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# Recovering Lesbianism in Pre-Colonial Andean Peru

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**Introduction**

*El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno* (The First New Chronicle and Good Government) is a Peruvian chronicle produced around 1615 written by indigenous Peruvian nobleman Felipe Guáman Poma de Ayala. The manuscript was intended for King Phillip III of Spain and it was produced with the intention of providing a historical account of Andean culture and life prior to the arrival of the Spanish as well as a denouncement of the Spanish abuse of native Peruvians. It is one of the few manuscripts to survive which offers an indigenous recording of pre-Hispanic Andean society. Of most interest to us, however, is that it contains one of the few records on the practice of lesbianism within pre-colonial Andean society. Guáman Poma states that Kapak Yupanqui, the fifth Sapa Inca, had "a special affection for them (*un cariño muy especial por ellas*)". They were allowed a large level of sexual promiscuity. Thus, he argued that not only should they be tolerated but also highly respected (Andahazi 2008, 40). Aside from this, however, there is an extreme "dearth of information" (Trexler 1995, 6) on the topic. While there are several pieces of thorough research on male homosexuality under the Incan Empire, monographs on female homosexual behaviour in pre-colonial Andean Peru are practically "nonexistent" (Ibid) leaving a large gap in this area of queer Peruvian studies.

The subaltern nature of knowledge not only from an indigenous perspective, but also a female indigenous perspective, is doubled by the Conquistas repression of knowledge on Incan lesbianism. However, as Jacqueline Murray, author of a study on lesbianism in the Middle Ages (1996), states, "relative silence should not be taken as absence" (202). Spanish conquistadors rarely look into Andean traditions and activities involving women. Their cultural bias meant Spanish clerics did not recognize female-dominated activities due to their belief in male

dominance in religious and public life, activities considered most important and most culturally defining. Further, Hispanic perspectives understood heterosexuality as a basic framework which defined a woman's life from her earliest moments. Hispanic heterosexual hegemony determined women's lives from the moment they entered the world ensuring the reproduction of a male and female reproductive unit and the suppression of women. Hispanic understandings of gender, the socially imposed category which assigns certain roles onto the sexes, were a cultural force which placed males above females in a social hierarchy and ensured their continued dependence upon males.

The concept of obligatory or compulsory heterosexuality has been explored by thinkers like Adrienne Rich and Gayle Rubin who argued that heterosexuality be understood not as natural to human instincts, but a political institution, underpinned by repressive understandings of gender, which subordinates women in several societies and represses, demonises, and erases lesbian existence. It does this through the creation of asymmetrical gender relations, which render women dependent upon men, constraints on female sexuality through which women are, in effect, controlled, exchanged by men, and "Great Silence," or the silencing of lesbian existence from common discourse, history, art, and other forms of knowledge reproduction (Rich 2003, 18); (Katz 2007, 133-134).

This essay aims to recover lesbianism in the context of pre-colonial Andean Peru and to discuss the role of the Spanish *conquista* in ignoring its existence. It will first discuss the current view of queer theorists on lesbian silence as well as the "act" versus "identity or the "Acts Paradigm"

within queer studies, assessing our use of modern terminology and categories such as “lesbian” to describe pre-colonial Andean society.

It will then explore the ways in which pre-colonial Andean Peru, with its positive view of lesbianism, serves as a paradigm of a society with a relative lack of compulsory heterosexuality. Due to the lack of resources on this topic, this essay will emphasise the importance of close reading of recorded Andean rituals and myths to recover the subaltern female homosexual voice. Utilising Rich and Rubin’s theories, I will also explore the Andean understanding of gender roles and the female role in society in order to extrapolate how their differing gender roles might have resulted in their positive view of its practice. Lastly, this essay will explore colonial-era Hispanic legal documents, Catholic confession manuals, and popular entertainment within Spain to describe the reasoning for Spanish erasure of female homosexuality.

**Literature Review**

Female homosexuality is often represented inadequately within historical studies. Much of what is written on female sexuality is viewed from a male’s perspective. Women are only deemed in their associations to other men as wives, as mothers, as sisters, or as daughters. This silence must not be understood as an absence. As Rictor Norton states,

*“Because of society's reluctance to admit that lesbians exist, a high degree of certainty is expected before historians or biographers are allowed to use the label. Evidence that would suffice in any other situation is inadequate here... A woman who never married, who lived with another woman, whose friends were mostly women, or who moved in known lesbian or mixed*

*gay circles, may well have been a lesbian. ... But this sort of evidence is not 'proof'. What our critics want is incontrovertible evidence of sexual activity between women. This is almost impossible to find."* (Norton 1997, 184).

Finding "evidence" of lesbian existence is particularly difficult in the context of pre-colonial Peru because of the lack of testimonials from indigenous Peruvian women. We have no ability to explore the close relationships between individual women that we may have inferred were of a romantic or sexual nature because testimonials to this effect do not exist. It is for this reason that we must look to subaltern forms of knowledge to uncover lesbian existence.

Much of what we will be exploring will thus point to evidence of specific female homosexual sex acts though perhaps less to lesbianism as we understand it today. The "act" versus "identity" debate within queer theory often critiques the use of terms like "lesbian" in this context as it suggests a modern understanding of lesbian identity even though, many times, we are basing this assumption of "lesbian" purely upon individual sex acts. The "acts paradigm" specifically states that prior to the late nineteenth century, same-sex identities did not exist, there were only acts (Velasco 2011, 2). Thus my choice to use the term "lesbian" is very intentional — not only am I using it generally as a category to specify a certain romantic or sexual interest, but I am also using it in order to emphasise my opposition to any attempts to erase lesbianism as so often has been done by scholars of culture and history.

**Compulsory Heterosexuality and Andean Lesbianism**

The universality of women's subordination pushed within theories of compulsory heterosexuality projects Western configurations of gender onto colonized people. This results in a failure to consider the paradigms of societies with different gender structures and understandings of sexuality. We will now look at what we have established as the three key themes of coercive heterosexuality — asymmetrical gender roles, "Great Silence" on lesbian existence, and constraints on female sexuality — in the context of Andean Peru to show how it contradicted these elements.

The asymmetry of European gender roles lead to a strong incentive for women to enter into heterosexual relationships. As Rich puts it, "Heterosexual preference and taboos on homosexuality, in addition to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely" (636). Spanish gender ideologies, however, were unfamiliar to those of Andean people who understood gender as existing through an ideology of complementarity.

While Andean norms did define certain tasks as male and female, with women largely serving the role of weavers, they did not prohibit any sex from doing a task if need be. Both boys and girls learnt weaving, men helped with spinning State tribute clothing, and women were even expected to fight in war under certain conditions. Even when separate, male and female tasks were both seen as equally necessary for the reproduction of society. The fact that women bore and reared children was not a barrier to their participation in Andean society (Silverblatt 1978).

While most Spanish chroniclers chose to ignore this fact, favoring to only report instances in which Andean people acted according to their ideals of gender, “one chronicler clearly indicates balanced interdependence in the division of labor by gender; indeed, women's economic activities are presented as indispensable” (Silverblatt 1978, 46). This demonstrates the clear economic independence, or at least, interdependence, of both women and men in Andean society. A chronicle-letter to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V highlights this, pleading that indigenous women be protected from the abuse of the Spaniards as their labor was necessary to Andean society (ibid). Women and men could each survive individually without each other’s economic support (though the whole of society required both male and female labour). As women did not require the male economic support, they would have been able to enter into a long-term lesbian coupling without the necessity for a male partner.

While the role of weaver has different associations in the context of European society, weaving was a critical job in Andean society. Women of upper classes were also weavers. The distribution and exchange of cloth underpinned the economy and political structure of the Incan empire (Graubart 2000). Gertrude Solari has also demonstrated how through these cloths, women recorded accounts of their lives, described the events of the year, and represented their society’s history. While historians of Incan history have been assumed to be male, Solari maintains that female State weavers were essential scribes of the community. While, disappointingly, we do not have access to these, they importantly recorded events from “a distinctly feminine perspective” (Silverblatt 1978, 43) and may have been beneficial in the reproduction of knowledge on lesbianism perhaps going against this “Great Silence” on lesbian existence.

The Ancient Moche civilisation, which preceded the Incan Empire, had a large cultural influence on pre-colonial Andean society (Horswell 2005, 117). This is of particular note considering the artifacts that have been found from Moche society. Moche iconography found that women were autonomous and their power was not derived from their relationship to men. Further, Moche vases depict a variety of consensual, equally autonomous heterosexual sex acts which do not depict female resistance of coercion on the male part. Most interestingly, vases depicting examples of lesbian sex acts have also been found. These sexual vases were found in tombs and served ritual purposes which clearly positions sexual activity within the context of rites (Mathieu 2003).

As was previously mentioned, the shortage of *conocimiento* on female sexuality within primary sources or chronicles in Andean Peru calls for us to turn to native oral myth and ritual description in order to understand female sexuality in the context of pre-colonial Peru. As Michael Horswell puts it, *"If this conocimiento is overlooked or ignored, because of the privileging of Western rational, lettered discourse over that which is expressed through the [art], then we receive only half of the story of pre-Hispanic and colonial gender culture"* (127).

We will now turn to *The Huarochirí Manuscript*, an early 17th century Quechua transcription of native oral myths and ritual practices. We must keep in mind that details may have been lost in its subsequent translation to Spanish as well as the positionality of the scribe as male. That said, the source is still brimming with information on female sexuality. We will first look at a myth which shows an open portrayal of female autonomy in the sexual sphere.

The myth of Paria Caca, a male *huaca* or god, begins with an egg that is eventually transformed to a falcon and then a man. He meets Chuqui Suso, a woman who was struggling to irrigate her maize plants. Paria Caca offers to assist in the irrigation of her land in exchange for sex and Chuqui Suso agrees. However, after watering her field, Chuqui Suso refuses again, and pushes for more. She would like all of her fields to be irrigated. In response, Paria Caca widens a ravine, creating a new irrigation canal. Only after this does she consent and after the sexual encounter, she turns to a stone *huaca*. She was understood as a metaphor for the female cultural sphere, representing the agency and negotiation of terms between her and the male huaca. Chuqui Suso was highly worshipped in the region and offerings of maize beer, guinea pigs, and llamas were given to her (Horswell 2008, 131).

Let us now turn to the myth of Tamta Ñamca, Chaupi Ñamca, and Huatya Curi. Huatya Curi, son of Paria Caca, is a poor but wise man who made his way by outsmarting the men of the region. Hearing of the malady of Tamta Ñamca, the king of the region, he seeks to help him. Tamta Ñamca is ill and offers his daughter, Chaupi Ñamca, a deeply revered woman, as a reward for anyone who can cure him. Huatya Curi discovers that the Tamta Ñamca's malady is his wife's infidelity and cures him. As a reward, he receives the hand of Chaupi Ñamca (129).

This myth clearly depicts an imbalance of power. Chaupi Ñamca's role is passive and objectified. Horswell, however, offers a reading from the subaltern female voice as a way of reading female agency into the text. Chaupi Ñamca was an immensely revered *huaca* in Andean society. She was of such importance that her lithified representation was hidden from the Spanish during the *conquista*. Her preunion autonomy offers an important depiction of free female sexuality. It is

told that she went through several sexual partners before finding her match in the male mountain huaca Rucana Coto, a phallic force and the only one capable of pleasing her. Further, several dances were performed in her honor during the Paschal Festival with her favorite noted as being the *casa taco* in which the men dance naked. This shows a “reversal of Western representation of the female body as a desirable object” (135). In this situation, the female huaca objectifies the male body.

This seems to support what we know of sexual relations in Andean society. While community norms differed, in many Andean communities, premarital sex was encouraged as was trial marriage in order to encourage the satisfaction of both parties with the arrangement. We can read this as a counternarrative against our traditional views of “wife exchange”, the cultural practice characterised by anthropology Claude Lévi-Strauss as fundamental to society’s foundation in that "the emergence of symbolic thought must have require that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged". This institution, Rubin argues, is a large driving force behind the institutionalisation of compulsory heterosexuality. However, if the narratives of pre-colonial Andean society emphasise the free practice of female sexuality without scrutiny, it would be safe to assume that female homosexuality was also practiced (Katz 2007, 133-134).

The concept of *yanantin* is one of the key characteristics of Andean social existence. The term can be roughly translated as “helper and helped united to form a unique category” (Platt 245, 1976) but it is also used to characterize several pairs of things including hands, eyes, and legs. Key to understanding this concept, and thus understanding Andean gender and sexual relations, in the symbol of the mirror. The mirror was used in both the rites surrounding marriage and

death. Platt asks us to consider what a mirror actually does — invert objects with the precision "so that the resulting image relates to the original object as left to right or as right to left". When we look into our reflection, we see ourselves, our symmetrical pair, yet that reflection is of the same sex and there lies the predicament. Yanantin is intended to unite man and woman in a process of social reproduction; how does the mirror allow this if the reflection is of the same-sex pairing? Platt argues that indeed Andean society did understand our perfect symmetrical pair to be in a same-sex pairing (ibid).

Platt further emphasises this point through a linguistic analysis of the root "yana". As described in the Domingo de Santo Tomas's 1560 *Lexicon o vocabulario de la lengua general del Perú*, *yana*chani is defined as "one woman embraces another naked." Similarly, Gonzalez Holguin's 1608 *Vocabulario* defines *yana*chano as "one man to make use of another, or the sin of man." We can thus see that the homosexual union is embedded in the concept of yana (ibid).

Thus, when attempting to unite two partners of different sexes in marriage, the symmetry needs to be created through ritual negotiation. Platt mentions the ethnography of Inge Bolin who explored rituals in a Quechua community in Chillihuani which utilises adrogynous godparents in the marriage in order to bring the relationship to harmony (ibid).

Not only does the yanantin concept support the existence homosexual pairings in pre-colonial Andean culture, but the relative freedom women experienced with gender complementarity allowing economic independence, the ability to express lesbian existence through art and weaving, and their sexual freedom, Andean culture offers a paradigm of a society without the

existence of compulsory heterosexuality likely leading to the positive view mentioned by Guáman Poma.

**The Spanish Erasure of Lesbianism**

As hwe know that lesbianism *was* an occurrence in pre-colonial Andean Peru, one might ask why all sources on homosexuality in Incan Peru seem to focus entirely on male homosexuality. In order to explore this question, we turn to the Iberian Peninsula, in the hopes that in unpacking Hispanic attitudes towards homosexuality, we may reveal why lesbianism seemed of so little interest to the conquistadors, especially considering their intense policing of male homosexuality.

Legal and Biblical Understandings of "Sodomy"

The boundaries between crime and sin in early modern Spain and colonial Peru are difficult to discern and are often interlinked. The early modern doctrine that defined sexual relationships between people of the same sex was the phenomenon of sodomy. Sodomy, however, represented a very blurry category as it could also be used to cover anal penetration between heterosexual partners. Jurists attempted to clarify the distinction between "perfect" and "imperfect" sodomy — perfect sodomy described copulation between two same-sex partners and consummated with sperm effusion, clearly limiting the phenomenon to intercourse between men; imperfect sodomy was described as either intercourse between two women or carnal access between a man and a woman (Molina 2018). The effusion of sperm was considered a waste of God's procreative seed and any deviation in this "economy of creation" was an act against God (Molina 2010).

While perfect sodomy was punished by death, imperfect sodomy was dependent on the circumstance. That said, however, several jurists like Antonio Gomez also considered any "woman [who] acts the part of a man with another woman" to be guilty of perfect sodomy. That is to say, women who utilised any phallic object were likely to be met with the death penalty (Velasco 2011, 17).

Gender transgressions were clearly the key consideration in the policing of sodomy. If the crime of male sodomy were truly related to the "waste of God's procreative seed," (Molina 2018) should masturbation not have been punishable by death? Further, male sodomy was often represented in terms of the agent and the patient or the one who "serves as a woman" and the one who plays the role of the man (Molina 2018). Similarly, the offense of female sodomy only became relevant when a phallic object was used.

As lesbianism was seen as more banal than male homosexuality, it was often ignored. When discussed, lesbianism was so often seen only within a male heterocentric bias. The *Ritual formulario e institución de curas, para administrar a los naturales de este Reyno* (1631) was a guide available in both Spanish and Quechua with sample questions for confessors to ask confessants. This particular section describes the questions to ask if a woman confesses to same-sex activity:

*Have you sinned with another woman? With how many women? How many times? When you were doing this abominable sin, were you thinking about married men? Single men? Clergy? Monks? Relatives? Your husband?* (230-31).

Same-sex attraction was clearly not seen as a possibility. Lesbianism was framed as a distraction in the event of a lack of male partnership without the potential to be a serious relationship. Another explanation for the lack of policing around female sodomy, however, was offered by Ludovico Maria Sinistrari in 1700. He admits, “More than once I have consulted very learned men...They all candidly confessed...that they were completely ignorant as to how [female sodomy] can differ from the pollution produced by rubbing their privy parts together” (as quoted by Velasco 2011, 7). This ignorance to how the practice occurs clearly makes its policing all the more dubious to the male jurists.

Lesbianism in Entertainment

Despite the taboo of homosexuality, several forms of male-authored entertainment in Early Modern Spain contained depictions of lesbian practices though their presence was always a temporary transgression or moment of comic relief until the heterosexual conclusion gave way. Maria de Zayas’ novella *Amar sólo por vencer*, a novella which tells the story of Esteban who disguises himself as a woman in order to get closer to his love interest, Laurela, is a possible exception to this. The novella frequently defends same-sex desire though completely desexualizes it:

*“All right, but for one woman to love another woman is a fruitless love," one of the maids commented.*

*“No,” said Estefanía “it's true love, for loving without reward is the purest kind.”*

*"Well how come men," asked one of Laurela's sisters, "ask for their reward after they've loved for only four short days and if they don't get it, they give up?"*
*"Because they don't really love;" Estefanía responded, "if they did love, even unrewarded, they'd never give up. True love is the very substance of the soul and so long as the soul doesn't die, love won't die. Since the soul is immortal, so love will be also. But in loving only with the body, if they don't enjoy the body, they'll soon desist and forget and go seek satisfaction elsewhere. If they do attain their ends, surfeited, they move on to seek more of the same elsewhere."* (as quoted by Velasco 2011, 153-154)

That said, the reactions to Estefanía's confessions of love for another woman are met with laughter taken to be a joke by the other characters:

*"For the power of love can also include a woman's love for another woman just as it does a suitor's love for his lady. Estefanía's words followed by a deep sigh, made them all laugh at the notion that she had fallen in love with Laurela...Again they all laughed, further convinced that Estefanía had fallen in love with Laurela...In spite of the fact that Estefanía was always telling her of her love, she and everyone else thought it was simply folly..."* (as quoted by Velasco 2011, 155)

Unsurprisingly, after revealing himself to be Esteban, the author reveals an equally phallocentric view of female sexuality. While trying to convince Laurela that he is really a man, Esteban relies on the popular, heteronormative rejection of the possibility of erotic feeling between women:

*"Is it possible that you've been so blind that you haven't seen in my love, in my jealousy, in my sighs and tears, in the feelings expressed in my songs and poems, that I really am what I say and not what I seem? Who's ever seen a woman fall in love with another woman?"* (as quoted by Velasco 2011, 156).

While the text is not a true commendation of lesbianism, the fact that same-sex romanticism, though without sexual relations, were so openly portrayed tells us how much less of a threat it was viewed as.

**Conclusion**

Pre-colonial Andean Peru offers a poignant paradigm of a society in which the model of compulsory heterosexuality does not apply as readily. Due to the belief in gender parallelism, which allowed women a large degree of economic independence, the encouragement of women's sexual autonomy and exploration, and the role of women as scribes of history all counter the forces of compulsory heterosexuality that Rich described. While the Spanish's unclear definition of sodomy, heterocentric bias in the questioning of lesbianism, and devaluing of lesbianism as a true possibility for a relationship, knowledge on Andean lesbianism was erased from the historical records. It is important we continue to unpick these narratives of lesbian existence from the historical canon. It is necessary that we continue to attempt to recover these hidden narratives utilising nontraditional methods of historical inquiry. The "Great Silence" on lesbian existence that Rich described must not prevail.

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