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The Sick Sun: Poetics of Contagion in Seventeenth-Century Mexico City*

“Of all the forms attributed to pandemics, we rarely see poetic ones,” writes Lakshmi Krishnan, “yet it is poetry that disposes of endings”[1]. This statement holds particularly true for the context of the early modern Spanish empire. Across the vast territories of the empire, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, poetic texts often accompanied or commemorated festive processions dedicated to interceding patron saints, bringing together the heterogeneous population of cities ravaged by epidemics to celebrate the end of contagion[2]. Urban poetry, circulated in small chapbooks, honored the miraculous intercession and accompanying festivities held in honor of figures such as Santa Rosalía during Palermo’s plague of 1624, the Virgin of Guadalupe during Madrid’s plague of 1682, and Jesus the Nazarene and Mary Magdalene during Cádiz’s epidemics outbreak of 1681[3]. Poetry and festivities, both narratively and performatively, offered a formal resolution to plague’s devastation—a resolution that, though officially instituted, was also collectively and socially affirmed.

This article focuses on the relationship between poetry and epidemics. Building on Krishnan’s remarks, it explores how poetry in seventeenth-century Mexico not only disposed of epidemic endings; it also encouraged its diverse audience to reconceptualize time, and in so doing, reconsider their past and recent outbreak experiences. To show this, I analyze a series of *Quintillas* (five-lined stanzas) that narrate the festive processions held for the Virgin of Los Remedios (hereafter referred to as Remedios) in Mexico City, 1668, celebrating her divine intercession in ending a *viruela* outbreak and bringing rainfall after a period of drought[4]. Within the linear narrative traced by the *Quintillas* — progressing from the sorrow of pestilence and drought to the joy of rainfall and deliverance from contagion — a cyclical understanding of epidemic outbreaks and natural disasters emerges. Articulating ecological and spiritual imaginaries at the

intersection of Catholic faith, European theories of contagion, and Nahua mythology, this poetic composition is shaped and informed by the historical experiences of past epidemic outbreaks and natural disasters in the central valley of Mexico.

Scholarship on epidemic outbreaks has traditionally adhered to an event-based linear perspective. In his provocative 1989 article, “What is an Epidemic?,” Charles Rosenberg argued that health crises unfold as a drama following a basic sequence: “Epidemics start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crises of individual and collective character, then drift towards closure”[5]. Generative as Rosenberg’s paradigm has been, several scholars nowadays have summoned us to defy the conventional notions of outbreaks’ temporal limits. In the introduction to the special issue of pandemic histories, for example, Jacob Steere-Williams and Claire Edington ask the question: “While historians of disease have long used the language of “framing,” and considered the “dramaturgy” of epidemic events, what other conceptual tools do we have at our disposal to narrate epidemics in ways that help to capture the diversity of experiences with epidemics at both a local and global scale?”[6]. The *Quintillas* analyzed below continually resist the linear chronology of epidemic outbreaks, turning instead to a cyclical understanding of them grounded on a *long durée* memory. Beyond a linear chronology, the poetics of contagion unveil a cultural memory of pandemics in seventeenth-century Mexico City that inform how these episodes were experienced and interpreted.

A Bibliographic Note

These *Quintillas* are the subject of an attribution debate. We have knowledge of two different editions: the first one, printed in Mexico City in 1668 by the

printing house of Bernardo Calderón, is nowhere to be found today, but is listed in several bibliographic repositories including that of José Mariano Beristáin de Souza (1756-1817) and Antoni Palau i Dulcet (1867-1954). The second edition (fig. 1) was published 57 years later, in 1725, in the port city of Cádiz, in Spain[7]. This article's research is based on this edition, nowadays kept at the *Centro de Estudios de Historia de México* in Mexico City (082.172 V.A and gathered within Book 22,146). Another copy of this edition is kept at the Benson Latin American Collection (GZ 282.7 P752).

Until recently, both these editions were attributed to Alonso Ramírez de Vargas, about whom little biographical information survives. According to the Beristáin de Souza, Ramírez de Vargas was born to noble parents in Mexico, held several administrative posts in the colonial government, including local governor (*capitán*) and regional magistrate (*alcalde mayor*), and was well-regarded by the ruling elites of the viceroyalty[8]. Martha Lilia Tenorio's anthology of New Spain's poetry shows Ramírez de Vargas was a prolific writer of festive accounts (*Relaciones de fiestas*), folk songs (*Villancicos*), and loose poems. The reason for this attribution is straightforward: the 1725 edition claims the author of the *Quintillas* was Ramírez de Vargas.

In 2013, Judith Farré Vidal cast doubt on this attribution. While at the John Carter Brown Library, she discovered a set of *Quintillas* identical to those of the 1725 edition signed by Ramírez de Vargas, but authored by friar Alfonso de Ena and printed in Mexico by Juan Ruiz in 1668 (BA668 .E56d). Farré Vidal suggests that the false attribution to Ramírez de Vargas may have been part of an editorial strategy common at the time, where printers published works attributed to more famous authors in order to boost sales[9].

Determining the authorship of these *Quintillas* is beyond the scope of this article. After all, the argument holds regardless of who their author is. However, this bibliographic conundrum speaks not only to the popularity of Remedios as a Marian devotion across the Spanish empire. It also reinforces, as Domenico Cecere and Alessandro Tuccillo argue, that early modern emergencies generated a widespread

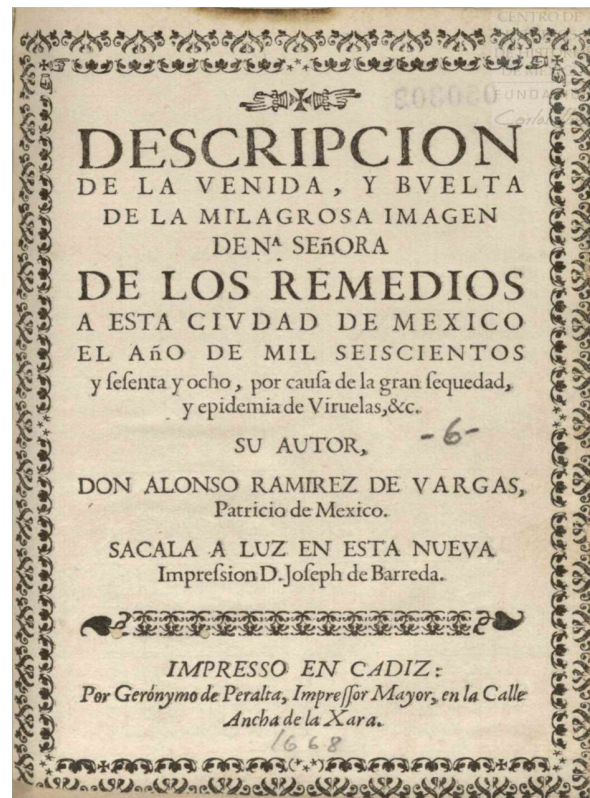


Fig. 1: Frontispiece of the 1725 edition of the *Quintillas*, 1725. Print, 14 x 19 cm. Cádiz, Spain. Centro de Estudios de Historia de México. (Digitized image by Centro de Estudios de Historia de México).

demand for information, concern for experiences of crises elsewhere, and communicative exchanges across the Iberian Peninsula and other territories of the Hispanic Monarchy, a claim that has yet to fully account for poetic forms like this one[10]. Persuaded by Farré Vidal's claim, and until I am able to consult the version of Alfonso de Ena, the analyses of this article mostly refer only to the *Quintillas* (corresponds with plural) or 'the author,' to avoid assuming or reproducing a possibly mistaken attribution.

Remedios and the Seasons of Adversity

Literary scholars have long regarded poetry as a cornerstone of the cultural and social life of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Martha Lilia Tenorio explains "almost all Novohispanic lyrical verse is collective and civic, committed to describing and praising the festivities to which it is linked." By the seventeenth century,

poetry—often commissioned by ecclesiastic or government authorities or motivated by literary contests—constituted “a sort of collective memory, in which the circumstantial became essential.” These circumstances were, of course, immensely diverse: from theological disputes to canonizations; from the arrival of a viceroy to the city, to miraculous events. And yet, a Baroque formula for poetry and celebrations can be clearly articulated: “celebration, which presupposes social cohesion and ideological intent, and poetry, which, in turn, implies a certain degree of cultural cohesion—a literature created by few, but enjoyed and celebrated by many[11].”

Titled *Description of the coming and going of the miraculous image of Our Lady of los Remedios to this City of Mexico on the year of 1668, on account of the great drought and viruela epidemic*, the *Quintillas* adhere to the Baroque formula identified by Tenorio. They center around the festive procession held for Remedios on June 13, 1668. For nearly three centuries of colonial rule in Mexico City, Remedios was the most popular deity for which processions were held outside the liturgical calendar[12]. Experts like Rosario Granados Salinas assure Remedios’s cult was inextricably attached to the memory of the conquest; the Virgin was often called the *conquistadora*[13].

But as Granados Salinas also notes, the memory of the conquest was not static throughout Mexico’s three centuries of colonial rule, and neither was the association of this Marian image with Spanish oppression. Remedios might have aided conquistadors in their favorable military deed but, according to popular belief, her statue had been miraculously found by an Indian cacique or headman of the otomí people, Juan Ce Cuautli, hiding in a maguey, around 1540, an image that became a trope in Remedios’ iconography well into the eighteenth century (fig. 2). It was on this spot where, allegedly, her shrine had been built. Possibly created by the caciques of Tacuba as a way of exalting their Christian faith, this myth nevertheless promoted a widely successful adoption of the Virgin amongst Indigenous populations.

In his chronicle of Remedios’s origins and miracles in Mexico, the Mercedarian friar Luis de Cisneros meticulously describes a procession held on



Fig. 2: Miguel Cabrera, *Finding of Our Lady of Remedios*, ca. 1750. Church of Merced de las Huertas, Mexico City. Image from Fernando Franciles López.

June 11, 1616, to honor her after a long period of drought ended, offering a detailed blueprint of how such processions unfolded. These processions involved carrying the statue of Remedios—housed in her shrine, 11 kilometers northwest of Mexico City—to the Cathedral in the central plaza of Mexico City. Her voyage towards New Spain’s capital city was a sumptuous and ceremonial event. Secured within a silver tabernacle, Remedios’s crossing would begin early, at around 7 a.m. Transported on an elaborate float decorated with golden cloths and carried by priest porters, the Virgin’s entourage traversed through the *Calzada de Tacuba*. Indigenous authorities from the surroundings were responsible for holding up a canopy to protect the holy statue. At around 11 a.m., the cortège sheltered themselves from noon’s heat in the Franciscan convent of Tacuba.

Finally, they reached the parish church of Santa Veracruz, where the official procession began.

At this point, Remedios and her already large convoy were joined by religious and secular authorities: the city council (*Audiencia*), the Viceroy, ecclesiastic authorities, religious orders, the city's confraternities, and the common people. All were arranged in a strict order that reflected social and political hierarchies. Regimented, they made their way to the Cathedral in the city center. This strict order, however, does not diminish the festive atmosphere of seventeenth-century religious processions. Cisneros evokes a jubilant and emotive quality to the event: music from wind instruments, fireworks, and blasts from artillery salutes. Approaching the Cathedral as dusk was setting in, people lit candles and torches from decorated balconies and roofs. In Cisneros's account, the setting darkness is defied by the hundreds of lit candles that surrounded Remedios. Remedios' arrival to the Cathedral was triumphant and stirring.

Contagion and the Sun

The *Quintillas* similarly summon this gradual build-up towards celebratory relief that took place in Mexico City, in June 1668. Made up of 154 five-lined stanzas and following the conventions of festive accounts, the poem follows a linear chronology that can be divided into 5 parts: First, an invocation to Urania, the Greek goddess of astronomy and astrology (stanzas 1-4). Next, the author sets up the scene of the outbreak's inception, striving to be precise about the climatic conditions it develops in (stanzas 5-12). Stanzas 13 to 66 paint a bleak picture of the effects of diseases and drought on people, flora and fauna—men, women, dogs, birds, lambs, myrtle leaves, mulberry trees—these stanzas pulse with dramatic intensity as an inverted pastoral landscape throbs with death, thirstiness, and misery. Subsequently, stanzas 67 to 120 describe the kickoff of Remedios's procession, following the viceroy's orders, who was, at the time, Antonio de Toledo Molina y Salazar (1622-1715), commonly known as the Marqués de Mancera. This section is packed with embellishing descriptions of the Virgin's voyage—taking off from Tacuba and moving through the city—along with the crowds that follow and are moved to contrition by the sight of her: guilds, pious communities, and religious orders meld with secular

clergy, and city councilors. In these scenes, contagion brings together, if only temporarily, a diverse and segmented community that gathers to pray for divine intercession. Briefly, all survivors are affiliated through the fear of death and Catholic piety. Finally, once divine relief has been granted, stanzas 121 to 154 close off the poem by asserting the people's gratitude and appreciation to God, and Remedios's intercession.

Alongside this linear narrative arc, the *Quintillas* introduce a cyclical temporality through various elements of the poem. Structurally, the five-line stanzas with an alternating rhyme scheme in octosyllabic lines create a lighter tone that nods towards a degree of familiarity with a kind of event that repeatedly upends daily life but is nevertheless expected to end. This is further reinforced by the author's strategic use of the *jocoserio* style at key moments of the poem; what Alain Bègue describes as a combination of mockery and seriousness used to critique social vices[14]. In the *Quintillas*, this seriocomic style critiques the social and medical failings exposed during outbreaks, while the dominant use of the past tense distances the suffering from the moment of recitation. Humor and verb tenses together create a sense of detachment from the shock of the outbreak and drought, emphasizing that the present is no longer under their threatening grip. Let us look at the *Quintillas* to illustrate these dynamics.

The beginning of the poem links the past hardships to the natural cycles of the seasons. The opening stanzas make an invocation to Urania, the Greek muse of astronomy and astrology. Daughter of Zeus by Mnemosyne, Urania was also known to be, in the early modern period, the muse of religious verse. [15] The author conflates both of Urania's domains in his text, in which poetry and astrology come together to sing of the drought and *viruela* outbreak that afflicted the inhabitants of New Spain's capital city. By summoning Urania, the author foreshadows two important and related notions that underpin the poem as a whole. First, that there is an inextricable interdependence between celestial bodies, the environment, and living beings, echoing paradigms of the time that conceived the universe as an interconnected whole. Second, and related to this theory, the author advances an inclusive notion of 'life' affected by contagion and

drought, that encompasses not only human life, but also animal and natural life (rivers, seas and plants), as well as cosmic life (the Sun). This expansion of the scale of contagion's damage determines the *Quintillas*'s narrative scope. After the invocation to Urania, the poetic persona sets up the scene of the outbreak's inception, striving to be precise about the climatic conditions it develops in[16]:

<p>5. Era el Verano: más no; la verdad fija esté: pues si el <u>Verano</u> inviernó, faltará a la Historia yo, diciendo lo que no fue.</p> <p>6. Era el Invierno: tampoco; que hubo calores impíos; a mil dudas me provocó: tiempo fue de escalofríos, conque andaba el tiempo loco.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>8. En fin, por el frenesí de la confusión severa, en su mudanza advertí, sin duda alguna, que era un tiempo de <u>sumesfui</u>.</p>	<p>5. It was Summer: but no; let truth be set for if Summer wintered I'll be untrue to History saying what was not.</p> <p>6. It was winter: neither; Since there was impious heat; a thousand doubts befell me: Time it was for chills, A mad time indeed.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>8. Alas, in the midst of stern confusion I realized this change marked without a doubt a time of <u>sumesfui</u>.</p>
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A time of sumesfui. The climatic confusion rhetorically built throughout the stanzas is condensed in the term of *sumesfui* at the end of stanza 8. The term closely resembles Sumesfuit, the name of a character that appeared in Francisco de Quevedo's anthology of baroque poetry titled *Parnaso Español* (1648). Described as a "pastor vejete," that is, the comic old shepherd, the character of Sumesfuit also features in the *comedias* of Agustín Moreto y Cavana's *Scorn with Scorn* [El desden con el desdén] (1654), and Jorge de Cañizares's *Gyges's Ring* [El anillo de Gyges] (1764). According to Joaquín Álvarez Barrientos, the name of Sumesfuit is the union of three persons of the Latin verb 'sum', to be: 'sum' and 'es' from the present tense, and 'fuit' from the perfect indicative[17]. In other words, the name literally translates to 'I am-You are-He/She/It was' all joined together. In José de Cañizares's *Gyges's Ring*, Sumesfuit describes himself as "a servant/ of a puppeteer master/ who is seen and not seen/ who walks, runs, and sits still." Playing with his name's performative connotations, he also calls himself 'Oath,' "because they can't call me/ without dropping verbs"[18]. As his name foreshadows, Sumesfuit behaves in erratic and unpredictable ways.

However, in the *Quintillas*, Sumesfuit is not a character. If the author borrowed it from contempora-

ry plays, he transformed it into a locution that represents the period's chaotic climatic phenomena. Additionally, the spelling uses a Hispanicized form, replacing the Latin 'fuit' with the Spanish 'fui,' the first-person singular of the simple past, transforming the phrase into "I am-You are-I was". Diachronic corpuses of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish of the Americas yield no results for this term. Nevertheless, within the stanza that invokes the Baroque trope of *mudanza* (roughly translating to "transformation" or "mutability," as it reflects themes of impermanence and flux), the locution of Sumesfui underscores the chaos unleashed by the unpredictable behavior of the weather that challenges the common expectations of the seasons. The delirium and bewilderment evoked in stanza 8 are the natural outcome of the poetic persona's constant unsaying in stanzas 5 and 6. By retracting his statements—"It was Summer: hold on, no"; "It was winter; also false"—, and expressing his doubts and fears—"a thousand doubts befell me/ it was a time of shivers"—the author presents the weather not only as a cause of contagion, but also as a prelude to the trials to befall on the population of Mexico City: the beginning of a season of adversity.

By starting off his narrative of contagion with the state of the weather, Ramírez is complying with the period's understanding of the causes of contagious diseases. Recovering Aristotelian doctrine, for example, Galen explained there was a tripartite system of causation of diseases: a cohesive cause, an antecedent cause, and an initial cause. Vivian Nutton explains:

The initial cause was something external—heat, cold, a blow on the head—that led to harmful changes in the body's condition by an alteration of the humours. The antecedent cause was a predisposition of the body to be affected by a disease: some people catch colds more readily than others, even though they inhabit the same environment [...]. Finally, the cohesive cause, which was brought by the other two, acting either singly or together, was a state of an organ or bodily part which prevented it from exercising its proper function[19].

Galen's tripartite system of causation partially supports Ramírez's conception of contagion, as the initial causes—the unruly weather—are carefully described. However, in the following stanzas, after detailing the dryness of March and the scorching heat of June, Ramírez shifts his focus to the Sun, before considering the people affected by disease.

<p>12. En su color admiró lo populoso y lo yermo y espantado dije yo: ¿Quién ha visto al Sol enfermo? ¿<u>Quien</u> con achaque le vio?</p>	<p>12. In his color [the Sun] perceived the crowded and the dry fearful, I said: Who has seen a sickened Sun? Who has seen him ail?</p>
<p>13. Cuyo influjo pestilente ocasionó desatado, en todo el reino doliente, muchos males de pensado, muchas muertes de repente.</p>	<p>13. Its pestilent influx caused without control across the hurting kingdom many ailments purposely many sudden deaths.</p>

Astrological explanations for contagious diseases were not infrequent at the time across Europe and the Americas. In fact, astrology played a preeminent role in medical and philosophical explanations of epidemic outbreaks. In Diego de Cisneros's *Sitio, naturaleza y geografía de la Ciudad de México* (1618), for example, he uses astrological knowledge to explain Mexico City's most frequent afflictions, as well as the population's humoral composition. However, the specific illness of the Sun in these verses can also be linked to Nahua mythology.

The Sun played a central role in the cosmogony of indigenous peoples of the Central Valley of Mexico. The plot varies according to sources and regions, but the anthropological work of Guy Stresser-Péan allows us to identify one constant element across the variations of Mesoamerica: a sickly man who was granted the privilege from the Gods to turn into the star that would shine light over the world and its people[20]. According to the version of the *Florentine Codex* (Book 7)—the ambitious project that sought to create a bilingual (Spanish and Nahuatl), illustrated encyclopedia of the belief system and customs of Nahua culture pursued by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his Nahua collaborators—the Gods gathered to decide who would be graced with the honor of becoming the Sun. In a mocking tone, some proposed Nanahuatzin, a man whose name is a nickname for someone suffering from an unidentified skin disease, often interpreted as leprosy or syphilis. Proving them wrong, Nanahuatzin is courageous enough to take on the challenge the Gods set out for him: to immolate himself. On account of his bravery, Nanahuatzin—who bears the Nahuatl suffix -tzin that denotes respect and fondness—becomes the Sun, one of the most highly esteemed deities of the Nahua.

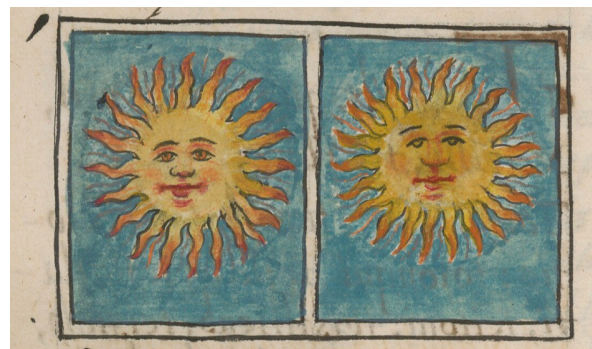


Fig. 3: Image of the Sun in the *Florentine Codex*, Book 7: The Sun Moon and Stars, Folio 1v. Digital Florentine Codex, Getty Research Institute.

Almost a century later from the production of the *Florentine Codex*, the *Quintillas* do not make any explicit relationship between the Sun and Nanahuatzin's myth, and yet both texts personalize the star and remark on its changes of colors as a phenomenon that directly affects the mental and/or physical state of living beings on Earth. In the Spanish text that accompanies Figure 3, for example, an author writes:

Other times, it looks whitish [the Sun], and other times it rises having a sickly color because of the fog or the clouds covering it. When there is an eclipse, the sun turns red. It looks as if the sun is getting restless or upset, or it sways or turns over and becomes very yellow. As soon as the people see this, they immediately become agitated, and a great fear seizes them. And then the women cry out loud, and the men yell as they hit their mouths with their hands. And there would be loud screaming, shouting, and yelling everywhere[21].

The fragment from the Spanish column of the *Florentine Codex* parallels the causality of the *Quintillas*'s verses: first comes the sickness of the Sun, which then results in the altered state of the population, whether it be panic as in the *Florentine Codex*, or spreading infection, as in the *Quintillas*.

The paintings of the Sun in the *Codex* (Fig. 3) further highlight the star's personalization: with varied facial expressions and tones, the two depictions connect the star's physical appearance to its internal mood. The work of Alessandra Russo invites us to approach the visual archives of New Spain beyond the syncretic paradigm and consider instead the "untranslatable" quality of images and objects; that is, the inexhaustible process of translation and interpretation of Iberian art[22]. To do so, one must return objects and images to their *long durée* in order to better grasp the intersections and mixtures of artistic pro-

ductions where American, European, African, and Asian traditions came together and create novel artistic configurations.

Russo's concept of untranslatable images proves particularly insightful when applied to the poetic image of the Sun in the *Quintillas*. While the association with Nanahuatzin's myth is one possible interpretation of the "sick Sun" in these verses, it more broadly highlights the untranslatability of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century New Spain's conceptions and experiences of contagion. These were shaped by an intimate relationship between heavenly bodies and humanity — an ecology forged within a *long-durée* history.

When we think of New World epidemics, we tend to think of the devastating pandemics of the sixteenth century. Despite the controversy between the "high" and "low" estimates of the American continent's pre-contact population, nobody today denies that the encounter between native American populations, Africans, and Europeans triggered a catastrophic demographic collapse of indigenous peoples throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries[23]. In some regions of the continent, more than 90% of the native population died. Massimo Livi-Bacci, however, explains that the issue goes well beyond the numbers: new diseases imported from Europe and Africa became significantly more lethal when combined with the effects of forced labor and enslavement, land dispossession, territorial displacement, and the conquistador's cruelty and violence towards the native population. When these factors are considered, epidemics cease to be exclusively "demographic cataclysms"—purely natural events driven solely by germs—; they rather become cultural phenomena largely shaped, experienced, and endured by people.

The work of Jennifer Scheper Hughes has been instrumental in shifting the focus of epidemic scholarship of colonial Latin America from numbers and demography to cultural dimensions, particularly with regards to systems of belief and religious organization. In her work *The Church of the Dead* (2021), she argues that the mortality caused by the cocoliztli epidemic of 1576–81, which claimed nearly two million lives, plunged Spanish evangelizers into despair while prompting Indigenous survivors to strategically

reclaim theopolitical jurisdictions across Mexico's central valley. More recently, in her article "Paying Tribute for the Dead," (2023) she has also argued that this same epidemic outbreak shaped labor practices in colonial Mexico. Scheper Hughes' work demonstrates epidemic outbreaks in the Americas fundamentally shaped socio-political structures throughout the first decades of the colony.

Recurrent waves of epidemic outbreaks significantly affected this region between 1520 and 1580. However, towards the end of the seventeenth century, a change in the disease regime took place. In his *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, Franciscan Gerónimo de Mendieta reports an outbreak in New Spain in 1595, but makes a telling observation: "Another general pestilence came about, a mix of *sarampión*, *papera*s and *tabardillo*, from which hardly a man has been left standing, although by the clemency and mercy of our most benign God, not as many have died as they used to in other outbreaks"[24]. Mendieta's observations outline a shift in the disease regime of the region. William McNeill has referred to this as a "modern disease regime" achieved through a "biological balance" that no longer threatened with the mass death of one group[25]. Following Livi Bacci's approach to demographic processes, biological equilibrium must be understood as a multi-factored phenomenon in which *mestizaje*, political stabilization, and the establishment of institutions such as hospitals and universities, contributed to a distinct relationship between hosts and parasites in New Spain.

Despite this disease regime shift, epidemic outbreaks kept affecting the population of the central valley of Mexico throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Charles Gibson lists 16 epidemic outbreaks of diverse nature (cocoliztli, *sarampión*, viruelas, *tabardillo*) for the seventeenth century alone[26]. While scholarship has paid much less attention to these outbreaks, focusing on the demographic demise of the sixteenth century caused by epidemics, the *Quintillas* remind us how important and recurrent they were. In these verses, contagion takes place across different types of bodies: a sick sun unleashes the pestilent influx that afflicts the Kingdom, a metonym of both the people and the territory. Thus begins a lengthy description of Mexico

City's ordeals that begins by portraying how disease prompts a swift and vehement decomposition of people's bodies[27]:

14. De viruelas salpicados, a rigores importunos, morían los más pintados; y si escapaban algunos, estos eran señalados.	14. From splatters of <i>viruelas</i> , to untimely harshness, the most tinted ones died; and if any escaped, they did so <i>marked</i> .
15. A muchos hacían fieros las Reumas muy <i>inguetas</i> hinchándose tan severos, que, aunque fuesen Caballeros, se vieron pobres trompetas.	15. Many were fiercely tormented by the restless <i>reumas</i> swelling up so severely, that even Knights became pitiful trumpets.
16. Unos, que malos se veían, con sangrarse era acabada la enfermedad que sentían; y otros, muriendo, decían: A Dios, con la colorada. ²⁸	16. Some, looking ill, after bloodletting themselves saw the ailment resume while others, dying, said: Godspeed, with the colored disease.

Harsh *viruelas*, fierce *reumas* that affect the respiratory system, a flushing ailment he calls “la colorada,” and later on talk of “erisipelas,” a type of bacterial skin infection: the enumeration of diseases in these verses vividly portrays the encompassing range of the epidemic outbreak that marks the bodies (“morían los más pintados”), weakens even the strongest, (“que aunque fuesen Caballeros,/ se vieron pobres Trompetas”) and claims numerous lives (“y otros, muriendo, decían/ A Dios con la colorada”). These verses vividly illustrate the unique epidemiological landscape of seventeenth-century Mexico City, characterized by its multi-racial composition, including Spaniards, creoles, diverse Indigenous nations, enslaved and freed Black people, and Asian inhabitants. Consequently, epidemic outbreaks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often comprised multiple illnesses, what Woodrow Borah refers to as “composite epidemics”[28]. This overlap of diseases in a multicultural setting gave rise to multi-paradigm disease categories, some medically recognized and others colloquially coined, as the verses illustrate.

The devastation depicted by the *Quintillas* does not stop at the human, as earlier mentioned. Although the *Quintillas* allude to all sorts of animal species, the author of the verses had a clear predilection for birds, all affected by drought: the Cardinal questions his superiority, the Hawk her diligence, the sparrow hawks (gavilán) steal some chickens, the crows (cuervos) desperately seek fruits, the Sun harms the herons (garzas), and the ducks (patos) swim in an em-

pty lake. Although these damages are more explicitly related to the drought, the diversity of birds in Ramírez's poem evoke the material reality of Mexico City, providing a poetic rendering of what Antonio Rubial García and Jessica Ramírez Méndez refer to as “an amphibian city.” Throughout the colonial period, Mexico City presented a lacustrine landscape, despite countless efforts to drain and dry its bodies of water[29]. Canoes, canals, and ditches in Ramírez's verses remind the reader of Mexico City's double life: part aquifer, part terrestrial.[30] The *Quintillas* encourage us to reconsider—or at least broaden—our understanding of Borah's concept of ‘composite epidemics’. Epidemic outbreaks were not only made up of multiple diseases, but also frequently coincided with other natural disasters, a reality that as the *Quintillas* demonstrate, shapes the cultural dimensions of epidemics.

Let us not forget that the imagery in these *Quintillas* is framed by the miraculous intervention of Remedios and her merciful rescue of the diverse living beings of Mexico City. According to the diary of Antonio de Robles, Remedios was brought to the capital on a Wednesday, “due to illness and lack of water”[31]. At 2 p.m., that same day, as the *Quintillas* also narrate, it began to rain. Relieved and grateful, the *Quintillas* portray a crowd restored with life and serenity. The season of adversity is behind them. It is perhaps Remedios, more than all of the other elements analyzed in this article, who epitomizes the role of cyclical temporalities in the cultural imaginary of epidemics and natural disasters. According to Luis de Cisneros, the first Remedios procession dates to 1577, when viceroy Don Martín Enríquez and Archbishop Don Pedro Moya de Contreras personally escorted the virgin from her shrine to Mexico City, asking for her intercession in one of the land's deadliest epidemic outbreaks of *cocoliztli*. Since then, Grados Salinas calculates Remedios's statue was carried through Mexico City's streets fifty-seven times in three hundred years. Either in the form of petitionary or thanksgiving processions, “forty-five out of [these] fifty-seven times [...] the procession took place because of drought, disease, or famine.” The *conquistadora* thus became the keeper of the population.

The repetition of Remedios's intercessions protecting the population of Mexico from epidemic outbreaks should not be mistaken for formulaic veneration. This article argues that, at least in the case of epidemic outbreaks—events closely connected to her devotion—the poetic texts and celebratory festivities stemming from her cult preserve and transmit a cultural memory of past hardships. In this sense, poetry operates as a vessel that both archives and updates collective experiences of disease and disaster. Turning back to Tenorio's concise definition, Baroque poetry should be understood as "a civic conversation, a public art, a dialogue between the inner self and the world"[32]. The *Quintillas* civic conversation spans across temporalities, engaging with past systems of knowledge while emphasizing that hardship lies on the future horizon, with Remedios remaining the steadfast support, the people's unwavering protector.

Endnotes

- * I want to express my gratitude to Larissa Brewer-García and Martha Lilia Tenorio for their invaluable help in developing the ideas for this article.
1. Lakshmi Krishnan, *Pandemic Forms*, in: *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 79 (no. 4), 2024, p. 311, <https://academic.oup.com/jhmas/issue/79/4>.
 2. In a recent article, Samuel K. Cohn examines the festive cultures marking the end of epidemics in late 16th-century Italy, characterized by poetry recitations, elaborate city decorations, and the boisterous sounds of artillery, trumpets, and tambourines. See Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *Epidemics that End with a Bang*, in: *Centaurus. Journal of the European Society for the History of Science*, 64.1, 2022, pp. 207-216, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1484/J.CNT.5.128785>. For more on plague poetry in sixteenth century Italy, also see Cohn's chapter *The 'Liberation' of the City and Plague Poetry*, in: *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance*, Oxford 2010, pp. 140-160.
 3. In a recently published article, I explore the role of poetry and festivities regarding this epidemic outbreak in Cádiz. Specifically, I demonstrate how poetry fashions a triumphal chronology of the plague outbreak, re-establishing the social and political order of the port city in the aftermath of this health crisis. See *How to End and Epidemic: The Politics of Poetry in Seventeenth-Century Cádiz*, in: *Calíope. Journal of the Society for Renaissance and Baroque Hispanic Poetry*, 29, issue 2, 2024, pp. 235-260 <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/caliope>.
 4. Throughout this text, I retain the original terms for diseases such as 'viruela(s)', to avoid equating them with modern disease categories, which risk stripping them of their social and cultural contexts.
 5. Charles Rosenberg, *What is an Epidemic?*, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 94, no. 4, 2020, p. 564.
 6. Jacob Steere-Williams and Claire Edington, *Introduction: Re-Writing Pandemic Histories*, in: *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 79, no. 4, 2024, p. 293.
 7. According to Mario Colín, this edition was financed by José de la Barreda, a nobleman from Asturias who venerated Remedios. Mario Colín, *Bibliografía general del Estado de Me xico* Ciudad de México, 1963-1964, pp. 2-8.
 8. Beristain de Souza's information from *Biblioteca Hispanoamericana Setentrional*, 1883 comes from Martha Lilia Tenorio's *Poesía novohispana* (vol. 1), Ciudad de México 2010, p. 647.
 9. Judith Farré Vidal, *Espacio y tiempo de fiesta en Nueva España (1665-1760)*, Madrid 2013, pp. 71-92.
 10. Domenico Cecere and Alessandro Tuccillo (eds), *Communication and Politics in the Hispanic Monarchy: Managing Times of Emergency*, Bern 2023, pp. 11-35.
 11. Martha Lilia Tenorio, *Novohispanic Baroque Poetry. A Lyric Chronicle of Mexico City*, in: *A Companion to Viceregal Mexico, 1519-1821*, ed. by John F. López, Leiden 2021, p. 407.
 12. This claim, and the historical contextualization of the cult of Remedios in this article comes from the work of Rosario Granados Salinas in *Fervent Faith. Devotion, Aesthetics, and Society in the Cult of Our Lady of Remedios (Mexico, 1520-1811)* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012). For a version that includes both an abridged content of the dissertation and additional material, see her article: *Mexico City's Symbolic Geography: Processions of Our Lady of Remedios*, in: *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 11, 2012, pp. 145-173.
 13. Granados Salinas, *Fervent Faith* 2012, p. 3.
 14. Alain Bègue, *Los límites de la escritura epidíctica: la poesía jocoseria de José Pérez de Montoro*, in: *Criticón* 100, 2007, pp. 147-166, <https://doi.org/10.4000/criticon.9399>.
 15. In *El Parnaso Español* (1648), Francisco de Quevedo refers to Urania as one of the three muses of poets.
 16. All translations of the *Quintillas* are my own. In this translation, I have modernized the language, thereby losing, in most cases, the original eight-syllable count and the alternating rhyme scheme. I have retained the Spanish version for reference and note instances where these elements significantly affect the impact of the verses.
 17. José de Cañizares, *El anillo de Giges*, ed. by Joaquín Álvarez Barrientos, Madrid 1983, p. 130.
 18. Cañizares 1983, p. 130.
 19. Vivian Nutton, *The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance in Medical History*, 27, 1983, p. 4.
 20. Guy Stresser-Péan, *Viaje a la Huasteca con Guy Stresser-Péan* (ed. Guilhem Olivier), Ciudad de México 2008, <https://books.openedition.org/cemca/4002?lang=en>
 21. Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, Book 7: The Sun, Moon and Stars, fol. 1v, Getty Research Institute, 2023. <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/7/folio/1v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>
 22. Alessandra Russo, *The Untranslatable Image*, trans. by Susan Emanuel, Texas 2014, p. 6.

23. For this debate, see the succinct synopsis by Massimo Livi Bacci, *The Demise of the American Indians* in *Population and Development Review*, 37, no. 1, 2011, pp. 161-183.
 24. Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, Ciudad de México 1870, p. 515.
 25. William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, New York 1998, p. 233.
 26. Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810*, Palo Alto 1964, pp. 448-451.
 27. Ramírez's poem incorporates plenty of proverbial aphorisms into his writing. "Adiós con la colorada" appears in *refraneros* of early twentieth century, an expression used to refer to bidding farewell to embarrassment. In Ramírez's usage, however, it has a clear link to an ailment that changes the body's tone. The *Diccionario de Español de México* registers 'colorada' as a name for rubella (German measles).
 28. Woodrow Borah, *Juicios secretos de Dios: Epidemias y despoblación indígena en Hispanoamérica colonial* ed. by Noble David Cook and W. George Lovell, Quito 2000, p. 20.
 29. Antonio Rubial and Jessica Ramírez Méndez, *Ciudad anfibia. México Tenochtitlan en el siglo XVI*, Ciudad de México 2023, pp. 14-15. For a study of the hydraulic technologies developed in colonial Mexico City, see Vera S. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land. Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City*, Palo Alto 2014. For a study of the centrality of water in Mexico cosmogony and Tenochtitlán's urban landscape, see Barbara Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*, Austin 2015, pp. 25-51.
 30. Rubial García and Ramírez Méndez 2023, p. 9.
 31. Juan R. Navarro, *Documentos para la Historia de México*, vol. tomo II, Ciudad de México 1853, p. 63.
 32. Tenorio 2021, p. 422.
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Figures

Fig. 1: Frontispiece of the 1725 edition of the *Quintillas*, 1725. Print, 14 x 19 cm. Cádiz, Spain. Centro de Estudios de Historia de México. (Digitized image by Centro de Estudios de Historia de México).

Fig. 2: Miguel Cabrera, *Finding of Our Lady of Remedios*, ca. 1750. Church of Merced de las Huertas, Mexico City. Image from Fernando Franciles López.

Fig. 3: Image of the Sun in the *Florentine Codex*, Book 7: The Sun Moon and Stars, Folio 1v. Digital Florentine Codex, Getty Research Institute.

Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between poetry and epidemics. It explores how poetry in seventeenth-century Mexico not only disposed of epidemic endings; it also encouraged its diverse audience to reconceptualize time, and in so doing, reconsider their past and recent outbreak experiences. To show this, I analyze a

series of *Quintillas* (five-lined stanzas) that narrate the festive processions held for the Virgin of Los Remedios in Mexico City, 1668, celebrating her divine intercession in ending a *viruela* outbreak and bringing rainfall after a period of drought. Within the linear narrative traced by the *Quintillas*—progressing from the sorrow of pestilence and drought to joy of rainfall and deliverance from contagion—a cyclical understanding of epidemic outbreaks and natural disasters emerges. Articulating ecological and spiritual imaginaries at the intersection of Catholic faith, European theories of contagion, and Nahua mythology, this poetic composition is shaped and informed by the historical experiences of past epidemic outbreaks and natural disasters in the central valley of Mexico.

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Title

Paulina León, *The Sick Sun: Poetics of Contagion in Seventeenth-Century Mexico City*, in: *Epidemics and Cultural Rebirth in Early Modern Worlds*, ed. by Angela Dressen, Susanne Gramatzki, Nils Weber, in: *kunsttexte.de*, No. 2, 2025, pages 51-61, www.kunsttexte.de.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48633/ksttx.2025.2.110592>