



DID YOU KILL YOUR BABY? Gender, Race, and Religion in the Early Venezuelan Republic

Using court cases of infanticide and other crimes to study the lives of working-class women from two centuries ago.

Funded in part by the CSWS Faculty Research Grant, Reuben Zahler visited historical archives in Venezuela during the summer of 2015, to begin researching his next book.

by Reuben Zahler, Associate Professor, Department of History

In January of 1811, María Isabel Ribas found herself in jail, charged with murdering her own baby, one of the most heinous acts imaginable for a Catholic woman. A few days earlier, in her neighborhood of Mérida, Venezuela, locals had found the cadaver of a newborn infant in a field, being eaten by vultures. Officials searched in the area for women who had recently been pregnant, and questioned María. She admitted that the baby was hers but also insisted that she was innocent of murder.

María's testimony offers us a brief view into a life that appears both difficult and lonely. She was 26 years old, single, of mixed-racial background, illiterate, and worked as a seamstress and laundrywoman. She came originally from another city, had no local family, and appeared to have no friends. She knew the father of the infant—he lived in her native city—but did not want to marry him. She explained that on the day of the birth she was walking on a deserted road when she went into labor. She stepped into a vacant lot so as not to be seen and then passed out from the pain. When she recovered, the labor had finished but her baby was dead—she speculated that it asphyxiated during the birth process. Afraid and unsure what to do, she cut the umbilical cord and left the body. However, there were several problems in her story. She admitted that she had told nobody about the pregnancy or the birth, nor had she assigned a godparent. Further, the argument presented by her court-appointed defense lawyer was full of inconsistencies and contradictions. These circumstances challenged her version of events and suggested that the death may have been a premeditated murder.

This case forms part of my new research project, which focuses on women and crime in Venezuela from 1780 to 1850. These years span from the end of Venezuela's colonial period through independence (1821) and its first decades as an independent republic. This is the period when Venezuela, and the rest of Latin America, first experimented with electoral government, written



Top: Historic text from the court case discussed in the article • Above: Outside of Mérida. • Opposite page: Mérida, Venezuela from a distance / photos by Reuben Zahler.

constitutions, capitalism, freedom of speech and religion, and so on. This research will consider instances when women were the victims of crime, such as rape, abduction, domestic abuse, fraud, and embezzlement. However, I have also found a trove of cases in which women were the perpetrators of crime, such as homicide, robbery, assault, lesbian cohabitation, vagrancy, immoral conduct, etc. These court cases offer a rare opportunity to hear the voices and glimpse the lives of working class women, who otherwise are often invisible in the historical record. They give us not only a sense of how these women navigated their lives but also illumi-



nate how authorities sought to control them and maintain patriarchal structures, as the country went through a dramatic transition towards modernization.

Among other challenges facing this project, doing research in Venezuela is increasingly difficult. With rampant corruption and a collapsing economy, Venezuela may soon become a failed state; the country ranks as one of the most dangerous in the world due to its rates of homicide and kidnapping. As a Caucasian foreigner, I make a conspicuous and appealing target for criminal gangs. Over the past two decades, I have gone there to work in the archives numerous times, and each visit the conditions are worse than before. Ever since I became a husband and father, it has become harder to justify the risk of working there—my son deserves to have a father for at least a few more years. So how to continue this research?

The funding I received from the CSWS Faculty Research Grant has been instrumental in my ability to continue investigating this under-studied country. With assistance from CSWS, in 2015 I traveled again to Venezuela. The two goals of this trip were: 1) to determine the feasibility of my new project, and 2) to arrange to continue studying this country without visiting in person. I successfully located troves of archival documents in three cities: Caracas, Coro, and Mérida. Since my return, I have used CSWS funds to pay archivists to send me digital photos of documents, and now have nearly 13,000 images in my possession. I have also used the funds to pay archivists to transcribe documents. Reading the handwritten, decomposing pages from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a laborious process, so having professional archivists type up the documents saves me an enormous amount of time. Further, as the Venezuelan economy crumbles, the payments to the archivists are helping to keep their families alive.

In the Andean city of Mérida I discovered a collection of infanticide cases, which is remarkable for a few reasons. The court records include forty cases of infanticide during the years 1811-1863. Curiously, there are no records of infanticide before or after those dates. Also curious, the archives of Caracas and Coro contain no cases of infanticide at all. Why authorities in this one provincial capital investigated this crime for fifty-two years and then stopped is a mystery.

Though so far I have read only a few of the infanticide cases, already they have yielded surprises. The courts seem eager to acquit in these cases when possible. As we saw above, María claimed that the infant was stillborn but her story had numerous problems. Nonetheless, in her case and others like it, the state prosecutors and the judges accepted the defendants' story without further investigation and pressed for an immediate acquittal. In contrast, prosecutors and judges were far more rigorous and tough on female defendants in other types of criminal cases, such as abortion, robbery, vagrancy, and concubinage (living with a man out of wedlock). For reasons as yet unknown, the courts were credulous and lenient with women accused of infanticide, despite the fact that this act violated so many female gender norms in this traditionally Catholic country. Research into infanticide and other crimes, therefore, not only offers a glimpse into the lives of these women. This project will also illuminate how the society at large sought to regulate working class women's behavior, and why the state punished some transgressions more than others. ■

— Reuben Zahler received his PhD in history from the University of Chicago and is an associate professor of history at UO. His research considers how Latin America transformed from colonies to independent, liberal republics during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries. Specifically, he explores the evolution of honor, law, and patriarchy as Venezuelans adopted civil rights, capitalism, and elections into their institutions and daily lives.