

**Review / Reseña**

Sellers-García, Sylvia. *The Woman on the Windowsill: A Tale of Mystery in Several Parts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. 296 pp.

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*The Woman on the Windowsill* opens with a gruesome and shocking incident: the discovery of two severed breasts on the windowsill of Don Cayetano Díaz's house in Guatemala City on July 1, 1800. To the alarm of colonial authorities (and, likely, most of the city), similar attacks continued to take place in the following weeks and months. In this engaging book, Sylvia Sellers-García follows the criminal investigation initiated by the colonial government to prosecute these crimes. Her aim is to answer two deceptively simple questions: first, what was the attacker trying to communicate through his actions? Second, how did Guatemalans experience and make sense of these crimes? To answer these questions, Sellers-García draws on an impressive number of disciplinary fields, including the history of science, urban studies, literature on state formation and social discipline, gender studies, the history of sexuality, psychoanalysis, the history of religion, and the history of emotions. The result is a book that sheds new light not only on late-colonial Guatemala, but on how we write history.

Sellers-García's main argument is that Guatemalans did not perceive the crime in the same manner we would today—theirs, she claims, was a foreign world. At the beginning of this review, I was short in describing the book's opening incident as “gruesome” and “shocking.” The author's goal is precisely to show that

such reactions to the crime, despite their apparent normalcy, are, in fact, the product of broader social, emotional, and political contexts. Late-colonial Guatemalan authorities, she argues, also found the crimes outrageous and shocking, but not for the same reasons modern readers likely would. They were uninterested in violence against women as such and showed no concern for what we may see as the criminal's misogyny and perversity. For them, the crimes were disturbing because they constituted flagrant breaches of public order and state authority. Theirs was a trained response: a socially acceptable reaction that fitted their racial and gender prejudices, as well as broader attitudes towards justice, violence, and death in the colony. Sellers-García invites us to consider how our own reactions to this horrific case and the indignant patterns of misogyny that the book describes are also shaped by our cultural environments. "We are trained to be both morally outraged at the misogyny [detectable in these crimes] and simultaneously titillated," she writes (5).

The eight chapters of the book trace the crimes' meaning by inserting them into their wider social, political, and cultural contexts. In a veritable tour de force of Guatemalan history, Sellers-García studies the most common forms of violence in Guatemala City, medical care at home and in the hospital, the practice of Enlightened medicine, and the Bourbon discipline project. In each chapter, the author emphasizes three fundamental axes of experience: space, visual perception, and language. Sellers-García thus takes us on a journey through Guatemala City's streets and squares, its elite and poor households, its cemetery and hospitals, its ravines and morgue. In the process, she reconstructs not only the activities that people performed in these places, but the meanings they attached to them. She similarly examines the colony's multiple visual cultures, including religious imagery, scientific bodily representations, Maya iconographies, and secular paintings and portraits. The author also revisits the words Guatemalans used to describe and reflect upon crimes and their social impact, most notably "*estupro*," "public," and "scandal." To support her arguments, Sellers-García not only relies on abundant archival evidence (including lists of hospital patients and thousands of criminal records) but also draws insightful ideas from authors such as Georges Bataille and Pierre Bourdieu. The picture of turn-of-the-century Guatemala that emerges from this vast exploration is that of a complex and dynamic society undergoing multiple transformations, from the emergence of new urban experiences to the formation of a more robust state.

The book interweaves historical exploration with a profound meditation on the historian's craft. Sellers-García openly discusses the steps she followed throughout her research as well as the methods she adopted to interpret the sources. She invites readers to join her as she zooms in on the documentation, detects contradictions both within and between documents, tracks individuals across archival repositories, and constructs and analyzes vast sets of data. Drawing inspiration from Arlette Farge's *The Allure of the Archives*, the author shares not only the joys of archival research but also its frustrations (especially when facing the archives' biases and silences).<sup>1</sup> What makes this book unique is how Sellers-García implicates readers in the task of interpreting and analyzing the sources, inviting us to speculate, use our imagination, and keep our senses alert as she guides us through the case. The book also asks us to acknowledge how our positionality, experiences, and convictions affect our understanding of the past. Particularly refreshing on this matter is Sellers-García's attention to both her emotions and those of others—including readers, whose potential emotional reactions she imagines throughout the book. Historians, this book shows, should consider that all humans—not only the people we study but also our audiences and us—are emotional beings, and should explicitly incorporate this awareness into their research and writing practices. This, of course, does not mean we should give in to our preconceived ideas or biases. Based on a suggestion made by an anonymous reviewer, the author makes a valuable distinction between neutrality and objectivity: historians, she argues, can pursue objectivity while also recognizing they are not neutral in the matters they are discussing.

Some of Sellers-García's arguments (for example, that late-colonial Guatemala was an incipient police state) will spark discussion among specialists. On a more general note, the author is less convincing when inferring people's beliefs or mindsets from their participation in legal proceedings. Sellers-García uses court documents to retrieve the perceptions of elite and ordinary Guatemalans about phenomena as varied as criminality, the urban space, and public order. However, as legal scholars have shown, people involved in legal action—including victims, witnesses, clerks, and judges—operated within a set of conventions that they helped shape in turn. For this reason, the language and arguments they used in court were

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<sup>1</sup> Farge, Arlette. *The Allure of the Archives*. Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

often highly formulaic and tailored to fit not only the explicit contents of the law but the assumptions that undergirded it.<sup>2</sup> For example, litigants in nineteenth-century Concepción (Chile) used the concept of “scandal” strategically, mobilizing it to add legal weight to their claims and disputing its utilization by others when convenient.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, magistrates and potential litigants alike took the law into consideration before deciding whether to initiate legal action; in other words, they weighed the possible consequences for themselves before setting the legal system in motion. This could explain why judges (*asesores*) were less inclined than district magistrates (*alcaldes de barrio*) to prosecute domestic abuse affecting women. While Sellers-García argues that both groups held different definitions of violence (more encompassing for district magistrates, less inclusive for judges), an alternative explanation is that both were simply following their role within the colonial legal structure. While ordinances mandated district magistrates to bring any case of domestic abuse that affected public order to the attention of the courts (a rather lax directive), judges were to make sure that the ensuing trials adjusted both to the restrictive (and for us, defective) legislation concerning these crimes and to the misogynistic and racist ideas that underpinned it.

*The Woman on the Windowsill* is a prime example of how historians, combining rigor and imagination, can illuminate the past and interrogate its zones of silence. Sellers-García never forgets that the people involved in these criminal cases were complex humans whose lives are, at best, only partly captured in the archives. The book’s title is emblematic of this approach, as it serves as a constant reminder that behind the severed breasts found on a windowsill in 1800, there was a woman, a person whose life transcended the brutal act of mutilation through which she entered the historical record (I won’t say more so as to not spoil the reading). The archives are full of such fragments of life, of remains that bear the marks of unspeakable violence and dehumanization. *The Woman on the Windowsill* brilliantly demonstrates that historians, while recognizing the limitations of such sources, can still find traces of humanity and dignity within them.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Francisco Tomás y Valiente. *El derecho penal de la monarquía absoluta (siglos XVI, XVII y XVIII)*. 2nd ed. (Madrid: Tecnos, 1992); Brian P. Owensby. *Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); and António Manuel Hespanha. *A ordem do mundo e o saber dos juristas: Imaginários do antigo direito europeu*. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Rojas. Mauricio F. *Las voces de la justicia. Delito y sociedad en Concepción (1820-1875): Atentados sexuales, pendencias, bigamia, amancebamiento e injurias* (Santiago: Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos, 2008), 146–53 and 249–51.