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Fantasy and Stereotype: the Witches of Lima as Colonial Identity

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17th century Lima, Peru was a cosmopolitan trading hub governed by the Spanish Crown and populated by Africans, Amerindians, Chinese, Europeans, and Jews, along with their resulting multiethnic offspring. The social networks in work and domestic spheres facilitated interaction between economic classes and the exchange of ideas that fomented colonial identities. Homi K. Bhabha describes the process of formation in terms of stereotype: “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is...already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.”¹ Lima’s population of immigrants, mixed with Amerindians acculturated by the Incan empire’s formative practices in the centuries preceding contact, continuously rewrote its convoluted stereotypes of ethnicity, class, and occupation. Bhabha writes that stereotype functions as phobia and fetish at the same time, changing the object of analysis itself and preventing the concretization of racial schema. It paves the way for a colonial fantasy that culminates in Otherness: “an articulation of difference contained within fantasy of origin and identity.”² The ethnic binaries essential to Inquisitorial proceedings on the Peninsula proved

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2004), 95.

² *Ibid.*, 96-104. Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

problematic when the Inquisition began investigating Lima's residents; the problem was only exacerbated in witchcraft cases, which involved women of every social class and ethnic group. Accusers, witnesses, and defendants overlapped in the slew of trials in the mid-1600s, the mythical concept of universal sisterhood further disproved through their testimony citing payment from desperate clients as the cynical motive behind their actions. While the framework for European belief in diabolism informed Lima's Inquisitorial proceedings and contributed to the creation of the colonial witch, the women working as magical practitioners in 17th century Lima were the product of colonial fantasy: they used the tri-continental syncretism that created them to continuously negotiate their identities and reap the benefits of their position within Otherness.

The origins of the 17th century colonial witch can be traced back to a marriage of the gender binaries that emerged in both Andean and European divisions of labor with the Christian ideology of women and diabolism. While giving birth and rearing children did not stop Andean women from actively participating in community life - in fact women and men were conceived of as an interdependent work unit - there was

still a conscious male/female binary in Andean tribes.³ Irene Silverblatt, a scholar on gendered life in pre- and post-Colombian Peru, maintains that as the Inca absorbed tribes into their ever-expanding empire, they “stuck to this conception of interdependent male and female activities as the keystone of the labor process,”⁴ furthering the binary and solidifying concepts of gendered tasks and behavior: “If weaving and spinning were considered the epitome of ‘feminine’ activity, plowing and combat were the tasks that represented Andean malehood...of course, men did much more than that...nevertheless, placing foot plow in the earth and bearing arms were the domain of men.”⁵ While Andean gender ideologies associated women and men with particular tasks, both sexes engaged in a wide range of jobs. One was not seen as inferior to the other; rather the two were complementary pieces of a whole.

To the colonizers’ eyes, Andean men and women fit roughly into the same private and public spheres that their European counterparts did. Spaniards, socialized into an extremely rigid gender schema, interpreted the Incan division of labor from within their own framework, creating a baseline for colonial social structure that was

³ Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

part misperception and part half-truth. Women operated in the domestic/private sphere, excluded from participating in the official public spheres of lawmaking, voting, and decision-making, instead relegated to maintaining the household. Poor women in the city worked outside of these restrictive boundaries in order to survive, and were often the majority of the vendors in the street markets. By European standards, those working outside the realm of established female tasks were capable of further deviation from the social norm, just like European witches. In her book *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru*, Silverblatt provides the following synopsis of the Church's view on witchcraft in Europe: "Women, especially the poor and old...were perceived as the weak point in a divinely ordained patriarchal social order...women, the consorts of the devil...were the means through which...God's kingdom, reflected in the divinely sanctioned social order of civil society, could be destroyed."⁶ Silverblatt's description reveals a profound preoccupation on the part of the Church that women, the Creator's imperfect afterthought and the origin of sin, would ally themselves with the Devil to invert established society. Emerging in the turbulent conditions of

⁶ Ibid., 167.

medieval Europe, demonology and the stereotype of the witch became part of European folk belief, ultimately ⁷ “bec[o]m[ing] a standard for judgment and a cultural evaluation which was applied outside the boundaries of the specific context in which it had been conceived.”⁸ Bhabha cites this ambivalence as the driving force behind colonial stereotype; it “ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures...produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which...must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved.”⁹ When the Spanish conquered Peru, they imported the Devil and his accomplice, the witch. Andean religion had no place in the Spanish framework, and so was incorporated by being filtered through Christian ideology, which identified it as idolatry and subsequently devil worship.”¹⁰ For Spanish colonialists, witchcraft was definitely present in the Andes, women performed it, and they did so via pacts with the Devil.

⁷ Ibid., 179.

⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2004), 95.

¹⁰ Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 171.

Colonialism's legacy was profound cultural change, a "refashioning [of] the humanity of women and men in consort with the processes of colonial state making."¹¹ The Otherness created as a byproduct of this colonization in turn served as the space for the practice of witchcraft: colonial identity allowed witches to shape their craft using elements from the geographic points of origin of the diverse ethnic traditions present in Lima. Because there was no preexisting standard for what constituted witchcraft in the colonies, it took little to convince those who sought help from its practitioners of their spells' potency. The use of ingredients exclusive to the New World in a thoroughly cosmopolitan society made defining witchcraft frustratingly complicated for Inquisitors and conveniently ambivalent for practitioners.

Bhabha describes the colonizer's interest in the colonized as a comfortable foray into the exotic; the prolonged interaction between the two creating an increasingly adulterated and mainstream conception of "Indianness": "Colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and

¹¹ Irene Silverblatt, *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 110.

visible.”¹² The colonized subject exists within the relatively familiar social and economic structure of the colonizer, the traces of native culture attributed to him modified and tempered by time and space: “...remarkable is the attraction...to native customs and fashions, said to seduce Peru’s non-Indian populations, and to native herbs and lore...prized by non-Indian women for use in sorcery and witchcraft.”¹³ Potions, rituals, and incantations formed the magical triumvirate of the colonies. Inquisition testimony reveals ingredients in potions to be an inconsistent hodge-podge of household items and native plants. The ever-changing craft made it hard to define and prosecute witches, weakening Inquisitorial authority and allowing for slippery participation in the Inquisition’s subversive practices. In the trial of Ana de Castañeda, a “quarter mulata” originally from Santo Domingo, witnesses described her bag of tricks as containing wool, salt, fat black chickens, scented water, her client’s menstrual blood, jars of toasted corn, powder made from China plates, palla palla (a plant found in the Andes), cloves, pepper, cinnamon, and an array of other seemingly

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2004), 101.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

random additives.¹⁴ As Silverblatt puts it, “Living in the colonies opened up a Pandora’s box of knowledge...rooted in the wisdom of three continents...Jewish symbols and the insights of *moriscas* were common ingredients in devilish brews, where they joined a myriad of saints, sacred relics, stars, and items of nature.”¹⁵ Two elements that appeared in multiple trials over several years serve to illustrate the evolution of the anti-Spanish discourse inherent in Peruvian witchcraft; depending on the decade and the user, coca and the Inca were used for different outcomes, but what remains consistent is their decidedly non-Spanish origin: “Coca was...used for divining and curing in the indigenous Andes, but not in the ways described here. Drawing on European witchcraft beliefs, these women with Inca guidance had transformed coca into an instrument of sorcery.”¹⁶ The coca leaf was widely used in the colonies, chewed as a moderate stimulant and believed to be good for both the teeth and the stomach. In the transcription of Antonia de Abarca’s trial in 1655, she is accused of chewing coca and tobacco (another common pleasure exclusive to the New World and suspect in the Old) and using it

¹⁴ AHN, Inq., Lib. 1029, ff. 500v-509.

¹⁵ Irene Silverblatt, "Colonial Conspiracies," *Ethnohistory* (Duke University Press) 53, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 259-280, p. 262.

¹⁶ Irene Silverblatt, *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 122.

in her spells: “[The witness] said her mistress [the Defendant] had ordered her to remove the crucifix so that she could chew coca.”¹⁷ She also reportedly made offerings of chewed coca to the devil and used chewed coca as part of her divining spells.¹⁸ By this time, a direct link had been established on the part of the Inquisitors and at least some portion of the civil population between coca and diabolism, furthered by its use in conjunction with the pagan Inca king: “Coca took on powers in these women’s hands that it did not have in indigenous ones...As king of Indians – ‘gentiles’[here meaning pagans] and idol worshippers – the Inca had accrued powers of witchcraft, effected through the most ‘Indian’ of plants, coca.”¹⁹ The Catholic authorities had condemned the Inca along with all pre-Colombian Amerindians to eternal damnation on the grounds that they died unbaptized. However, ruling his empire with an iron fist, the Inca King and his wife the Coya were not the universally adored leaders that colonial Peruvians imagined. Most native peoples did not think of themselves as his descendants, and many loathed him for usurping their lands, labor, and political sovereignty. Colonial racial hierarchy – the complex *casta* system – bolstered the

¹⁷ AHN, Inq., Lib. 1031, ff. 378-381v, p. 380.

¹⁸ Ibid., 378-380v.

¹⁹ Irene Silverblatt, *Possible Pasts* ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 121-122.

constructed identity of “Indian,” a profoundly misinformed stereotype of one all-encompassing ethnic group: “Coca conjuring increasingly tied ‘Indianness’ to the figure of the Inca monarch...in which the Inca, acquiring an ‘absolutist’ taint, began to typify the keystone of colonial cultural fiction: the Peruvian ‘Indian.’”²⁰ Silverblatt points to colonial Peruvians as transforming pre-Colombian history, “painting Indians/Inca in broad strokes and making coca the key to a merging Indian/Inca domain.”²¹ In the case of Ana María de Contreras, a “mulata slave” and native of Lima, she was reported as worshipping mountain peaks and using rocks dedicated to the memory of the Inca and his wife.²² Mountain peaks and rocks were indeed an important part of the native sacred landscape, but they did not commonly represent the Inca or his wife. This was a colonial attribution of meaning to the mountains.²³

By virtue of these hybrid practices, the Lima witches and their clientele were reworking parts of the colonial system, threatening the hierarchy of homogeneous identity by creating a pervasive subculture

²⁰ Ibid., 122.

²¹ Irene Silverblatt, "Colonial Conspiracies," *Ethnohistory* (Duke University Press) 53, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 267.

²² AHN, Inq., Lib. 1031, ff. 332-332v, p. 332v.

²³ Irene Silverblatt, *Possible Pasts* ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 120.

largely controlled by its members. Silverblatt writes that colonial witches saw power in indio herbs, indio mountains, and the vanquished Inca, “arguing about...the illegitimacy of Spanish rule, its limits, its impossibilities.”²⁴ They were using the categories of colonial rule as an organizational framework for their battles, in which colonial ideology provided the scaffolding for political critique.²⁵ An example of authorities' burgeoning fear of interaction with native customs can be found in the novel edict of faith read aloud in Peru's churches. Traditionally, when the Inquisition arrived in a city, its first step was to read the edict of faith, which explained possible heresies and encouraged all community members to come to the tribunals of the Inquisition to report suspicious behavior. The novel edict read in Peru's churches added the particular problems of women to the usual litany of crimes perpetrated by hidden Jews, Muslims, Protestants, and other heretics: “[women are] given to superstitions...who with grave offence to God...[and] who do not doubt...their adoration for the devil, they invoke and adore him...the aforesaid women go to the countryside

²⁴ Ibid., 113.

²⁵ Ibid., 113.

and...drink...herbs and roots, called *achuma* and *chamiço*, and *coca*..."²⁶

The edict combines the familiar European conception of witchcraft as a pact with the Devil with the potions and rituals requiring unfamiliar ingredients. These unknown components of colonial witchcraft threaten the established order, as the ambiguity of their general functions in Andean traditions and colonial society locates witches in a position of authority: "The colonial race hierarchy cut both ways: it gave dominance to *españoles* in the realm of official politics, but when it came to the subterranean powers of shamans and witches, it put authority in the hands of Peru's subordinates."²⁷ Ingredients, rituals, and incantations were powerful insofar as they constituted acts of witchcraft; they practiced in a realm largely unconquered by colonial authorities, and were used by people whose position in society was weakened by its oversimplified attempts to categorize them.

The other element of colonial witchcraft requiring examination is the clientele: who sought help from "witches"? And what kind of services were they seeking? Trial records from the mid-1600s prove that witnesses were commonly the Defendants' former clients. The

²⁶ Irene Silverblatt, *Possible Pasts* ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 110.

²⁷ Irene Silverblatt, "Colonial Conspiracies," *Ethnohistory* (Duke University Press) 53, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 265.

majority were women, but they had varied ethnic and religious backgrounds, and belonged to every social class in the city. Elinor Burkett's article "In Dubious Sisterhood" challenges the notion of a female experience that transcends class and race, instead arguing, "the position of the one is maintained only through the exploitation of the other...such a relationship leaves little concrete room for sisterhood."²⁸ Class, Burkett writes, is the main factor in determining behavior and relationships: in the colonies, women had few avenues to legitimate power. Witchcraft lent a feeling of control to lives largely determined by marriage contracts for the wealthy, domestic servitude or the struggle for survival for the impoverished. Elite women were severely constrained by marriage; they were part of a ruling class that used marriage to transfer capital through dowries.²⁹ Ana de Castañeda's trial includes typical descriptions of services rendered: a woman asked her to use divining tricks to find out if a man would marry her, and she did love magic to make him love her, a woman wanted to know if her daughter was pregnant (though unmarried) and whether she'd give birth before she got married, another asked her to find out if her

²⁸ Elinor C. Burkett, "In Dubious Sisterhood: Class and Sex in Spanish Colonial South America," *Latin American Perspectives* (Sage Publications, Inc.) 4, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1977): 18-26, p. 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

husband would come back from Panama, and yet another wanted Castañeda to prevent her husband from finding out she was cheating on him.³⁰ Upper class women's livelihood was entirely dependent on their marriages, and using any means they could to prevent the discovery of adultery, illegitimate births, and to influence their chances of marriage made witchcraft a very attractive option. Lower class women did not have capital to transfer, and so were not integral to the maintenance of colonial social networks. They were freer to conduct their private affairs with only individual or single family needs influencing their actions.³¹ Many of the witches in the trials of the 1650s showed profound cynicism toward the craft, incredulous about the legitimacy of supernatural power and claiming to be motivated by the fees they demanded for their services. While inquisition testimony must be read skeptically, the witches' actions and their clients' desires are almost universally economic.

Bhabha writes that fixity is "the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, saying further that it is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an

³⁰ AHN, Inq., Lib. 1029, ff. 500v-509.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.”³² This mode of representation is what allowed witchcraft to flourish and evolve so thoroughly in Peruvian society: women could choose elements from Jewish, *Morisco*, Andean, and European traditions to invent a practice, rendering lasting stereotype impossible. Colonial witches rivaled church sovereignty in domestic affairs and played on colonial fears of native subversion, gender subordination and cultural disorder.³³ By harboring fantasies of the Inca while praying to indio ancestors, they reconfigured their pre-Colombian past while continuously recreating an ever-changing colonial present.

Abarca, Antonia de. AHN, Inq., Lib. 1031, ff. 378-381v.*

³² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2004), 94.

³³ Irene Silverblatt, *Possible Pasts* ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 128.

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*AHN = Archivo Histórico Nacional of Madrid, Lib. = Volume, ff= Pages

