rodríguez's case stands out because of the staggering bureaucratic obstacles placed in her way as she sought release. Through her four petitions, I trace what Javier Auyero terms the “tempography of domination” – that is, “a thick description of how the dominated perceive temporality and waiting, how they act or fail to act on these perceptions, and how these perceptions and these (in)actions serve to challenge or perpetuate their domination” (Auyero, *Patients* 4). By tracing her perception of waiting and her changing strategic approaches in each letter, as well as the government's varying responses, I demonstrate that waiting functioned both to produce her political and religious subordination and physical debilitation.

In 1789, Juana María Rodríguez was placed in *recogimiento* for having had two consecutive relationships with married men. The first document in her file is the testimony of her second lover and benefactor, Don José Pioquinto Hernández. He relayed his fear to authorities that, in the absence of his patronage, she would commit:

mas ofensas a Dios coloreada su malicia con suponer faltarle lo nesario para su manutención [...] lo que pretende es el quedar con livertinaje, y sin subordinación ninguna. [...] es una muger que no tiene ningunas facultades para sobstenerse, pues aun que quiere aparentar las tiene en su Patria, [...] no [tiene] cosa alguna. [...] abrigada de este supuesto falzo pretende vivir a su salvo conducto. (AGN: Presidios y Cárceles Vol. 15 Exp. 8 f. 46v)

Hernández's portrayal of Rodríguez highlights the ways she broke with expectations of femininity, especially regarding personal mobility (reframed as “livertinaje”) and financial independence (her “facultades para sobstenerse”). He argued that she stubbornly refused to accept the assistance she needed to support herself and her mother and sister; instead, she wanted to live “a su salvo conducto” without being subjected to the will of a male relative, as would have been expected of a respectable woman. Hernández's testimony also corroborates the lower-class status implied by Rodríguez's alias, while simultaneously suggesting she was a prideful woman, given she pretended to have financial means in her hometown of Juchitepec where none existed.

Rodríguez's refusal to embody normative, submissive femininity becomes more obvious based on testimony about her sentencing, which she had attempted to appeal. Though the exact nature of her appeal is unclear, it was likely for a formal investigation into the charges against her, since she repeatedly decried her sentencing as extrajudicial. The official who sentenced her, the Regent Francisco Javier Gamboa, recounted that she had presented

him with “un impertinente recurso dirigido a evitar la correccion y castigo que merece” during these proceedings (AGN: Presidios y Cárceles Vol. 15 Exp. 8 f. 48f). Here, the word *recurso* could either refer to an emotional appeal or to a legal proceeding to request a new judge (*Diccionario de autoridades*). Since this petition did not correspond to Gamboa’s gendered expectation that she be submissive and penitent, he branded her “impertinente.”

Though the testimonies from Hernández and Gamboa shed some light on the justification colonial authorities cited for reforming Rodríguez via debilitation, her letters from inside the *recogimiento* are the richest representation of the tenacious woman who demanded recourse from authorities until her death. Both the tone and the content of each letter demonstrate her shifting strategies to obtain her release, and the influence of state debilitation on said strategies.

Her first letter was written around February 1792 and addressed to the Fiscal de lo Civil, the district attorney for civil cases. In this letter, she argued her diminished culpability by painting herself as a victim of circumstance and male treachery, then leaning into the stereotype of female irrationality. She framed her first affair with Don Torquato Montellano, the Alcalde de Tepeaca, as stemming from her financial insecurity. Given how, as she noted, “es tan corto lo que puede adquirir [a manera de trabajo] una infeliz mujer,” she was driven to accept a position washing and mending Montellano’s clothing (AGN: Presidios y Cárceles Vol. 15 Exp. 8 f. 55f). After seeing “el particular recato, modestia y recogimiento” that she demonstrated while working for him, he proposed marriage to her, whereupon they exchanged “palabra y prenda de efectuarlo” (f. 55f).¹² While the *Siete Partidas* recommended that spoken betrothal take place publicly, *palabra de casamiento* still legally initiated the marriage process, and carnal union taking place after a verbal agreement produced a legally binding marriage (Lavrin 5-6). In adherence with this norm, Rodríguez accepted Montellano’s word as sufficient to initiate a physical relationship, saying, “caí en la fragilidad [...] fiada en que todo tendría remedio con [...] nuestro matrimonio” (f. 55 f-v).

She then received a letter from Spain from his legitimate wife, which deeply upset her. At this point, Rodríguez asked that her subsequent actions be considered as those of “una mujer amante, apasionada, y celosa a causa de un desengaño;” factors which explained why, “llevada de mi enojo, o de mi pasión arrastrada, por quebrarle los ojos a este villano [Montellano] me quité de su amistad; y di en tierra con otro yerro de igual naturaleza (que una mujer burlada, celosa, y apasionada [...] comete)” (f. 55v). By describing her second affair in terms of uncontrollable feminine emotion, she rendered herself as

¹² Rodríguez uses ‘recogimiento’ in its definition as a feminine virtue, connoting “modest, controlled behavior, enclosure in an institution or the home, and a retiring or quiescent nature” (Van Deusen xii).

the helpless victim of her anger and passion. Rodríguez leaned into the dominant discourse that women were irrational, belonging to the realm of “emotions and sensuousness” rather than reason, so as to diminish her culpability (Lloyd 50). However, since recogimientos were intended to produce penitence in “scandalous” women, leaning into these female stereotypes seems to have convinced authorities that she was not yet fit for release. Her expressed desire for physical violence—to literally “quebrarle los ojos a” Montellano—masculinized her, revealing vengefulness rather than repentance.

Rodríguez continued in this vein, calling her second affair a “*yerro involuntario*, dimanado [...] de un acto primo o de un mero espíritu de venganza,” and asking that her actions be considered a reflexive response to Montellano’s much more treacherous “*alevosía* [...] manifiesta” (f. 55v). Finally, she ended with a legal argument, noting that since her second partner, Hernández, had been reunited with his wife, “este agravio [Hernández’s infidelity] está perdonado y absuelto, y por consiguiente lo debe estar el mío” (f. 56f). Since the injured parties were no longer injured, no offense remained to be punished.

After spending the majority of her first letter explaining factors she hoped would mitigate her guilt, she closed with just one paragraph admitting her crime, while ultimately begging the official to close his eyes to said crime, given that she had experienced “*las necesidades más crueles, los trabajos más enormes, y últimamente [...] he perdido la salud, y tan perdida, que si Vuestra Excelencia no se apiada de mí, sin duda alguna que me quitarán la vida las enfermedades que adolezco*” (f. 56f). Although she said she feared for her life, she did not dwell on her health, nor did her letter come with any doctor’s testimony. Her descriptions, however, paint the recogimiento as part of an “asphyxiatory regime” intended to weaken its population by cutting off access to necessities (Puar 134-5). This letter was accompanied by testimony from the rector of the recogimiento, who noted that she frequently partook of the sacraments and lived “*con juicio y arreglo sin dar qué decir*” (f. 54f). His testimony attempted to prove that the recogimiento was producing the desired subordinating effect in Rodríguez, reforming her via “penitential discipline” (Van Deusen 63).

Unfortunately for Rodríguez, her petition did not secure her release. In his response, the Fiscal noted that, since she had not even served half of her six-year sentence, her petition was “premature.” Releasing her too soon would be to “ponerla en ocasion de tercera reincidencia,” and what’s more, she was not yet “deserving” of pity (f. 57f). In her attempts to mitigate her guilt, Rodríguez had inadvertently embodied all the qualities of a “scandalous” woman, one whose uncontrollable sexuality posed an imminent danger to the public by threatening the sanctity of marriage. Her legal argument also proved fruitless; arguing that no crime had taken place was a far cry from the penitent meekness that authorities hoped the recogimiento

would produce in her. She had not yet been forced to wait long enough to effect her subordination.

Rodríguez wrote a second letter, this time to the Viceroy, around June 1792. Perhaps seeing that her first letter had not secured her release, she changed strategies, completely denying her second affair had ever taken place. Upon discovering her first lover was already married, she said she was "poseída de [...] angustia," and sought other means to support herself, her sister, and her mother (f. 75v). Hernández was not her lover, but instead her benefactor: he took her into his protection "solo por un efecto de caridad" (f. 75v).

After briefly denying her guilt, Rodríguez turned to criticizing the justice system which had placed her in the recogimiento without a fair trial. In spite of the platonic, charitable nature of their relationship, Hernández's wife had unjustly complained to authorities, who then failed to thoroughly investigate the claims:

De aquí dimanó queja; tan injusta que bastó el informe simple para que por [...] Vuestra Excelencia, se me pusiese en depósito. Esto es nulo, porque aunque cometí el primer yerro que confieso, esto fue por que me animaba de casarme; pero el segundo, aunque se aparente justificado, es de ningún modo cierto. (f. 75v)

She decried the injustice of the fact that no investigation was performed to check the veracity of the complaint against her and vehemently denied all charges, in spite of having admitted to them earlier and in spite of Hernández having testified to them in court. Furthermore, the tone of her letter was assertive, even argumentative. She redoubled her claims of innocence and the lack of justice being taken in her case, arguing that during the three years she had been imprisoned:

...ya se podía haberme indultado, bajo la protesta que tengo [...] de no volver a asistir en esa corte, y de no contestar [...] con la persona de quien se me hace cuerpo de mi delito, sin tenerlo, pues confieso de buena fe mi inocencia. (f. 75v)

In increasingly legalistic terms, she denied she had reason for guilt in her relationship with Hernández, although she agreed not to see him again. While this legal language may have been introduced by the scribe writing the letter, her denial of the second affair is a clear change in strategy from letter one. Similarly to the first letter, she only added one line mentioning that she was sick, but stated that "cualesquiera resulta puede causarme la muerte" (f. 75v).

Once more, Rodríguez's petition was denied. On July 5, 1792, the office of the Viceroy responded solely with the terse "Ocurra por donde penden los antecedentes," indicating that she had not sent her letter to the correct ministry (f. 75v). Her chances were likely not improved by her refusal to

admit guilt and her vocal criticism of the justice system. The waiting to which she had been subjected, the “delaying without destroying hope,” had neither the effect of debilitating her to the extent that she was preoccupied primarily with her health, nor had it successfully produced her as a “compliant client” of the state (Auyero, “Patients” 6). Rodríguez had not yet been shaped into a docile, penitent woman deferential to church and state authority.

Rodríguez addressed the viceregal office’s feedback in a third letter, written over a year later around December 1793. In this letter, also addressed to Revillagigedo, she explained in detail the actions she had taken to appeal her case, demonstrating an impressive familiarity with viceregal bureaucracy. Upon being told to recur to the office where her case files were held, she said, she had contacted Regent Gamboa, who explained to her that he had acted on behalf of the previous viceroy, and so the documents would be in the Secretaría de Cámara, rather than the Real Sala de Crimen. In fact, the phrase mentioning the location of her files was underlined so as to draw attention to it: “su Señoría [el Regente] me contestó *volviese a repetir ocurso a Vuestra Excelencia por su Secretaria de Camara y Gobierno donde se hallaba el Expediente*” (f. 69f). Rodríguez’s increasing sense of urgency and frustration is palpable in this sentence, which outlined the viceregal power structure to the viceroy himself in the hopes that someone would heed her when she explained who had sentenced her and where her papers were located.

As was stylistically customary, she softened the vehemence of this comment by following it with polite, reverent language, attributing the lack of action on her case to the viceroy’s busy position as a leader: “me he mantenido en silencio por no volver a incomodar la respetable atencion de Vuestra Excelencia tan preocupada en asuntos de mas peso” (f. 69f-v). In so doing, she, like other female defendants in the period, “hid self-assertion behind formulae” (Schlau 18). For reasons that are unclear, but which illustrate the cumbersome bureaucracy of New Spain, the office that responded to her third plea was that of the bishop of Puebla, not the viceroy to whom she had addressed her letter.¹³ He too told Rodríguez that she needed to contact the office that had sentenced her.

In spite of its original fruitlessness, this letter is the most emotive of her four letters. After opening by underscoring her knowledge of viceregal bureaucracy, she sagely appealed to religion and the precepts of the Catholic Church insofar as they concerned her actions and those of the viceroy. Her illness had clearly become much graver, and her desperation to leave the *recogimiento* alive is apparent. For example, following her comment about the Viceroy’s important affairs, she said she would not even send her current petition, “a no presentarse esta necesidad de conservar la vida *que por precepto*

¹³ The Viceroy in December 1793 was the Count of Revillagigedo; the bishop was Salvador Biempica y Sotomayor.

divino debo procurar mantener" (f. 69v, emphasis mine). Here, she framed her determination to leave the recogimiento as in line with the precepts of the Church, by which suicide was expressly forbidden and life was viewed as a gift from God that must be preserved. Since she expected to die if she stayed, not contacting the viceroy would, she implied, be tantamount to an immoral death wish. The subtext in this comment about her divine obligation to defend her own life was that the viceroy, consequently, had a divine obligation to help her meet said obligation, given she was his subject.

She followed this by asking a rhetorical question intended to spur the viceroy to action by appealing to his sense of religious obligation: "¿y será posible Señor Excelentísimo que residiendo en Vuestra Excelencia un corazon tan lleno de piedad y micericordia, como lo decanta todo un Reyno halla de permitir, que esta pobre infeliz y desvalida Muger continue en su padecer?" (f. 69v-70f). While the language of "humble petitioner" is not atypical of women's petitions from the period, it is still important to consider its rhetorical function (von Germeten 4). By expressing her incredulity that someone as magnanimous and pious as the viceroy could ignore her plight, she hoped to persuade him to authorize her release.

Her third letter also drew on gendered religious tropes far more extensively than her first two letters. She explained that she had first fallen into sin in order to save her sick mother, thereby reframing her originally stated desire for financial independence, which was improper for a woman, as a desire to be a selfless caretaker. Rodríguez then employed the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene to make the case for her forgiveness, asking the viceroy:

...pido a Vuestra Excelencia llena de lagrimas, y de todo corazon micericordia para que atendiendo a esta, mas que a la justicia como lo hizo el Salvador de el Mundo con la Magdalena se digne Vuestra Excelencia imitando a el mismo Redentor [...] perdonarme estos por no poder ya la maquina de mi devil sexo sufrir tanto tormento de crecidas penas, como estoi tolerando en esta triste pricion y no ha de permitir [su] noble corazon [...] que en ella pierda la vida. (f. 70f)

Here, she placed the Viceroy in the role of Jesus, "Salvador del Mundo," and herself in the role of Mary Magdalene.¹⁴ At this point, she had been in the recogimiento for four years and three months, and, as the rector mentioned in his introduction to her second letter, she had been regularly attending Mass and confession, where priests surely used the figure of Mary Magdalene to preach to recogidas. Rodríguez may have become more pious during her time in the recogimiento, but she may also have observed the ideas of women held by men in religious positions, and strategically mirrored this language to

¹⁴ Recogimientos were often referred to as "magdalenas" since they were originally intended to house repentant prostitutes.

better fit the narrative of penance expected by authorities. Whereas previously she had described herself through female stereotypes like passion and jealousy to argue that she could not be held accountable for her actions, here she employed language and tropes similar to those utilized by the recogimiento's founders, referring to herself as a member of the "devil sexo" and highlighting her moral frailty. By likening herself to Mary Magdalene, Rodríguez appealed to the Viceroy's preconceptions of recogidas as fallen, fragile women in need of redemption by a powerful, godlike authority like himself.¹⁵

Furthermore, her unequivocal admission of culpability was distinct from her first two letters, which centered on denying responsibility and denying guilt, respectively. Whereas she had originally come across as angry and unrepentant, her third letter is that of a woman submitting herself entirely to a male authority, begging for forgiveness. While initially having undermined the viceroy's authority (and by proximity, his masculinity) by casting aspersions on his judgment in her sentencing, she pivoted in letter three. This letter went to great lengths to appeal to his sense of masculinity, employing compliments such as that he was a "Padre de misericordia," a man of "eficacia [...] aconstumbra[da]" whose "grande perspicacia," she felt sure, "penetrar[ía] el asunto" (f. 70f-v). Given the difference between this letter and her prior communications, I suggest that the state strategy of debility was beginning to prove effective in modifying Rodríguez's behavior. This strategy may not have been verbalized or agreed upon by individual government officials. Nevertheless, allowing sickness to fester ultimately served to slowly quash the willpower of scandalous, uncontrollable women, with the effect of reasserting Spanish patriarchal dominance. Rodríguez had found herself compelled to craft increasingly subservient appeals as her illness advanced.

In fact, according to two doctors' testimonies included with this third letter, Rodríguez was suffering from advanced-stage scurvy. As stated in the first doctor's assessment, "se halla su Sangre con un humor salso scorbutico de suficiente consideracion para tener en ella un grave daño si no se emprende su curacion con prontitud" (f. 71f). The second doctor agreed that she was in "eminte [sic] peligro" and shed light on the dire conditions inside the recogimiento, explaining that Juana María required a "situacion sosegada moderada i destinada a curacion i tambien prolija asistencia en alimentos medicamentos y otras nesarias cosas que en el paraje en que exciste no puede tener" (f. 72f). These doctors' letters acknowledge that the recogimiento did not have the quality of food or medicine required to cure her scurvy.

¹⁵ The irony of this comparison, given her strong desire for self-determination and history of self-sufficiency prior to her arrest, cannot go unnoticed. This performative self-deprecation by a woman very much aware of her capabilities is reminiscent of Sor Juana's use of irony when addressing the bishop in her "Respuesta a Sor Filotea."

Doctors of this period had already identified the four stages of scurvy and its signature symptoms, although they had not identified Vitamin C deficiency as the cause, instead blaming "humores scorbúticos." According to the *Compendio de la medicina: ó Medicina practica* by Juan Manuel Venegas, published in Mexico in 1788, scurvy, in its worst state, caused "comezon en las encias, rubor, hinchazon, blandura, y supuracion [discharge of pus]; orina roxa, fetida, y lixiviosa; color del rostro rubricundo; fisuras en las piernas, brazos, o cara; letargos, epilepsias, hemorragias de narices, marasmos, fluxos coliquativos [liquefaction of tissue], rumor en los huesos, y gangrenas secas" (334). This stage could take quite a while to reach, however, since the onset of the first stage takes up to three months to occur (Mayberry).

While doctors did not fully understand the causes of scurvy, several cures had been proposed. The *Compendio* recommended "los verros, el chichilacastle [...] los rabanos hortenses, y silvestres, la mostaza, la yerbabuena, el hepasote, y los agrios;" other curative ingredients included "xarabe de limones, sumo de limones, resina de xalapa, tianguispepetla, tamarindos, xarabe de rosas" (335-336). Many of these ingredients, particularly lemon juice, watercress, and radishes, would indeed have provided the patient with the Vitamin C her diet was lacking, potentially preventing her death. Even if the doctors had not chosen the correct remedies to cure Rodríguez, it is clear there was widespread awareness that doing nothing, in a case of advanced scurvy, led to imminent death. Though recogidas were fed, the dearth of nutrient-rich foods in the recogimiento was so marked as to allow scurvy to progress to its most advanced stage. This operated as a form of maiming; the limited nature of the care provided by the recogimiento "masquerade[d] as 'let live' when in fact it act[ed] as 'will not let die'" (Puar 170).

However, maiming was not the only form of state violence enacted upon Rodríguez in this case. She was met with a slew of bureaucratic obstacles and prolonged waiting that also constituted a form of state violence, a way of asserting domination over her as a subject of little importance (Auyero "Patients" 5). As mentioned, her first three petitions to the government were all denied. However, while the first was denied because she "lacked merit" and had not served enough time, her remaining petitions were not so much denied as given a bureaucratic runaround, a common practice utilized to create "subjects who know [...] they have to *patiently comply with* the seemingly arbitrary, ambiguous, and always changing state requirements" (Auyero, *Patients* 9, emphasis in original). Several factors contributed to the erratic government responses she received. First, although she had been sentenced under Viceroy Florez, he was replaced by Revillagigedo on October 16, 1789, shortly after Juana María's transfer to the recogimiento in Puebla from a *casa de depósito* on September 30, 1789. What's more, Florez himself had not directly sentenced her, but had commissioned Regent Gamboa to preside over her case. As previously described, her second and third letters were

initially ignored with the terse response to “seek out the sentencing authorities.” Since the office of the viceroy did not have her file, officials expected it to be located in the Real Sala de Crimen; in reality, the files were anomalously located in the office of Regent Gamboa. Complicating the already unclear paper trail is that Rodríguez’s letters, and the government’s responses, form two different cases within one file (*expediente*) in the archive, which would suggest that her paperwork accumulated in two different government offices and only later was consolidated into one *expediente*.

As it turns out, in spite of having been initially ignored, her second letter was the letter that would finally prompt authorities to grant her clemency. For unclear reasons, after having told her on July 5, 1792, to write to the office that had sentenced her, Viceroy Revillagigedo reopened her case on February 22, 1794, asking the Real Sala de Crimen to locate her files. Therein ensued a bureaucratic back-and-forth in which the Real Sala could not find any files for Rodríguez, even though officials in Puebla stated she was indeed imprisoned in the *recogimiento*. On March 2, 1794, the Real Sala officially confirmed they had not sentenced her and could provide no further information to Revillagigedo.

It seems her reopened petition would have stagnated at this stage were it not for the unexpected discovery of her file among Regent Gamboa’s possessions upon his death on June 4, 1794. The officials who discovered said papers, which included all documents relevant to the case except her second letter, sent them to Revillagigedo at the end of June 1794, four months after he had attempted to reopen the case on the basis of her second letter. In addition to the original sentencing information, the testimony from her second lover, her rejected first letter, and her emotional third letter with attached doctors’ notes, these papers included a fourth and final letter by Rodríguez, addressed to the viceroy. In this letter, she continued to demonstrate an impressive familiarity with the viceregal power structure, explaining to the viceroy that:

Vuestra Excelencia se sirvió expedir un Decreto al Señor Governador Yntendente para que se me notificara ocurriera a continuar mi solicitud en la Real Sala del Crimen [...]. Yo siegamente obedeseria sus preceptos a no estar informada por el Señor Rexente mediante los repetidos ocurso que le he hecho que el prosedimiento contra mi lo hiso como Comisionado por el Señor Excelentisimo antesesor de Vuestra Excelencia y asi comprehendo que en esta Causa aquella Real Sala no tiene facultad para resolver sobre mi solicitud por que la superioridad de Vuestra Excelencia es el Jues de ella y esto me movió a hacer nuevo ocurso que llegaria a sus manos. (f. 82f-v)

It is bitterly ironic that this detailed explanation of the paper trail regarding her case file was ultimately never used to locate said file, and only came into the viceroy’s possession upon Gamboa’s death. In this last letter, Rodríguez adhered to the prescribed use of subservient language (“siegamente

obedecería;" etc.) while simultaneously leaving little doubt she had lost hope that the viceroy might heed her instructions and successfully locate her case.

Rather than returning to the fierier arguments of letters one and two, Rodríguez made plain that she accepted the gendered comportment expected as of her as docile and repentant. She lamented "el tanto sufrir en esta dura pricion tan dilatada por que mas lo siente una muger por su sexo que un hombre," both acceding to the idea of women as the weaker sex and highlighting the grave state of her health (f. 82v).¹⁶ However, she had no doubt that "a vista de ella [her letter] se apiade el benigno corazon de Vuestra Excelencia," especially as she promised never return to the city and not even to give "la menor nota de mi persona" (f. 82v). A far cry from her first letters denying responsibility and guilt, here Rodríguez promised to uphold the highest ideal of womanhood: to be unnoticeable, to become invisible to the public eye, to be "recogida" even outside of the recogimiento. The institution had achieved her repentance and subordination.

Upon receiving her complete case, the viceroy finally granted her release. On July 9, 1794, he sent word to Puebla that Rodríguez should be released to a private house to be cured. Now that she had succumbed to an appropriately subservient female role, had been sufficiently weakened so as to diminish her threatening "scandalousness," and had satisfactorily demonstrated contrition for her sins, the authorities were willing to release her. She had been created as a "docile subject" by the "disciplinary apparatus" of the colonial power structure (Puar 32). Additionally, authorities now had proof from two male doctors that she was in grave danger of death. The debilitating circumstances of the recogimiento had produced their desired effect; now that she was malleable, they did not want Rodríguez to die. Even still, the viceroy asked that the Intendente de Puebla be "a la mira sobre su conducta" and, in a separate notice, he underlined the phrase "*cuidando Vuestra Señoría* de que se cele sobre sus procederés" (f. 85f, 86f). Rodríguez was still presumed to be a threat to public integrity, even though authorities had subjugated her both physically and psychologically.

On September 23, 1789, Juana María Rodríguez was sentenced to six years' prison in the Santa María Egipcíaca recogimiento in Puebla, New Spain. Four years and ten months later, on July 19, 1794, Viceroy Revillagigedo sent word to Puebla that she be released for her curation at a house of good reputation. Unbeknownst to the viceroy, four months earlier, at midnight on March 16, 1794, Rodríguez had died "repentinamente, de haverle ahogado la Sangre" (f. 89f). This death is consistent with scurvy, wherein "death is usually caused by hemorrhaging in the brain and heart"

¹⁶ A woman could indeed be expected to suffer physically more than a man in similar circumstances, given the contemporary Cartesian ideology of the mind/body divide, which argued that women had "a different kind of intellectual character" and thus perceived the world less through reason than through the senses (Lloyd 50).

(Mayberry). Notable, as well, is the mundane way in which her death was related. This is consistent with the way debilitation naturalizes injury to specific populations, putting torture in the realm of the public without spectacularizing it (Puar 129; 269). *Recogimientos* naturalized isolation and physical deterioration to marginalized women, neither drawing public attention through overt violence nor operating clandestinely; in fact, their location in urban centers was critical to their role in silently deterring women from errant behavior. Rodríguez's death, far from causing outcry, was drily noted by a scribe and filed away to be forgotten.

The case of Juana María Rodríguez underlines the debilitation through forced waiting to which *recogidas* were subjected by the Spanish state in colonial Mexico, demonstrating the impact of debilitating state violence on marginalized populations. As a widow forced to make a living for herself and her family as best she could, she immigrated to Mexico City, took the work readily available to her as a woman with no male protector or social connections, and utilized her relationships with men strategically to earn money. These relationships violated the sanctity of the men's marriages and marked Rodríguez as a potential source of moral contagion due to her lack of sexual "continence" and her racialized class status as a poor rural *criolla*. She was sentenced to time in the *recogimiento* in an effort to render her a normative female subject via domination by the patriarchal colonizing state. This domination was "experienced as a waiting time: waiting hopefully and then frustratedly for others to make decisions, and in effect surrendering to the authority of others" (Auyero, *Patients* 4). Forced waiting also gave rise to her debilitation, a physical state intended to target "not [...] life itself, but resistance itself" (Puar 135).

Rodríguez ultimately died due to this debilitation, but the flurry of bureaucratic activity at the end of her case indicated that death was not the (immediate) intended consequence of *recogimiento*. Rather, *recogimientos* were designed to debilitate an undesirable, "unruly" population of racially and socioeconomically marginalized women by letting diseases like scabies and scurvy fester, forcing women to wait for remedies until they were rendered "patients of the state" who surrendered themselves to political domination and sexual subservience. Unfortunately for women like Rodríguez, authorities pushed too far when testing how much her resistance could be worn down before she succumbed to death. Juana María Rodríguez's case demonstrates the logic of debilitation employed by authorities against the marginalized women of the *recogimientos* in New Spain, while simultaneously highlighting the ways *recogidas* perceived, then resisted and/or complied with, the systems working to debilitate them. As institutions that disciplined and regulated women through gendered, racialized, and class-based mechanisms of control, *recogimientos* served as an important element of late colonial power structure.

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