In a Mexico City mansion on October 23, 1789, Don Joaquín Dongo and ten of his employees were brutally murdered by three killers armed with machetes. Investigators worked tirelessly to find the perpetrators, who were publicly executed two weeks later. Labeled the “crime of the century,” these events and their aftermath have intrigued writers of fiction and nonfiction for more than two centuries. Using a vast range of sources, Nicole von Germeten recreates a paper trail of Enlightenment-era greed and savagery, and highlights how the violence of the Mexican judiciary echoed the acts of the murderers. The Spanish government conducted dozens of executions in Mexico City’s central square in this era, revealing how European imperialism in the Americas influenced perceptions of violence and how it was tolerated, encouraged, or suppressed. An evocative history, Death in Old Mexico provides a compelling new perspective on late colonial Mexico City.

Nicole von Germeten is an associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University. She has written extensively on the history of crime, violence, gender, and sexuality in Latin America.
Death in Old Mexico

The 1789 Dongo Murders and How They Shaped the History of a Nation

NICOLE VON GERMETEN

Oregon State University
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Preface

A rectangular wooden table measuring four feet by six feet sits in a large high-ceilinged room. The powerful midday sun slants through skylights at least thirty feet overhead, partially illuminating the table in bright blocks of light. About a hundred pieces of paper of various sizes cover the table’s black surface, from ragged scraps to large files of rectangular folios sewn together in a packet. Dark slanted handwriting adorns these papers, some of which show water stains and odd-shaped holes. Some have been organized into piles and others sit on the surface.

This scene took place in Mexico City during the summer of 2013, at the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) reading room. Archivists and historians were in the process of putting thousands of pieces of paper in chronological order. These disorganized pages comprise some of the remnants of the viceregal judicial system, which existed when Mexico was under Spanish rule from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.¹

This book takes inspiration from this table and its jumble of documents. It samples from the millions of pieces of paper that make up the historical record of New Spain, focusing on certain texts that were written from the mid-eighteenth century through to the twenty-first century. It gathers together some of these fragments, mingling them to offer readers a kind of historical kaleidoscope. When you look through the eyepiece down the body of this kaleidoscope/book, the multiple and shifting texts that are visible all relate to the history of death in Mexico.

¹ Linda Arnold guided me to this table. She generously shares her knowledge with me and many others who visit the AGN.


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Preface

Inspired by the work of creative historians for the last several decades, I have written this book, to continue the kaleidoscope metaphor, with a mirror system which reflects and combines the various documents in ways that will look different than the traditional scholarship. My goal is not to confuse or distort history, but to show how texts merge and reflect upon each other to create complex patterns that change, repeat, and generate endless subtle variations.  

Even the largest, most complex kaleidoscope cannot contain all of the texts or reflect all of the angles on the theme of death in Mexico. Therefore I chose one compelling incident as my focus in this book – a crime that inspired a multitude of writings on the topic of violent death. The crime took place as New Spain transitioned from a European-ruled viceroyalty to a modern nation.

Court scribes, historians, and novelists have had an ongoing conversation for the last 230 years about this one horrendous event: the murder of eleven people in a large house in Mexico City, during the night of October 23, 1789. The victims included a wealthy Spanish businessman, his live-in cashier, and nine domestic servants. From the morning of October 24, when the notary viewing the bodies created his first report documenting their deaths, the massacre has held a potent yet changing symbolism. For the viceregal authorities, these killings were a call to action. They were motivated to find the murderers and wreak the state’s vengeance on them. Unofficial commentators at the time wrote their impressions in shocked tones, noting the fast reactions of their leaders to solve the crime and execute the perpetrators. They pondered the cosmic order that allowed such horrors.

After independence from Spain, Mexican writers expressed more ambiguity about the crime. To them the crime and its aftermath showed both the best (strong, effective leaders) and the worst (greed and violence) of their history as part of an empire ruled from Europe. After Mexico’s mid-nineteenth-century reforms, novelists felt inspired to depict the massacre according to the values that they wished to foster in their own era. They added sexual and political interpretations to the events that do not appear

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in the original eighteenth-century accounts. More recently, professional historians have analyzed this case in the context of the viceregal judiciary. This book does not take a conventional form. Instead I hope that it will allow readers to observe a variety of images in conversation with each other. Because the entire textual record consists of fragments written from individual perspectives, whether a few lines on a scrap of paper or a two-volume novel, no one source allows us to comprehend the entire story and its repercussions. I decided to surrender to the path where the texts led me, guiding readers through a fascinating journey that serves as an entry point to understanding this era.

The chapters that follow are organized into seven parts, each with a slightly different writing style and citational style. Drawing entirely from the documents that a scribe began to write on the morning of October 24, 1789, the story begins with a present-tense narration of the scene and setting of the crime and what led up to it. Part I describes what observers of this event experienced, without multiple layers of interpretation and scholarly apparatus. Part II gives a more conventional historical background of Mexico City in the 1780s and early 1790s, with an overview of the viceroy in power at this time, the justice system, and the Spanish empire. Part III returns to the style of Part I, recounting how the investigation unfolded in the 1789 case file. Part IV draws more broadly from historical scholarship to present the characters involved, including the murdered man and his killers. Part V describes the punishment of the perpetrators and places it within the context of the reforms of late eighteenth-century judicial culture.

While the first five parts of the book experiment with an unconventional writing style for an academic history book, the final two parts delve into unusual coincidences and mysterious sources. Part VI focuses on the geography of death in the late viceregal capital. It speculates on the resonance of this murder and its aftermath as it relates to the staged spectacles of death in Mexico City’s central plaza and the surrounding streets.

Then the kaleidoscope twists so viewers can ponder a confusing series of events that puzzled residents in the late 1780s and early 1790s. In the same handful of years when hundreds of men and women were tortured and executed in the Plaza Mayor, laborers on public works projects unearthed Aztec artifacts only a stone’s throw away from the busy gallows. The authorities reburied two of these monoliths (the Stone of Tizoc and the Statue of Coatlicue) due to their perceived association with human sacrifice. Ironies echo through the entire book as imperialism influences perceptions of violence and when it is tolerated, encouraged, or suppressed.
Another slight twist illustrates how Mexico City residents interpreted natural phenomena that occurred in the years just before and after the murders – storms, earthquakes, and celestial events – as supernatural omens. Part VII turns entirely to an analysis of the sources for information on the Dongo massacre, including two novels which add another 1,600 pages of highly personal interpretations to this story. Arguably, these texts represent early examples of True Crime in Mexico and contain many of the controversial themes that persist in this genre to the present day. Overall, this book narrates the sights, smells, and sounds of daily life in late eighteenth-century Mexico City with an effort to recreate sensory details. Most importantly, it demonstrates how one extremely violent night can shape the history of a nation.
Acknowledgments

One of the best fates that a historian could wish for is inspirational mentors who are also friends. All of the below individuals, some whom I know personally, and others whom I only admire from a distance, have paved the way for me to experiment with the unconventional structure of this book.

My dissertation mentor from the University of California at Berkeley, William B. Taylor, has inspired me since long before I met him due to his exciting books dating back to the 1970s. Their titles alone inspired me to study New Spain, and Taylor’s humanity shines through in all of his descriptions, from how defendants excused their violent crimes by claiming drunkenness to how the faithful reported seeing miraculous divine signs in everyday objects. More recently, Taylor has written a character-driven tale of two marginal figures whose lives were in some ways similar to the criminals who committed the Dongo murders. Taylor interweaves archival texts with works of literature, a style I attempt to emulate.

Lacking the scholarship produced by Martin Nesvig and Zeb Tortorici, I would not have dared to venture into the scatological, the humorous, and the visceral aspects of viceregal history. I can only aspire to Sylvia


Sellers-García’s model of beautiful and accessible writing and her bravery to present one strange case study as the jumping-off place for a broad study of the history of Guatemala City around 1800. More than thirty years ago, Alexander Parma Cook and Noble David Cook also wrote a popular and engaging case study structured with dozens of very short chapters. Through one man’s “transatlantic bigamy,” they told a detailed and humanized story of sixteenth-century imperialism. Of course, much of this superb scholarship on Latin America followed the classics of microhistory written by Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis. The memory of inspirational scholars including Paul Vanderwood, James Lockhart, and Douglas Cope also shaped this book.

This book would not exist if it weren’t for the photos taken by Oregon State University (OSU) alum Ismael Pardo, during a visit to the AGN, along with Aimee Hisey, an up-and-coming historian who studies networks of knowledge created by Jewish medical practitioners in Spanish America, whom I have been fortunate to work with for more than a decade. I am very grateful to the employees of the AGN for allowing me and my students to access the precious records of the viceroyalty of New Spain. Dean Larry Rodgers at OSU’s College of Liberal Arts helped me finish this book with his unwavering support for my scholarship. He also read sections and provided his insights as an editor. The readers for Cambridge University Press encouraged me to finish the book and gave me many useful and helpful suggestions as well as a great deal of kind words. I hope that I have incorporated their very articulate and thoughtful comments well. I am very grateful for the professionalism and help generously supplied by Cecelia Cancellaro at Cambridge University Press. Kara Ritzheimer, Marisa Chappell, and Joel Zapata patiently read and commented on chapter drafts in the summer of 2021, not long after they helped me write my last book.

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