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Women Building the Colonial Archive Legal Authority, Female Knowledge and Affective Mobility in the Sixteenth-Century Iberian Atlantic World

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Abstract

In the sixteenth century, the transition from medieval unity to an expansionist state brought broader legal access and the bureaucratization of the Spanish Empire, leading to a diversified legal engagement among social groups. This backdrop is crucial in understanding how women from various backgrounds utilized the legal system. The article examines a set of letters (1560-1562) written by a Spanish widow to her son in Mexico and three judicial cases (1552, 1561, 1569) filed by transatlantic white women of different socioeconomic statuses, all seeking economic improvement. Through these examples, the article explores how these women navigated the legal system using what I have called affective mobility in early modernity, employing emotional, rhetorical, and narrative strategies. Their stories, mirroring popular chronicles, challenged the male-dominated legal sphere. The article highlights the prominent role of women in the colonial archive, intertwining their experiences with men's, demonstrating their use of personal details and honorable depictions for legal and economic benefits.

Keywords: Affective Mobility, Atlantic World, Colonial Archive, Early Modern Women, Spanish Widowhood

1. Introduction

In the early modern period, women in the Spanish Empire lived in a volatile, ever-changing world. While they have been traditionally positioned as caretakers of private spaces, specifically the home and the convent, the examination of archival sources that include non-elite women (peasants, workers, and poor) establishes women's mobility in the public sphere.¹ These sources

¹ Among many other studies, see Gonzalbo Aizpuru 2005; Mangan 2005; Graubart 2007; Lipsett-Rivera 2012; Schlau 2013.

– including letters, legal testimonies, wills, and other judicial documents – have revealed that women, and especially non-elite women, occupied different roles in the early modern period and were not always by men's side.² They became active and adaptable agents of a nascent early modern society embedded in economic exchanges and the search for better futures, aligning with the broader narratives of the Spanish Empire's expansion and its relentless pursuit of labor, land, and gold. As such, women of the time took part in economic transactions and sought out opportunities for better futures. They migrated, moved, and created knowledge. Importantly, they documented their experiences and movements, thereby producing and sharing what I call a female discourse of mobility.

The study of women's social and economic mobility historically has yielded demographic data that illustrate their migration patterns, revealing their significant presence on the earliest voyages to the Americas, including those with Columbus.³ Women traveled in smaller numbers than men, yet social historians have argued that they fulfilled important duties, especially the preservation of Catholic family traditions and values as exemplars of virtue (Lavrin 2008, 324).

Bearing this historical context in mind, the purpose of this article is to analyze women's archival narratives through the lens of mobility as a reconceptualized complex theoretical and literary construct. This approach sheds light on the complex interconnected lives of women whose experiences of and with movement have ample implications for the construction of the early modern Spanish Empire and colonial Latin American society. The narratives of non-elite women that I examine in this article provide a distinctive view of their struggles and dislocations. These stories contribute to the perpetuation of collective memories during a transitional period from medieval unity to an early modern expansionist state. In this sense, the reconfiguration of gender norms along with the insertion of women in the worlds of *letters*⁴ and other male-dominated spaces are intrinsically connected to the roots of what José Antonio Maravall defines as the Baroque. Women's depictions of the expanding world reflect the Baroque's clash of traditional and modernizing tendencies; these tensions arose as social mobility, geographical displacement, and transatlantic economies presented extraordinary challenges to 'maintain[ing] medieval lifestyles' within Spanish society(ies) (1981, 175). While the Baroque is often associated with the seventeenth century, the expansion of the legal system since the late fifteenth century indicates an earlier onset of this cultural shift, as evidenced by the increasing significance of textual production in daily life.⁵

The primary objective of this article is to investigate the experiences of common Spanish or criolla women within the world of *letters* and imperial knowledge, focusing specifically on how they represented their own mobility and that of others. Here, 'mobility' refers not just to physical movement but also to social and cultural shifts, serving as a lens to understand the female subjectivities in early modern Spain. This perspective, influenced by Adey's concept of mobility as an 'animating theoretical category' (2017, 36), illuminates how these women's

² See, for example, Jaffary and Mangan 2018. For diverse analyses of first-person narrated texts by noble women, particularly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I recommend the works of Mónica Bolufer. One notable example is her study, 'Textos escurridizos: a propósito de la escritura personal femenina en la época moderna' (2019).

³ Among the various examples, see two monograph studies by Ida Altman 1989 and 2000.

⁴ For an insightful exploration of how women empowered themselves in the creation of texts, see Díaz and Quispe-Agnoli 2017.

⁵ In *Esclavos de la ciudad letrada: esclavitud, escritura y colonialismo en Lima (1650-1700)*, J. R. Jouve Martín explains that official institutions such as the Inquisition and other legal infrastructures resulted in the proliferation of letters and writing among the populations of the Americas (2005, 69). Additionally, he emphasizes that non-traditional texts and the New Literacy Studies are allowing interdisciplinary scholars to access marginalized voices (14).

journeys across the Atlantic and their lives in a transatlantic world shaped their experiences and narratives. Central to this use of mobility is the role of customs and collective memory, which, as Andy Wood suggests, are not merely implicit knowledge but actively discussed and integral to people's understanding of their identity and place in society (2013, 94). These customs, deeply rooted in the Catholic empire, became a means for women to navigate, challenge, and sometimes subvert the dominant patriarchal system. The narratives of mobility, therefore, do more than recount physical movements; they reveal how women engaged with and influenced the social and legal structures of their time. By examining these narratives, we gain insight into how women used their experiences and the language of custom to legitimize what Wood defines as 'popular claims' within the legal system (12). This approach helps us understand the role of women in the socio-cultural transformations that marked the shift from medieval to early modern society, highlighting their contributions to the evolving colonial infrastructure and gender dynamics.

To establish a robust transatlantic framework for this article, I emphasize the cases of early modern Spanish women connected to the Americas through their literary and legal records. These cases are united by two factors: the women are all widows, and they tell their own stories in writing. Widowhood in this context is a complex concept. The literature of the time, especially in moralist and indoctrinating works, often portrays widows as morally depraved individuals, whose sexuality threatens the patriarchal order due to their rejection of remarriage. These women are depicted as transgressing norms, seeking freedom in both domestic and public realms. This ideology, aimed at enforcing male dominance, permeates various mediums, from dictionaries like the *Diccionario de Autoridades*, to plays such as *La viuda valenciana* by Lope de Vega, and even legal codes. However, folklore and popular literature's broad portrayal contrasts with the diverse representations found in archives and non-canonical sources. These reveal the unique subjectivities of widowed women, showing that each widow's story differs significantly. As multifaceted individuals, their writings not only highlight the privileges and agency they gained post-widowhood but also prompt a reevaluation of their daily lives, actions, representations, and language. In this context, I analyze stories of individual widows, demonstrating how they utilized their agency and knowledge in letters and judicial requests.

This article is divided into four sections: I first propose a new theoretical framework combining affect theory and mobility to uncover the impact of female mobility regarding the early modern and colonial socioeconomic system. Then, I closely examine a set of letters (1560-1562) written by Catalina de Ávila, a Spanish widowed woman residing in the Iberian Peninsula, addressed to her son who left for the New World. In contrast, I study three judicial cases filed by Isabel de Caballos (1552), Ana Segura (1561), and María de Vitoria (1569), three transatlantic women of different socioeconomic statuses, all of whom were seeking to improve their economic situations. I end this article with a brief conclusion that highlights some of the main ways in which female subjects exploited and penetrated the Spanish legal system through affective, rhetorical, and narrative mechanisms.

2. Sixteenth-Century Women's Affective Mobilities

The goal of this article is to expand the traditional understanding of mobility, historically seen as physical movement through space or as synonym of migration (Corbeil 2019, 24),⁶ to a more nuanced "ongoing" nature of mobility' (Hernández Sau and Eissa-Barroso 2022, 336). This the-

⁶ See also Lucassen and Lucassen 2009.

oretical framework also includes emotional, metaphorical, and material dimensions, particularly in the context of early modern Spanish women. In this sense, I pay particular attention to how early modern widowed women ‘gave meaning to their own movement and how they embodied practices of continued motion’ (335) in a transatlantic discourse.⁷ Scholars like Chelsea Maude Avirett have redefined medieval mobility as a deliberate act to navigate, manipulate, or subvert societal constraints (2013, 4).⁸ This reframing is pivotal in understanding how women of the Spanish Empire utilized mobility not just as a physical act but as a multifaceted tool to engage with their rapidly changing world and meet their socioeconomic objectives.

Early modern women of the Spanish Empire provide unique discursive examples to rethink mobility by closely looking at their affective, cultural, and everyday exchanges. Here, mobility is understood not only as a form of movement, but as a concept that re-situates how women conceived of and created their new early modern, transatlantic, or colonial environment and what they sought to gain from them. Through their mobility, they engaged with other people who, in most cases, would have had similarly mobile experiences. Nora Jaffary and Jane Mangan ably argue that ‘Primary sources of the era reflect the pervasive nature of mobility and migration’ (2018, xv). However, their exploration of these concepts primarily addresses the literal movement, especially focusing on women’s migration from the peninsula to the Americas. In contrast, my work not only examines the physical movements of early modern women – either seeking to travel to the Americas or connected to the ‘new land’ through male heads of household residing in those territories – but also delves into their figurative or reimagined movements. This includes the narration of other’s actions and their impact on the women, as well as the emotions expressed in their discourse, which shaped their subjective experiences and primary objectives. Thus, the term ‘affective mobilities’ in my framework refers to gestures, sensations, and movements that translate into rhetorical strategies in women’s narratives. This theoretical approach creates a space to analyze women’s transatlantic inquiries and stories more deeply, considering how they ‘crafted’ their narratives by ‘forming, shaping, and molding elements’ (Davis 1987, 3).

In this article, I explore mobility through the lens of affect theory in a combination of documents of different genres authored by or written about women. Most of these texts, even the personal epistles that I study in this article, are legal documents organized through a legal framework. The texts I examine, which are at once conversational yet structured, quotidian yet formal, speak to and for a purpose.⁹ Sara Ahmed’s concept of ‘orientation’ helps illuminate how these women’s perceptions and actions were shaped by their environment and societal norms (2006, 1). A key focus is how widowed women leveraged the locations and accomplishments of their husbands and sons in the New World to petition authorities for resources. These petitions highlight a contrast: while they emphasize the mobility of their male relatives overseas, they also draw attention to their own immobility in the Iberian Peninsula. Furthermore, these women skillfully used the merits of their husbands to construct a narrative that links their identity to various forms of (im)mobility. They argued that the accomplishments of their husbands entitled

⁷ These authors base their definition of mobilities on the work of Tim Cresswell (2010). They explain Cresswell’s argument, noting that ‘Cresswell argues that mobility is determined by three relational moments: the motion itself, the representational strategies associated with the self-presentation of mobility, and the embodiment of moving’ (Hernández Sau and Eissa-Barroso 2022, 335).

⁸ In the same line of methodology see Savo 2021.

⁹ I draw vital insights from Arnold Berleant, who states that ‘literature arises out of language that is activated by being spoken’. Precisely because these texts are performative, they are also real, providing ‘shifts in ideas, weak transitions, lame inferences, strings of trivialities, or fuzzy ideas’ (1973, 340).

them to compensation, which in turn would grant them the freedom to move. This strategic use of affective and rhetorical elements in their narratives is a central aspect of my analysis and understanding of ‘affective mobilities’. By examining judicial documents, I extract biographical information and analyze forms of discourse that go beyond historical data. This literary analysis of the documents reveals a wealth of persuasive, emotional, and logical strategies employed by these women. They not only sought socioeconomic advantages but also navigated their struggles, dislocations, and displacements in a period marked by shifting socioeconomic structures.

Taking affect as a theoretical concept alongside mobility permits us to understand and categorize emotions and subjective experiences based on the role that they play in our lives and in the lives of others through various interactions. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth argue that ‘Affect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters or; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters’ (2011, 2). Here, while difficult to define, affect is more than just emotion; rather, it is the subjective experience of individuals in multi-directional relationships between bodies, objects, and the larger world. Through emotions, sensations, and sensibilities, we become part of a world that is constantly changing and that is itself impacted by these emotions. Affect facilitates understanding of how we as individuals are constantly changing, or, in Gregg and Seigworth’s words, our ‘body [is] perpetual *becoming*’ (3).

Studying affect in literature thus enables an exploration of the nuanced interplay between individual subjectivity and historical context. Although fully recreating individual experiences is impossible, analyzing affect offers insights into how people interact within their environments and are shaped by them. A critical concept here is ‘becoming’, as described by Sara Ahmed: we engage with spaces by physically occupying them, thereby reshaping them and ourselves in the process (2006, 11). In this project, focusing on the early modern period, Ahmed’s idea takes a metaphorical form. The spaces women occupied were transformed by their presence and actions. The case studies in this article exemplify how women, particularly those of non-elite status, navigated and altered the patriarchal and gendered spaces of their time. Despite being restricted from public spaces and the legal system, they found ways to assert their agency and improve their socioeconomic standing. Their actions challenged and disrupted established gender roles – of women, wives, nuns, and mothers – not just metaphorically through their emotional expressions but also literally in their written texts. These women’s stories captivate us not only as historical narratives but also as instances of contesting and transforming societal norms.

Ahmed further argues that in order to inhabit a space, ‘orientation devices’ are essential (*ibid.*). These devices are ‘ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space’, emphasizing that ‘orientation is about making the strange familiar’ (*ibid.*). In this sense, these women who are looking for material compensation, royal salaries, or licenses to journey to the Americas, utilized not only their intellect, but also their social networks and the reconstruction of stories. They used their neighbors’ knowledge, their extended families’ resources, and information from daily encounters with other women, as infinite opportunities to demand returns of husbands and sons, secure financial support, and hold officials accountable. Judicial texts further show that these women’s efforts extended beyond family advocacy, indicating their pursuit of personal advancement. Thus, ‘affective mobilities’ in this context encapsulate the various strategies these women used to maneuver within and impact their socio-cultural surroundings, offering a nuanced view of their roles and aspirations in the early modern period.¹⁰

¹⁰ This theoretical framework is further developed in Ramírez Velázquez 2023.

3. *Female Affective Mobilities: From La Mancha to Mexico City*

The letters compiled by Rocío Sánchez Rubio and Isabel Testón Núñez in *El hilo que une* (1999) present the abundant transatlantic correspondence between Spanish individuals in the Old and New Worlds. These letters are drawn from inquisitorial cases concerning the heretical act of bigamy at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. This edited volume shows the receptors' understanding of these letters across the Atlantic, which present unique perspectives for studying the colonial period. The letters transcribed in this volume provide an opportunity to delve into the lives of women who struggle to function in the Spanish peninsular society.

From economic difficulties in maintaining their lands and houses and paying their daughters' dowry, to lack of defense in lawsuits and legal endeavors, women's actions and movements are not always aligned with the gender norms of this time. In order to prevail and create a home without a husband, father, or brother, women regularly took on more responsibilities after suffering from economic deficit when a husband was gone for years, abandoning them. Following Amos Megged's methodology to study single women in colonial Mexico, I examine women's affective discourses 'not from the dichotomist approach of "resisters" versus "subordinators", but rather from a far more multifaceted vantage point that takes into account internal factionalism ... as well as shifting roles' (2019, 31). Women's forms of resistance in these letters illustrate how they move beyond their assigned gender roles as means for achieving various objectives.

Men who went to the Americas in conquests or other endeavors for the Crown usually sought a better future for themselves and their families in the peninsula. By law, husbands were required to ask for licenses for their peninsular wives to bring them to the Americas after the second or third year.¹¹ However, it was common for husbands to overlook the complicated situation of their Spanish families and continue their lives in the newly conquered territories, often creating new families and new homes. On the other hand, other male heads of household, such as the eldest sons, did not have to follow any regulations regarding their mothers or sisters. The creation of new domestic arrangements in the Americas meant that these men were able to remarry without the dissolution of their first marriage. In these cases, men committed bigamy, and even though these cases were judged under secular and civil law, the Inquisition redefined their authority in the sixteenth century and understood the 'excesses' within marriage and sexuality as part of their jurisdiction.

While men committed far more bigamy offenses than women, both genders are protagonists of inquisitorial cases in the Iberian Peninsula and colonial Latin America.¹² As previously established, these epistolary letters were originally found in Mexican inquisitorial cases in which subjects were charged with the crime of bigamy. These texts form part of the hundreds of pages that compose these documentary trials in the archive and serve as proof to support the defendant or plaintiff's case. The crime of bigamy complicates the conceptualization of not only the sexual and marital lives of early modern people but also their socioeconomic situation. Satoko Nakajima explains that bigamy has been defined historiographically from the perspectives of the elite, who wanted to institutionalize marriage ('binding the tie authorized by the Church') and over-control marriages because bigamy 'was nothing but illegally binding an unauthorized one' (2021, 78). Nakajima instead shows how, in the sixteenth century, non-elite Spanish individuals navigated the strict post-Tridentine marriage regulations, exploiting legal loopholes or adhering to enduring cultural practices that permitted remarriage (105). Richard Boyer, in his

¹¹ AGI, 'Registros Generalísimos', Indiferente, 427, 54-56.

¹² For detailed historical information on this topic, see Boyer 1995.

study of bigamists in colonial Mexico, also highlights that ‘personal associations, more than the formal institutions of church and state, shaped daily life in colonial Mexico’ (1995, 1). These statements depict a nascent society in which the official regulations do not apply as expected when understood through the lived experience of the non-elite. In this case, as Wood has ably demonstrated, ‘the local remained the central locus of popular memory throughout the early modern period’ (2013, 12). In the following sections, I demonstrate how mobility serves as a means to understand collective memory: the emotions, actions, and movements of non-elite communities and individuals who are constantly searching for new ways to inhabit unfamiliar spaces via their incorporation into the economies of the Iberian-Atlantic world.

In 1560, Catalina de Ávila wrote from Almodóvar del Campo, in Castile, to her son Gonzalo de Ávila, who had been residing in Mexico (either Mexico City or Zacatecas in Mexico, as Ávila doubtfully explains in her letter) for approximately eighteen years. This middle-aged widowed woman desperately awaits an answer to her letters from her son as her state and family face serious social and economic challenges. From what she has heard around Almodóvar del Campo and the Mancha region, Catalina knows that only her son, who became wealthy during his journeys and conquests in Mexico, can help her overcome the household’s economic challenges. This widowed woman is worried about the future of her family, and thus she asks her affluent son to send her money along with the answers to her letters, because she wants to read personally, from his handwriting, about his current socioeconomic position in the Americas, and about his health.

Rich with Catholic references and common praises to God, implying the epoch’s cultural standard and connections with the Church as the institution that governed society, Catalina’s letters shed light on women’s societal role, as their position and even political location recenters when the male figure is not present. In specific early modern narrations like Catalina’s letters, women are clearly portrayed as the head of household with an authoritative tone that demands actions and solutions. However, women like Catalina seem to reach out to men for help, especially economic help. In the cases analyzed here, women are orientated to guard their families at any cost, as a family was what provided an indispensable structure to Catholic society. To find solutions, women used what surrounded them to achieve their goals. The forms of mobility Catalina exploits in her letters can be divided into different forms that complement each other: physical movement to find a scribe to write the letter and send the letter with a trustworthy acquaintance; metaphorical movements and actions to provide the necessary contexts to the recipient of the letter without implying or discovering information that could put her or her son in jeopardy; and socioeconomic mobility that portrays her as both resourceful and in need of resources. These forms of mobility enable space to conceptualize emotions and affection through Catalina’s own un/gendered actions.

Although there probably are around eight to ten letters in total from Catalina to her son in Mexico, only four are accessible in *El hilo que une*, starting with ‘Carta 5: Catalina de Ávila, desde Almodóvar del Campo, a su hijo Gonzalo de Ávila en la Ciudad de Méjico o en Zacatecas. 1560’ (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999, 45). From the beginning of her letters, Catalina portrays the connection between her family’s economic difficulties and the lack of male figures in her household. Catalina’s husband had died five years before, and her sons are all away from home or unreachable. From this perspective, Catalina’s petition and worldview can be understood as complying with the patriarchal system, even enforcing and reproducing it. However, her text and rhetoric hold unique ways to understand the daily life of a woman struggling for money, and the affective mobilities which shape her surroundings and her mindset.

As is commonly the case with early modern correspondence, Catalina de Ávila starts her letter ('Carta 5'), by praying and thanking God for taking care of her son. Religious imagery in these letters aligned with the concept of literary performance (Berleant 1973, 339), as this language highlights the clear connection between literary devices and public religious performances such as the inquisitorial *autos de fe*. In these public spectacles, people – often women and subaltern groups – repented from their sins to provide an example for the rest of the population. *Autos de fe* illustrate the early modern Spanish culture of 'penitence and justice – consisting of the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics and the implementation of imposed sentences –' (Boyle 2014, 6). In the case of these letters, women use this rhetoric as a strategy to safeguard their social positions as female subjects by adhering to the gendered moral values of early modern Spanish life. These descriptive narrations depict women's possibilities to persuade, push and stretch, and move within gender norms. Metaphorically and to a certain extent physically, Catalina's persuasive literary moves can be compared to the queen in a chessboard; she can make almost any move, but there are limitations that can be defeated by careful scrutiny.

Immediately after emphasizing her proximity to feminine virtue and hegemonic gendered expectations, Catalina explains that, while she awaits her son's news from the New World, she knows that he is 'Bueno, y bien quieto, y rico y honrado' (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999, 45),¹³ words that also sustain her son's honor as a person of *calidad*. A person of *calidad* literally means a person of 'quality'. With this in mind, the *calidad* of any person identifies what a person is worth through an understanding of the family's background and ties to meritorious acts for the Crown, their socioeconomic status, and also their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. In this case, Gonzalo's *calidad* was transferred from his family, specifically from his father, who probably was a *cristiano viejo* and took part in battles for the Crown in the Americas. A *cristiano viejo* refers to a person whose family and antecedents were Christian before the Catholic Monarchs imposed Catholicism as the hegemonic religion in the Iberian Peninsula. Taken together, these aspects of Gonzalo's identity are clearly a means to present himself as a *vecino* (good citizen) before the authorities.¹⁴ Furthermore, his *calidad* also affects his family, especially his mother, who is looking for economic advantage. While *calidad* is a concept broadly used in sixteenth-century documents and also studied in secondary sources, this term is complex. Archival legal documents illustrate that this term gradually loses its traditional meaning as the empire expands and more non-elite people obtain access to civil and religious bureaucracy and rewards through their actions and economic status rather than their family lineage.¹⁵

Along with the references to the dangers of losing the family's *calidad*, in the first paragraph of Catalina's letter there is also evidence of exchanges of information between the Americas and the peninsula at that moment. While Catalina highlights how she wishes to know about her son since he left the village, she simultaneously explains that she has not 'cesado de preguntar a unos y a otros, y nadie me ha dado razón. Y de un mes a esta parte ha sido Dios servido que he sabido lo que digo' (45).¹⁶ In the 'Carta 6', Catalina also expresses how she has constantly

¹³ (Kind, and calm, and wealthy and honored). All translations from primary sources are my own.

¹⁴ *Vecino* means that the person holds citizenship within a community. Citizenship or *vecinidad* provided certain rights and privileges to its citizens.

¹⁵ The word *calidad* is used comprehensively within archival documents, but petitioners often ask for rewards stating that they should get these benefits or rewards regardless of their *calidad*.

¹⁶ (ceased to ask around town, but no one has given [her] any information. And for a month now, God has been served with [her] requests).

inquired about her son's location and condition: 'He trabajado por saber del suceso de vuestra salud y trato muchos días ha, y no ha sido con poco trabajo para mí la dilación de respuesta de vuestra parte' (47).¹⁷ Embedded within her emotional tone, these statements demonstrate the continuous and abundant flow of oral, and implicitly written, information between the Americas and the peninsula during the sixteenth century.¹⁸ While scholars have defined the eighteenth century as the key moment in which postal correspondence became institutionalized (Moreno-Cabanillas 2021, 473) the sixteenth century marks the beginning of transatlantic exchanges of news. In the same vein, the oral communication of information also dramatically increased, as all kinds of passengers arrived and departed from both sides of the Atlantic on a daily basis.

In her letters, Catalina speaks of what she has heard in her surroundings, her neighbors, family, friends, and acquaintances. She emphasizes the relationship between her actions as a good Catholic and God's rewards in the form of answers to her questions. However, she specifically refers to the many sources that not only provide information to her, but also confirm her conjectures about her son's location. As Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham have argued, news in Early Modern Europe was 'more efficiently ... transmitted in person than in manuscript or in print, and many forms of written news sought not so much to be the first source of information as to confirm, correct, contextualise or reconfigure news which was already circulating orally' (2016, 2). Catalina's letters show that oral communication created networks that allowed everyone in town to be aware of most emigrants' whereabouts. In this specific case, through Catalina's rhetorical skills, this document shows how women shrewdly moved between different spaces to find information and accomplish their goals. As Catalina herself metaphorically expresses by acknowledging her agency and capabilities to decipher her world, 'he sentido tan gran grande alteración de placer que quisiera como pájaro volar a veros' (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999, 45).¹⁹ Catalina is not only relieved because her son is doing well personally and economically, but also content since she was able to find this information. Catalina's description reveals that 'Mobilities mean societies are interlinked by the mobilities of peoples and things' (Adey 2017, 10). Her (im)mobility as she awaits her son is an example of collective mobility with unique affective motifs. She realizes that her identity as a woman has mutated to become a person who is now able to equip herself with the necessary information in all spaces. The acknowledgment of her new agency is ultimately substantiated by observing that she will see her son once again before she dies.

Catalina's literary performance does not exclusively portray her ability to move and access a masculine world of exchanges, trade, and power. It additionally illustrates her own rhetorical flourish embedded in a discourse of pity that resonates with her miserable conditions. Her own outlook can be viewed as shaped by the economic difficulties that affect her whole family, and therefore her literary identity is influenced by this fact. While Catalina highlights that she became a widow because of her sins, further accentuating her Catholic guilt and the repentant culture of the time, the connections between God's aims and her own financial requests are another essential characteristic of her literary expression:

¹⁷ (I have been trying for many days to know your health condition, but the delay in your response has been hard for me to understand).

¹⁸ Renate Pieper argues that the Iberian Peninsula's geopolitical location was recognized as perfect for commerce as it connects the Mediterranean Sea with the rest of oceans and continents (2016, 497).

¹⁹ (I have felt such an enormous wave of pleasure that I would like to fly like a bird to come and see you).

Bien creo habéis sabido cómo, por mis pecados, yo estoy viuda, que ha cinco años, el día de San Andrés de este año, que murió vuestro padre. Sabe Dios con cuanta necesidad y deudas me dejó, y son tantas y tan grandes que fue menester lo que dejó, y no bastó para pagarlas. (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999, 45)²⁰

Once more, Catalina strategically positions herself as a destitute miserable woman whose sins caused her to lose her husband. She is embracing the Catholic doctrine of penance, using words that craft vivid, performative images, making the reader feel her pain, albeit perhaps overstated. By adopting this discourse of anguish and sorrow, Catalina provides a definition of widowhood that is clearly distanced from the power and accessibility women acquired when their husbands died from non-criminalized causes. As her letters demonstrate, Catalina's responsibilities expanded by incorporating a care-taking task beyond the private space of the home. In doing so, Catalina not only presents herself as a figure of misery but also transcends the confines of her traditional domestic role. By narrating her husband's and son's movements and activities, she granted herself the authority to step beyond the boundaries typically set by her gender roles in conventional marriage. Her epistle is meticulously structured to showcase her new-found responsibility for her family's honor and standing, transcending the limitations of her prescribed gender roles.

Catalina's principal mode of description is highly detailed narration: she narrates using sensory features that transfer her emotions to the reader. She describes what she and her family experience and see through their own eyes, but also what the future might bring to them if they don't find additional resources. Her intentions are influenced by the economic arrangements of the time. Catalina's problems, while structured in writing through Catholic dogma, are indeed economic; a good economy is what brings honor and prosperity to the family. In this sense, Catalina postulates one of the most important matters for her family: the complicated situation of her daughter, Isabel de Ávila, who had been married recently, but Catalina has not complied with the stipulated economic agreement with the groom. Catalina explains: 'Y sobre todas mis penas no tengo otra mayor que de vuestra hermana Isabel de Ávila, que quisiera yo tener mil ducados que darle en casamiento, que la tengo casada con un hombre muy honrado, que es Fabián Sánchez, hijo de Alonso Sánchez del Castillo' (45).²¹ Marrying one's daughter and the transference of a dowry were part of a family's reputation, as a way of publicly declaring that women in a family are subjected to the morals of the time, inscribing them within the patriarchal system. As stated in the *Siete Partidas* (1260), the book of reference for Castilian private law, women are subjugated to men because they are understood as inherently inferior:

The quality of the condition of men has several graduations, for the person of a freeman is judged according to law differently from that of a slave, although, according to nature, no distinction exists between them. And also men of noble descent are honored and judged in another way from those of inferior rank, and priests from laymen, and legitimate children from bastards, and Christians from Moors and Jews. Moreover, the condition of a man is superior to that of a woman in many things and in many respects, as is clearly shown in the Titles of this our book which treats of all the matters aforesaid. (quoted in Korth and Flusche 1987, 397)

²⁰ (I think you know well how, because of my sins, I became a widow since the death of your father five years ago, on Saint Andrew's Day. God knows how much need and debts your father left me with, and these debts are so many and so great that the money he left was not enough to pay them).

²¹ (And above all my sorrows I have no other greater than to pay your sister's dowry as I had promised the honorable Fabián Sánchez, son of Alonso Sánchez del Castillo, whom she married, *if I only had a thousand ducats* ...). My emphasis.

While the condition of women was legally viewed as inferior to men's position, the dowry provided them economic rights and protection if they were to lose their husbands or needed to end their matrimony as a result of extreme situations. The dowry was a specific sum of goods (money, but also property, furniture, clothes, jewelry, textiles, food, etc.) that women carried with them when they married to help with the economic burdens at home (Gamboa 1997, 57). The husband legally administered the dowry: 'In life, [the husband] managed the wife's dowry as his own financial resource; in the event of any eventuality, the husband only had to provide from what he had left' (59). However, it is here where dowry becomes ambiguous, as the archives show various ways in which women could file lawsuits against their husbands if they spent or inappropriately wasted the dowry's resources without their permission.

This material and financial element within the matrimony is better understood then as 'the private property of the wife' (Korth and Flusche 1987, 400) within Spanish canon law. Therefore, in most cases, women could use their dowry as a personal asset, containing properties and other goods in different forms. The dowry was not a requirement to consecrate the matrimony, but it was customary of many families, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Gamboa 1997, 56). Even when husbands died and left debts, women could protest and request to obtain part of their dowries from their husband's property before the debts were paid (Kagan 1981, 86-88). Although the dowry provided women with direct access to the local economies, they performed various roles and occupations that also impacted the community's financial capacities. As Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru argues:

The participation of *novohispana* women in the economy was in many cases as simple transmitters of goods, through dowries and inheritances of family wealth but also as entrepreneurs in activities such as bakeries, *pulquerías* [taverns], pastry shops, chocolate shops, etc. And for their incorporation into domestic service, an occupation that was always underestimated and poorly paid, but which was essential in domestic life for several centuries. (2006, 168)²²

Catalina uses matrimony and the dowry, two main components of societal organization, to justify her pleas for her son's urgent attention. While she portrays herself as assuming the lead of the family and underscoring the importance of Isabel's matrimony, she also uses these examples as a discursive mechanism to force her son Gonzalo to tackle a prevalent issue: his lack of communication and financial support for his family. This mechanism can even be read as a psychological game in a trial with the male-dominated system as the basis of the appellant's requests. Therefore, Catalina uses the specific and vulnerable position of her daughter to also obtain other outcomes that influence her personal affairs. In this form, Catalina provides updates to her son about the happenings around town while implicitly considering her own monetary objectives. To emphasize her son's duties as the family's male head, Catalina further argues: 'he tenido entendido que vos me habíais de favorecer largamente para esto, pues es tanta razón. Así mi señor hijo, por amor de Dios, os ruego que no me olvidéis, ni a vuestra hermana, que os prometo que si no fuese por ella y su marido que podría vivir de limosna' (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999, 45).²³ Here, once more, Catalina uses an emotive statement to persuade Gonzalo to fulfill her requests. On this occasion, she uses the verb 'favorecer', which could

²² For a case-by-case examination of women's impacts on the Mexican economy according to their ethnic status, see Cangas Arreola 2006, 9-17. See also López Beltrán 1998.

²³ (It is my understanding that you ought to favor me greatly in this matter, because it is the right thing to do. Therefore, my dear son, my lord, for the love of God, I beg you not to forget about me or your sister, because if it was not for her and her husband I would be living on the mercy of alms).

be translated as advance, help, or even please, but historically, also implies a gendered action. According to the *Diccionario de Covarrubias*, 'favorecer' means 'patrocinar, ayudar' ('sponsor, help') but the accompanying example to clarify the word's meaning is 'al que hace favor a la dama' ('the one who does favors for women'). Catalina knows her legal rights and takes advantage of them in writing, nearly as an extortion mechanism that she implicitly narrates amid the pleas for mercy. Additionally, she makes a clear connection between the financial help from her daughter and her economic struggles, prompting and expecting a reaction from Gonzalo, as a woman is now in charge of the family.

The figure of the widowed authoritative woman holds a distinct place in the Iberian context. Allyson Poska's research highlights that during the early modern period, Spanish widows had several paths available upon their husbands' demise. There were two main options: the first was to live with their youngest daughters, as the general norm was for them to take care of the mother until her death, or in fewer occasions, the mother would ask the daughter's husband to move into her house with her daughter. In this second scenario, the widowed mother assumed the role of household head, and the daughter's husband, 'far from undertaking the responsibilities of the man of the house, . . . became little more than a farmhand' (Poska 2000, 318). As seen in her narration, Catalina's story aligns with this latter option, as her narrative reveals that her daughter and son-in-law reside with her. Yet, she expresses gratitude towards them, acknowledging that without their support, she would struggle even to eat. Women like Catalina navigate their widowhood by leveraging their surroundings, legal acumen, and even their physicality as tools for contestation and resistance.

While Catalina refers solely to family members in these letters, she also mentions a woman named Benita who seems not to belong to the family tree. Catalina explains: 'El negocio de Benita os hago, señor, saber que ha más de seis años u ocho que está casada en Almagro y tiene cuatro hijos' (Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999, 45).²⁴ This is all Catalina mentions about this woman in her first letter. However, it is by reading Catalina's following letters that one starts to understand who Benita is. In 'Carta 6', Catalina explains: 'vuestro hermano Fabián Gutiérrez os envía una información de que Benita es casada en faz de la Santa Madre Iglesia en Valenzuela, cerca de Almagro' (48).²⁵ However, it is in the 'Carta 7', where Catalina presents the *información* from Fabián, where the whole story about Benita and Gonzalo's relationship is disclosed:

Yo he tenido noticia que, queriéndose casar v.md. en esa tierra, le fue puesto impedimento diciendo tenía dado palabra de casamiento a Benita López, vecina de Almagro. Y para que allá conste no ser así y estar v.md. libre y poderse casar, le envió un testimonio e información de cómo la dicha Benita está casada en Valenzuela más ha de tres o cuatro años, y tiene tres hijos de su marido, y hace vida maridable con él, y está casada en faz de la Santa Madre Iglesia de Roma, la cual lleva el señor capellán Francisco Montero, portador de ésta. (49)²⁶

²⁴ (I tell you the story of Benita, my lord, as it has been six or eight years that she is married and has four children in Almagro).

²⁵ (your brother, Fabián Gutiérrez sends you information from Benita, as she has been married at the Holy Mother Church in Valenzuela, near Almagro [in the Mancha region]).

²⁶ (I have received news that you have been wanting to marry in that land, your grace. But an impediment had been placed on you as you had already promised to marry Benita López, neighbor of Almagro. However, in order for you to freely marry over there, for the records, I send you a testimony and information on how the said Benita is already married in Valenzuela for more than three or four years and has three children with her husband, with whom she lives a married life. Benita is married in the face of the Holy Mother Church of Rome, which was carried out by the chaplain Francisco Montero).

This information, described by Fabián, but requested by Catalina, presents the story of Benita. She used to be Gonzalo's fiancée – or wife as this information is clearly tailored for its precise purpose – in Castile at some point. This information does not stand by itself unless it is connected to the whole story. Catalina is informing Gonzalo of Benita's whereabouts to both ensure Gonzalo's safety as he is starting a new family in Mexico and to exchange information for material compensation. Furthermore, this narration illustrates how these letters become material products of exchange and trade. These letters acquire a valuable material condition that oblige Gonzalo to respond, take action, and remunerate his mother for protecting his status as single within the Iberian Peninsula.

Catalina further underscores the potential and value of her letters through hidden meanings:

de todo os envié una información muy cumplida, que la hizo vuestro hermano Fabián, la cual envié con el padre Francisco Montero; procuradla, que va allí cómo no hubo matrimonio entre vos y ella, ni otro pasó, y que por el visitador fue determinado así, para que libremente os podáis casar, pues no tenéis impedimento; y esto digo porque supe que os lo habían puesto allá. ('Carta 8', 52)²⁷

The widowed mother recognizes the dangers associated with her son's intentions to marry and establish a new family in New Spain, aware of the pervasive dread surrounding the Inquisition. The sections about Benita in Catalina's letters, both implicitly and explicitly, reveal a deep-seated fear of the Inquisition, known for scrutinizing and punishing deviations from marital norms.²⁸ The depiction of Benita stands out as particularly crucial in the letter. Benita's own movements, her remarriage in a different town, the birth of her children, and her relocation to a nearby town furnished Catalina with valuable information that could potentially be converted into monetary gain. Therefore, Catalina utilizes her own physical mobility to collect information about Benita, as outlined in her letters, and about her son, whose prospective marriage in New Spain as a free man is a pivotal element in this intricate web of information and mobility.

Catalina ends the letter emphasizing how unstructured her family is, with her other sons, Gonzalo's brothers, in different places in the Peninsula and Northern Africa, who do not attend to her needs. She also acknowledges that her son's properties are being rented or sold for an unreasonable amount of money. Catalina provides the exact amount of *maravedies* (a unit of gold) these houses cost and should be marketed as. This knowledge also demonstrates that Catalina is well versed in finances and knows the market prices to sell or rent.

In all her letters, Catalina makes references to similar elements of her struggles: her family's financial struggles, which have a substantial impact on her as an individual and her own wellbeing. Even if women show compliance with the patriarchal system in which they are not allowed to function without a male presence in their petitions, their same narrations demonstrate a decisive intervention in the creation of a colonial economy. These women's petitions demonstrate their ability to narrate stories that provide them with economic advantages and rewards. In this sense, women's affective mobilities cross gendered borders. Through these relational experiences, Catalina enters a space of economic exchange through affective mobilities. These narrated forms

²⁷ (I sent you a document with very detailed information from your brother Fabián with Father Francisco Montero; take care of this information because in that record it is stated how you never married Benita or any other women [in Castile]. With this document it is clear that you can marry freely as you do not have any impediment; I restate this information because I have witnessed that this information is in the document).

²⁸ See the Royal Decree sent by the bishop Juan de Zumárraga, inquisitor in Mexico, entitled 'incumplimientos que se siguen de no hazer vida con sus mujeres los españoles que son casados o desposados y residen en essa tierra [Nueva España]' (AGI, 'Registros Generalísimos', Indiferente, 427, 58).

of mobility, which she draws upon, are examples of her most intimate desires, but they are not merely rhetorical: they function as a means to insert herself into the early modern transatlantic economy. These rhetorical mechanisms are examples of female legal and commercial discourse, which is hidden in letters built on familial and personal information. However, this discourse also forms a structure for negotiation. While complying with imposed gendered roles, Catalina also transgresses them by navigating the early modern economic world through affects. Ultimately, Catalina's literary and communicative skills do not exclusively portray her ability to move and access a masculine world of exchanges, trade, and power; they additionally illustrate her own rhetorical prowess embedded in a discourse of sympathy that resonates with her destitute conditions.

4. *Female Affective Mobilities: Widowed Women Building the Colonial Legal Archive*

As demonstrated in the previous section, Catalina, a widowed woman, crafted narratives in her transatlantic letters that endowed her with greater agency to seek material and economic support. These narratives, originating from propertied yet non-elite women physically located in Castile, transcended geographical boundaries, reaching into New Spain. These accounts represent a fraction of the narrated female transatlantic experiences during the sixteenth century. Spanish and criolla women living in New Spain also share their orientation towards obtaining financial advantages from the Crown. Specifically, in this section, I refer to widowed women who were once married to conquistadors or men with important *oficios* (positions) in the Real Audiencia de México, which was the highest Spanish court in New Spain. These widowed women used the legal system through the Audiencia to seek economic help to live according to their *calidad*. What is most remarkable about these women's legal discourses is their rhetorical capability to create marvelous stories about themselves and the men in their families. These discursive strategies emphasize that these women were married and therefore honorable. And because they state and support their honorable status, they also seek rewards and compensations. Through a complex imposition of social mores, women understood that their marital status was, in many instances, an additional factor delineating their rights, duties, and prerogatives.

While in epistolary narratives women often highlight the family's domestic intimacies, indicating a quasi-private aspect of this genre, the legal documents analyzed in the subsequent sections show women narrating and engaging with various forms of mobility aligned with the public sphere. These activities are often connected to American conquests, indigenous labor, or transatlantic commerce. Archival legal documents were predominantly public since, in most cases, the Spanish populace was aware of their natural rights. Despite the ambiguity of Castilian law in the sixteenth century, as Richard Kagan notes, 'knowledge of the law was an essential ingredient in winning a lawsuit' (1981, 23). With many townspeople serving as eyewitnesses, their testimonies became crucial evidence in the legal process. Consequently, women, despite being viewed as inferior to men due to their reproductive roles, were knowledgeable about their rights and adept at utilizing all available legal and social resources to accomplish their objectives, even in the face of male disapproval.

Archival documents show the various and distinct ways in which women approached the Audiencias to file lawsuits, present proof of merits, and request licenses. For example, in 1561, Isabel de Caballos organized and compiled a proof of merits in the name of her deceased father, who was one of the first Spanish conquistadors in the conquest of Mexico.²⁹ Cases of women

²⁹ AGI, Audiencia de México, 97, Ramo 2.

like Isabel are abundant within the archive's *legajos* (documentary bundles), as conquistadors' wives and daughters were born at the epicenter of the turn to the mercantile system of the time, and knew how to navigate the legal system. A widowed woman who does not have enough money to live to the standards she desires, de Caballos used her father's respected status and honorable actions to highlight her pristine lineage. She employed the memories of her father's actions across space – his conquests, his cross-continental journeys, and his discoveries – to impress the Audiencia and obtain *socorros* (financial help) because she is 'de buena vida y fama y est[á] tan pobre y necesitada', as one of her witnesses says.³⁰ While Pedro Caballos, Isabel's son, is the one who finds the witnesses who testify favorably in the proof of merits, it is Isabel who files the complaint and who fights the petition. Women like Isabel were able to enter the legal system through their storytelling abilities, sidestepping patriarchal social norms designed to prevent women from using the law to their advantage. In fact, the witnesses, who are mostly renowned conquistadors, answer two questions about Isabel's status, highlighting who oversees the petition and providing evidence that Isabel obeys patriarchal norms. While men needed to prove their courage and *actitud caballeresca* (honorable behavior) in these petitions, women, as shown through their legal narratives, needed positive evidence of their marital status, honesty, and honor. Once these elements were clarified and positively fulfilled by women, they could start narrating their case, which often demanded actions against that would destabilize the same patriarchal system. As one of the witnesses confirms, Isabel deserves what she asks for in her petition because she is 'hija de conquistador y [es] de buena vida y fama'.³¹

The *calidad* of this woman provides her with greater authority to ask for more compensation. The *calidad* and lineage in the American territories shifts from the peninsula's contexts, as many people obtained higher *calidad* statuses solely by being the offspring of Spanish conquistadors whose socioeconomic status was not originally prominent on the peninsula.³² Isabel, knowledgeable of her rights and benefits, emphasizes the fact that she does not hold an *encomienda de indios* (an official grant of indigenous land and labor) because her husband died at an early age. Women could hold *encomiendas* and became *encomenderas* (owners of the land and labor), but they could lose them quickly if they were not careful, as *encomiendas* were in high demand.

Among the various white *encomenderas* in New Spain, particularly in the Yucatán Peninsula, is Ana Segura. In 1552, Segura petitioned for a license to delay her return to New Spain from the Iberian Peninsula, as she was tending to her gravely ill husband in Catalonia.³³ This example illustrates women from socioeconomic backgrounds similar to Segura's, who often traveled between the Americas and the Peninsula under a range of conditions, always mindful of their financial status and their contribution to the economic infrastructure. Segura had received an *encomienda* through the *repartimiento* (a distribution of *encomiendas*) executed by Hernán Cortés, being one of the first women to migrate to New Spain in the early sixteenth century. She utilized the legal system to request a one-year extension for her return to New Spain, aiming to prevent the Audiencia from reassigning her *encomienda*, likely to a man.

³⁰ (very honest, widowed, and poor). AGI, Audiencia de México, 97, Ramo 2, 1r.

³¹ (a daughter of a conquistador and she is of honorable life and fame). AGI, Audiencia de México, 97, Ramo 2, 5r.

³² María Elena Martínez discusses this merit-based process in relation to the sons of conquistadors. However, she either overlooks or does not address its application to women. While it is predominantly men who claimed genealogical ties to obtain *encomiendas* or monetary support from the Crown, based on their fathers' merits, this example illustrates that women of Spanish descent also utilized the legal system in similar ways (2008, 124-128).

³³ AGI, Audiencia de México, 96, 1552.

Encomiendas, representing land and free labor, were highly sought during this period, with a long list of applicants, mostly men, seeking them as compensation for their honorable deeds. Understanding this dynamic, Ana Segura sent a letter to the Audiencia de México to secure her *encomienda* and inform the authorities of her delayed return. This letter exemplifies the discursive construction of women's physical and socioeconomic mobility across the Atlantic. Additionally, this record demonstrates how the system relegated women from economic endeavors and forced them to commit themselves to their domestic and care-taking duties. Yet, they displayed resistance through petitions, asserting their roles as organizers and proprietors of property and land.

In 1569, the widowed María de Vitoria mounted this kind of resistance through narration.³⁴ Her deceased husband, Juan Sánchez Pericón, was sent on a transpacific expedition to provide help to the *pobladores* (conquistadors or soldiers who (re)populated the land) in the conquest of Guam Island (current Micronesia) which, according to the document, was geographically part of China. De Vitoria not only narrates how her husband died as an honorable man fighting in the name of the Crown for a just war, but also extols the greatness of her husband's doomed actions.

María de Vitoria, poor after her husband's death, legitimizes her petition through the rhetoric of her narration of these misfortunes. She narrates that her husband, the captain Pericón, who was a *vecino* of Mexico City just like her, was serving as governor of the Zacatecas mines in New Spain when the Mexican Viceroy, through the Audiencia, requested him to start the expedition 'teniendo noticia de su persona',³⁵ which highlights the *calidad* and dexterity of Pericón. She explains that, among the more than fifty soldiers to embark on this official journey with María's husband, there was one captain assistant named Lope Martín who somehow knew the foreign land. María then emphasizes that Lope Martín, praising the lands around the Pacific Islands,

previno a la mayor parte de los soldados y marineros que iban en la nao y les dio a entender que estaban cerca de la tierra muy rica y que si venian en lo qual dezia los llevaría a robar la costa de la China donde todos fuesen muy ricos y que después los metería por el Estrecho de Magallanes para ir adonde quisiesen y siendo todos de este parecer dio el dicho piloto parte de ello a [Pericón].³⁶

This evocative description allows María to portray herself as an eyewitness through her tone and style, criticize corrupt men and the commerce system, and emphasize her knowledge about those lands and expeditions. The misfortunes of her husband, resulting in his death, are due to the excesses of men like Lope Martín. She understands that providing a clear division between the type of men (or masculinity) who work with conquest expeditions would suffice to grant her access to compensations by using her husband's glorious acts. María depicts her husband as a martyr for the Crown, and one who does not betray Catholic and imperial morals. She explains that her husband, after hearing Martín's plans to detour from the original journey to help the Spanish soldiers in Guam,

³⁴ AGI, Audiencia de México, 98, 1569.

³⁵ (being aware of his character). AGI, Audiencia de México, 98, 1569, 1r.

³⁶ (Warned most of the soldiers and sailors who were on the ship and told them that they were near a very rich and fructiferous land, and that if they would comply with what he demanded, he would take them to rob this coast of China. And just like that, they would become very rich and then they would go through the Strait of Magellan to travel wherever they would please. All of them agreeing with Lope Martín, he provided this information to Pericón). *Ibid.*

no dio audiencia diciendo que por Vuestra Merced le estaba mandado que fuesen a hacer el dicho socorro y que aquel se había de proseguir y visto por el piloto y los demás soldados que no le podían pervertir del servicio de Vuestra Merced trataron entre todos de matarle así al dicho mi marido capitán como a Pedro Sánchez Pericón mi hijo que iba por su alférez.³⁷

Here, the figure of the conquistador and warrior for the Crown can be equated to the figure of the missionary. Both the conquistadors and the missionaries acquired textual features from each other in chronicles and hagiographies (Lavrin 2014, 152-153). In other words, each narrative helped to shape one another. Pericón's duty is not only to help the Crown's soldiers in Guam, but also to enforce and transfer the Catholic dogma to the newly encountered populations. Pericón helped with the Spanish Empire's 'global project to evangelize all parts of the world', including China, Japan, and the Philippines (134). María illustrates here a clear image of the Empire's expansionism through commerce and religion by additionally highlighting New Spain's geographical position as key for the transmission of Christianity throughout the Pacific Ocean. However, this narration suggests that the treacherous peoples here are not the 'new' land's natives, but the very soldiers of the empire. As such, Pericón does not die as a martyr fighting for the Empire against the indigenous, which would have been appropriate and masculine. Instead, he meets his demise due to the greed and corruption prevalent among the Empire's own people.

The way women describe physical movements and actions in their judicial narrations clarifies the unique strategies they utilized both to use the legal system to their advantage and manipulate the patriarchal norm to obtain more freedom. Regarding physical mobility, women moved around the imperial territories with or without licenses, depending on the historical period. However, the petitions for licenses that are in the Archivo General de Indias demonstrate that there was a continuous flow of female passengers who went and returned to and from the Americas during the sixteenth century regardless of their origin. The most common motif for petitioning a license to travel was to comply with the sacrament of matrimony, as women were often left behind. Adhering to the norms of the patriarchal system, highlighting the literary tropes of their masculine husbands or sons, allowed them to travel physically and provided them with protection should their previous or future actions violate societal rules or their gender roles.

5. Conclusion

We find that these women tell stories to themselves in order to stay afloat. They also reproduce these stories in writing, immersing themselves in official, bureaucratic, and legal writing to achieve their goals. These goals evidence the proto-capitalist society that is being created in a patriarchal world. Women are constantly relegated to second place, but nevertheless, they know how to navigate this position to find better economic and social outcomes. Through letters, litigations, and petitions, widowed women describe their movements both as a form of justification, with details of their personal lives through intimacy and affection, and as products that affect the early modern economy.

³⁷ (could not believe what Martín was saying, exclaiming that your grace had ordered him to go and fight for the Crown by helping the other soldiers, and that they would continue their journey. However, when Martín and the other soldiers heard this news, as my husband could not be corrupted by the rest of the crew's members, all of them killed him and my son, Pedro Sánchez Pericón, who traveled alongside my husband as his lieutenant). AGI, Audiencia de México, 98, 1569, 1v.

Widowed women create a fundamental bridge for understanding other women with other demographics and in different contexts. As we cross the Atlantic into colonial Mexico, these women function here as a pivotal point of comparison for future studies. While Spanish widowed women may hold some privileges in specific situations, these are women who use their various forms of mobility or transgressive acts to inherently question the colonial-patriarchal-mercantilist early modern system. Even if these women objectify themselves as docile, modest, and subordinated female individuals throughout their petitions, letters, and testimonies, they, more importantly, self-represent and identify as mobile agents. Their agency permits them to both explore and utilize their public surroundings and the bureaucratic system, and depict how others, including their male counterparts, execute their own mobility to justify their actions. As a result of combining both experiences, these women obtain authority and often overcome their financial and legal struggles.

The women whose cases I have examined in this article do not view themselves as objects who assess their self-worth in relationship to men; men's permission to live and act freely is unnecessary for them. They move and search out different possibilities to socially and financially advance on their own terms to obtain compensation. These case studies provide specific examples of the many ways women from different socioeconomic statuses navigate male-dominated societies. Even though they were not merchants, traders, or soldiers whose labors were intricately connected to movement, these women found themselves in motion in various spaces. They access mobility through correspondence and day-to-day interactions and conversations in transatlantic environments. Additionally, they also physically move from the Americas to the Iberian Peninsula and vice-versa to supervise family matters and their businesses as *encomenderas* and heads of household. Furthermore, they authorize themselves to transgress moral rules and the principles of a gendered society. The cases I have analyzed in this article exemplify white women's self-authorization through physical, ethical, and collective transgressive movements as they make the strange familiar through collective and feminine knowledge.

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