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Beatriz de Padilla, Mulatta Mistress and Mother

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In this short essay, Solange Alberro of the Centro de Estudios Históricos, El Colegio de Mexico, employs trial records dating from 1650 from the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Mexico City to describe the eventful life of a woman of color in mid-seventeenth-century New Spain. Alberro finds a fascinating story, of great interest in itself. Beatriz de Padilla's significant place in her hometown, Villa de Lagos, though perhaps never quite secure, was due principally to her own formidable intelligence, ambition, and charms. The circumstances of what Alberro calls her "active and somewhat irregular private life" call for a wider consideration of other women in this colonial society (such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Selection 31) and "the partial survival represented by the process of genetic and cultural *mestizaje* [miscegenation]."

As Alberro notes, concubinage was a part of life accepted by most people so long as these unions complied with a certain range of expectations. Such relationships were expected to stay behind their thin disguises of propriety and not to be flaunted. Although such "illicit" (from the Christian point of view) relationships outside of wedlock were certainly not the exclusive pursuit of Spanish and Creole men, on the one hand, and women of color, on the other, these kinds of interracial unions were common, founded in part on

the cold fact that White men often held power over Africans, Indians, and people of mixed racial descent and took advantage of this power to gratify their sexual and psychological desires.

The case of Beatriz de Padilla reminds us of the hidden understandings, rules, and temptations in relationships between women and men from different stations in colonial society. These relationships might be characterized by more than simple oppression or sexual exploitation. In the present case, a long-standing genuine love and affection between Beatriz de Padilla and a local priest seem to have been the cause of slander and charges of murder-through-sorcery brought against her by jealous members of his family. In considering the verdict of the Tribunal of the Inquisition in the case of Beatriz de Padilla, Alberro wonders whether the woman's straightforward admissions in her own defense, "the recollection that she had been the beloved companion of a brother," combined with her noted and considerable beauty, may have elicited sympathy from clerical interrogators who could not help but reflect on their own lives and desires.

Beatriz de Padilla participates in other kinds of interracial interaction as well. Like her intimate relationships, these do not conform to what might seem the initially expected norms. A rebellious soul, solidarity with other women and men of color was not part of her agenda. She resents the defaming inaccuracy of the racial label, Mulatta (half African); she is lighter skinned than that. She admits to having landed in trouble for beating an Indian woman for no reason, and to treating slaves and domestic servants with brutality. She has clearly "risen" in her own eyes (not to mention the view of those in whom she inspired envy and jealousy) to become a woman of some standing and an heir in a priest's household.

In her analysis of the case, Alberro suggests that, in spite of her marginal position in society, such a colored woman possessed a remarkable degree of "freedom" to act spontaneously, "to walk, talk, and dress pretty much as she saw fit." Alberro brings this freedom into focus by employing a stark contrast, the standard to which contemporary White women were held. Beatriz's freedom and "naturalness" contrast with the severe restrictions on Spanish and Creole women who, Alberro notes, were meant to keep up appearances and concern themselves with the damaging consequences of hearsay both to themselves and their husbands and lovers.

Alberro's intriguing final statements about this story call for further inquiry. To begin, it is worth considering these notions of freedom and naturalness more closely. By whose definition, and within what limits, did they exist? Did they exist for groups as well as for individuals? What about the norms that Beatriz was judged to have violated so brazenly that she found herself accused before the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Mexico City? It is true that Spaniards and Creoles who flagrantly breached explicit and implicit moral and racial codes might be judged by their peers to be damaging honorable reputations and (especially in the view of eagle-eyed relatives) jeopardizing fortunes, but what dangers did such relationships hold for people from the lower stations of society? Beatriz de Padilla's predicament recalls similar charges made against native Andean love specialists in contemporary Peru (see Selection 35), not to mention many other non-Indians across Spanish America, such as the Mulatto gentlemen of Esmeraldas, Ecuador (Figure 18 in Selection 24), or the settlers of Amapa, Mexico (Selection 40). The interest and significance of Beatriz de Padilla's case seem crowned by the fact that she was not convicted of sorcery by the Inquisition, but it is worth remembering that as Alberro's relation of this particular story draws to a close, the "triumphant return" to a "sleepy town" that she imagines might easily have been different.

> In 1650 there was a great scandal in the sleepy town of Lagos, near Guadalajara in western New Spain. The shameless Mulatta Beatriz de Padilla was accused by the royal agent Don Juan Sánchez Vidaurre, an influential gentleman of the country, sixty-four years of age and the owner of several farms and ranches in the vicinity, and by a secular priest and some others, of having caused dreadful and mysterious things to happen to two of her lovers. According to the charges, she had poisoned the first of them, a priest who had been serving as commissioner of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Lagos; and then, several weeks later, she had driven the lord mayor of Juchipila crazy through the exercise of magic. informed of this development and alarmed at the possibility that one of its representatives might have been done away with in this cold-blooded fashion with impunity, the Tribunal of the Inquisition in Mexico City summoned the alleged

murderess to the capital. In the meantime, it instructed its new commissioner in Lagos to undertake a complete investigation of the case.

In the prisoner's dock in Mexico City, Beatriz informed the inquisitors in spirited language that she was not a Mulatta but a lighter-skinned Morisca, the daughter of a White man and a Mulatta [and a New World usage not to be confused with a new convert from Islam]. She said that she was about thirty years old, unmarried and without any "respectable" means of supporting herself. She had been born in Lagos, the daughter of a Don Lorenzo de Padilla (a descendant of one of the best families of Guadalajara, she was proud to attest, and brother to the late Gaspar de Padilla, who had served for a time as a secular priest in Lagos). Her mother was an unmarried Mulatta serving woman named Cecilia de Alvarado, who had been born a slave in the Mexico City household of the viceroy, Don Luis de Velasco. Cecilia had been an only child whose mother died in childbirth, and as a young woman she had been taken to Lagos to serve as housekeeper to the parish priest there, Don Francisco Pérez Rubín. She was still employed by this priest more than thirty years later, when the scandal broke around her daughter.

Cecilia had borne two other children, younger than Beatriz, by different fathers. They were Francisca Ramírez, who had been legally recognized and declared a free person by her father, a White man of the neighborhood, and Francisco de Alvarado. Francisca was the wife of the administrator of a cattle ranch in Zacatecas, but she lived with their several children in Lagos. Francisco, the unrecognized son of a Basque immigrant long since dead, had been blinded some two years before Beatriz's trial. He was unmarried and also lived in Lagos. Beatriz had begun her life as a slave, inheriting her mother's status, but both she and Cecilia had at length been granted their freedom thanks to the benevolence of their employer and presumably their own satisfactory service in the priest's household. At the time of her arrest and removal to Mexico City, Beatriz had been a housekeeper and mistress in the service of Don Diego de las

Marinas, the lord mayor of Juchipila, for the loss of whose senses she was being held responsible.

Like her mother, Beatriz was a woman who had led an active and somewhat irregular private life. Never married, she had brought two sons and two daughters into the world. The eldest was Agustín Ortiz, then fourteen, the son of the priest Diego Ortiz Saavedra, with whom Beatriz had interacted happily for eight years and whom she was now accused of having poisoned. Seven-year-old María, who was being raised by Beatriz's mother, was the daughter of one Hernando López de Lara, and her children Micaela, five, and Diego, four, were the fruits of her union with Diego de las Mariñas. Asked to provide a little more detail about the history of her life and loves, Beatriz replied that when she was only thirteen or fourteen years old, she had whipped an Indian woman without cause and had been taken to Guadalajara for two months—apparently in an effort to get her away from Lagos until the furor died down. There she had stayed in the houses of Doña Maria Ortiz, a sister of the priest Diego Ortiz, who was already her secret lover, and of another elegant lady. This visit would seem to have had a great influence in establishing the ideal of a standard of living to which the ex-servant girl hoped to become accustomed.

After returning to Lagos, she had first gone to live with Diego de las Mariñas in the village of Nochistlán. But her friendship with the priest Diego Ortiz was already of long standing, having begun when Beatriz was an adolescent and still lived with her mother in the household of Father Pérez Rubín. It would appear that Ortiz was the man whom she really loved throughout. Two years before his death the commissioner had reversed his earlier policy and determined to make his relationship with her a public one. At that point he had taken her away from Mariñas to live with him at his hacienda of Moya, some two leagues distant from Lagos. It is a powerful testimony to the strength of the affection that Beatriz had managed to inspire in Mariñas in the meantime that after Ortiz's death he was willing to take her back with him.

The witnesses hostile to Beatriz, whose testimonies were taken during the inquiry, were unanimous in declaring that the Mulatta had made life miserable for the lovelorn commissioner of the Holy Office during all the time that she had remained in his house. In their view, she had literally reduced the man to idiocy before finishing him off by placing poisonous powders in his bath. Before entering into relations with her, they recalled, he had been in excellent health, with an indomitable character and an evil disposition. Afterward he had lost his hair and grown very sickly, and he had lost control of his faculties to such an extent that he was often to be seen walking and talking to himself and laughing out loud for no reason at all. Beatriz replied that none of this was true, and that if the truth be known, it was she who had suffered a greater loss than anyone else with the death of Don Diego—because the priest loved her very deeply and had made her the lady of a household where she never lacked for anything. After his passing she had been beset with poverty and persecuted by her enemies. The priest's love for her had grown even more profound after their son Agustín had been born, she recalled. From then on he had often remarked that when he died, the hacienda of Moya would be hers to administer to support their son and another girl whom Ortiz had adopted. This last determination was, as it turned out, to be the chief cause of Beatriz's difficulty with the authorities.

Beatriz confessed that she had been less than exemplary in her conduct while exercising authority in the household of Diego Ortiz. She remembered having been an unduly harsh taskmistress to the slaves and domestic servants, despite the fact that she had served as a slave housemaid herself as a young girl. In particular, she admitted to having been especially cruel toward a lying and gossipy slave named Catalina la Garay—beating her frequently or spattering her with hot grease—and, moreover, that she had had this woman branded. But she denied that Diego Ortiz had suffered any transformations of character or behavior in her company. He had always had the custom of talking to himself, although she had never seen him laugh without reason. He had indeed lost some hair, but only on the face, where two spots had

appeared like birthmarks that were free of whiskers. But something none of the witnesses had mentioned was that he had suffered from an illness that caused him to complain frequently of severe headaches and flatulence and colic, and Beatriz believed that it was this that had carried him off.

Certain witnesses testified that the silver chamberpot in which Beatriz prepared the water for Diego Ortiz's bath had turned black on account of the menstrual blood she was in the habit of putting into it in an effort to poison her lover—and that when someone had pointed this out to the faithless mistress, she had replied that the skin of a prickly pear had fallen into the water and given it its red color. Beatriz responded sharply and astutely to this charge that, in the first place, blood would not cause silver to turn black, and, in the second place, she was not so foolish a person as to tell the whopper about the prickly pear skin, since everyone knew that the red color of the prickly pear was not the same as the color of blood. But most of the process was not so easy. The young woman was obliged to defend herself vigorously against the calumnies of her accusers, and in the course of doing so she took pleasure in providing many interesting details concerning life in the town of Lagos.

The folks back home, she pointed out, were green with envy at the fact that the lovers of Beatriz had all been important men who were crazy about her, such as the commissioner of the Holy Office and the lord mayor of Juchipila. Often people had asked her by means of what charms or love potions she was able to attract such admirers, and Beatriz recalled that she would reply with a laugh that the only charms or potions she employed were those she carried between her legs! But public opinion had a hard time accepting the fact that a mere Morisca, and an ex-slave at that, could come to enjoy the devotion of such important men by any such natural means as simply seduction, or youth and beauty, or sincerity in affection combined with a lively intelligence and a sparkling wit. The only convincing explanation for many was that she must be having recourse to magical procedures that were mysterious and dangerous, not to mention illegal.

As the trial proceeded, however, it became clear that something further lay behind the scandal, namely, a complicated situation within the family of the late commissioner, Ortiz. He had lived for years under constant pressure from his mother, Doña Luisa Ortiz, his sister's husband, the drunken but "respectable" royal agent Juan Sánchez Vidaurre, and their daughter Maria. These envious relatives had woven a veritable conspiracy against Beatriz when they realized that the priest was genuinely enamored of her and that he proposed to leave his entire estate to her and to their illegitimate son. It was they, together with their slaves and retainers, who had plotted to dispose of one whom they perceived as a contemptible upstart in any way they could.

Beatriz maintained that when Ortiz had died, the family had been in such a hurry to bury him that there had been a rumor in Lagos that they had buried him alive. She recalled that on that day the relatives of the deceased had descended on the house like a flock of buzzards, picking through his property and making off with the most insignificant objects. Doña Luisa had gone so far as to make off with a bird cage belonging to Beatriz, which she had gotten from some boys who had gone out looking for birds to snare in the countryside. Not satisfied with this, the greedy sister had later invented the preposterous charge that Beatriz only kept birds on hand so as to be able to use them in the preparation of her love charms.

Ortiz, said Beatriz, had for his part felt a great distrust toward his amily-knowing full well that they despised her and would do their best to frustrate his desires in the disposition of his estate. At one point, in an effort to win them over, she had begged Diego to name Luisa and her husband, Juan Sánchez Vidaurre, as godparents of their son. Ortiz had resisted the idea strongly, although in the end he had agreed to her request. But all of this had been to no avail. It was the *compadre* Sánchez Vidaurre and his wife who had first circulated the rumor that Beatriz was a sorceress and then put it about that she was a murderess as well. They simply could not accept the genuine love that Beatriz insisted had existed between the late priest and herself, and much

less the certain loss of a prosperous hacienda. Once launched by the envious relatives of Ortiz, the conspiracy had quickly broadened to serve as a channel for the rancor of all the leading citizens of Lagos—people who saw in the relationship between the commissioner and the Morisca the beginning of a dangerous process of social dissolution. Having a colored mistress of low social standing was no scandal in colonial society; on the contrary, it was a common practice, even among priests. But to demonstrate an exclusive affection for one's concubine in public, to put her in charge of one's household, and above all to make her the heir to one's estate were altogether unheard of. And this was especially hard to swallow when the woman in question was as outspoken as Beatriz and as indiscreet as she in boasting about her amorous and social successes.

The clamor against Beatriz had eventually been joined by no less a personage than the licentiate Andrés López, Don Diego Ortiz's replacement as commissioner of the Holy Office in Lagos. López was called upon to receive formally the depositions of the witnesses who testified against Beatriz. Before she left for the capital, he committed the error of warning her not to speak out against the hostilities that had been directed against her in Lagos if she wanted to avoid being muzzled as she stood before the Tribunal. Andrés López's hatred for Beatriz derived from the facts that at some point she had been the lover of his brother Hernando López de Lara, the father of Beatriz's second child María, and that the sister of these two men, Catalina de Lara, had been abandoned by her fiancé Don Diego de Ias Mariñas some years before, when he had "lost his head" and decided instead to take the humble Beatriz as his mistress! This intricate web of licit and illicit relations between civil and ecclesiastical functionaries and their female relatives, which seems to have been typical of the society of colonial Mexico, had left a bitter residue in the broken marriages, the frustrated ambitions, and the envies of many people. Beatriz was being made the scapegoat for all of them.

Catalina la Garay, the slave woman who had been so cruelly treated by Beatriz when she lived at the hacienda of Moya, had moved on later to become the servant of Ortiz's sister Doña Luisa. As a resentful ex-servant, she was able to contribute many valuable pieces of information to the preparation of the case against Beatriz, recounting with prejudice the details of the day-to-day life of the couple. All this notwithstanding, the Tribunal of the Inquisition was persuaded by the intelligent and sincere defense of Beatriz de Padilla (if not by her beauty, or by the recollection that she had been the beloved companion of a brother). To be doubly certain, the judges had Catalina la Garay brought to testify in Mexico City. Catalina confessed, apparently after a session in the torture chamber, that she had made up all her accusations. Then, so that her fate might serve as a lesson to all the evil-tongued gossips of Lagos, she was taken home and punished with two hundred lashes administered in the streets of the town. Beatriz, for her part, was acquitted and allowed to return to her hometown without any sort of punishment or reprimand.

At the time of Beatriz's release from the jail of the Inquisition she had returned to her the following items of personal property, which had been sequestered by the Holy Office at the time of her arrest. The list gives some indication of the conditions of material comfort in which the mistress of a leading citizen of the provinces might expect to live:

two sheets of Rouen linen	a blue petticoat adorned with Spanish flannel
a pillow with its casing	a used green woolen skirt
a white bedspread and blanket	one blue embroidered handkerchief
a mattress stuffed with cane leaves	an embroidered linen bonnet

two white shirtwaists	a red cloak
five embroidered blouses	a piece of coarse frieze cloth
two chambray petticoats	an old hat
a Spanish woolen skirt	two pairs of slippers

We may assume that the disgust felt by the respectable society of Lagos toward the beauteous Beatriz was in no way diminished by the sight of her triumphant return—especially in view of the fact that during the trial she had exposed to public criticism all the petty dealings and machinations of her detractors. It seems likely, however, that she returned to the household of the not-at-all crazy lord mayor of Juchipila with her position as beloved and respected concubine enhanced rather than diminished—and that there was little that anyone could do to harm her from that time forward.

The Mulatta mistress as a social type has always attracted the attention of students of colonial society, and it may be that her importance has been exaggerated. There is still a mysterious aura about women of this sort, a lingering suspicion that perhaps they did make use of love potions or other magic that turned their White owner-keepers into their sexual slaves. But without discarding the possibility that there may sometimes have been some basis to these charges, it is worth pointing out that in a colonial society the woman of low caste and swarthy skin, operating in a more marginal position than the White woman, was also less subject to a series of severely restrictive social regulations. A woman like Beatriz had in her favor, in addition to the attractions of her physical person and the color of her skin, a relative freedom of movement, a freedom to walk, talk, and dress pretty much as she saw fit, and an opportunity to give full rein to spontaneity and naturalness in her interpersonal relations. These freedoms were not available to the “respectable” White woman,

whether Spanish or Creole, who was obliged to concern herself always with what others might say and to do her best to adhere to the norms of society not only in every social interaction but also, since domestic servants were nearly always present, in the most intimate details of her private life.

The women of color in New Spain, whether of African or Indian extraction, performed—however unconsciously—a fundamental role in the historical development of Mexican society. The vital impulse that led them to join their flesh with the White men's and give birth to the White men's children was the biological response of a social group that found itself despised by the existing social order. What legitimate hopes for helping to mold the future might a Black person or an Indian in midseventeenth-century Mexican society reasonably entertain? Few, if any. But the same people might save some elements of their culture—a rhythm, a musical instrument, an aesthetic ideal, a culinary principle, perhaps a formula of courtesy—if they embraced the partial survival represented by the process of genetic and cultural *mestizaje.*

The Blacks and Indians who lost hope killed themselves, or they allowed their line to come to a halt by means of abortion, amenorrhea, and sterility—the physiological manifestations of a rejection of life. But the Indian, Black, and racially mixed women who had their babies, who struggled so that their fathers would recognize them, free them if they were slaves, provide for them, perhaps provide them with some education—these women were making possible the survival of their own kind over the long period. They were refusing to die. These women, for the most part despised by their contemporaries (and so little understood today), also were those who helped make life a little less harsh than it would otherwise have been for the European immigrants themselves. They forged the details of the domestic culture that gives a unique flavor to the home life of Mexican families even today. And above all they guaranteed the survival of many races in the new humanity that populates most of the Americas in our own time.