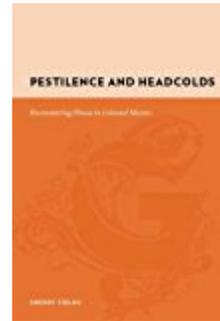




Sherry Fields. *Pestilence and Headcolds: Encountering Illness in Colonial Mexico*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 212 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14240-3.

Reviewed by Peter Vilella (University of North Carolina in Greensboro)
Published on H-LatAm (May, 2011)
Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



Of Miasmas and Tzitzimimeh: Sickness Culture in Colonial Mexico

Sherry Fields's new monograph on popular encounters with sickness and health in colonial Mexico, *Pestilence and Headcolds*, is a welcome contribution to colonial Mexican studies and medical works. With an eclectic and lively set of sources, the author examines what she calls "sickness culture"—that is, "the cultures of health and illness that were formed amid the high mortality and morbidity rates during the colonial years of Mexico's history" (p. xi). As "sickness culture" includes how people responded to minor sniffles as well as lethal maladies, Fields's project differs from—yet is complementary to—the historical epidemiology of such scholars as Noble David Cook, who have detailed the recurring plagues of the colonial world responsible, to a large degree, for the demographic collapse of the native population. These epidemics, she reminds us, occurred and were treated and understood from within a specific early modern Atlantic medical culture, one that encompassed both mortal and non-mortal illnesses.

Explicitly opting for breadth rather than specificity, Fields addresses the entire three centuries of New Spain (1521-1821), while also summarizing the medical beliefs and practices of both medieval Europe and prequest Mesoamerica for additional context. In practice, however, the vast majority of Fields's sources come from central Mexico; as a result, the book mostly details the sickness culture of the most Hispanized segments of colo-

nia society: Spaniards, Creoles, and mestizos (of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry). When specifically addressing indigenous customs and practices, the author's sources almost exclusively pertain to the Nahuas of central Mexico, before and after the arrival of Europeans.

Clearly, the intended scope of *Pestilence and Headcolds* is immense, and given that this is the author's first monograph, the reader may suspect overreach. Nonetheless, Fields is both ambitious enough to address the entirety of the topic yet careful enough to limit her conclusions to what can be internally justified within her own narrative. The book achieves this balance between the universal and the particular by supplementing the author's original research with highly readable extended syntheses of much previous scholarship, weaving together the historiography on such diverse topics as epidemiology, Galenic humoral theory, and Alfredo Lopez Austin's classic insights into the intersection of religion and biology in prequest Mesoamerica.

Indeed, though not purely one in format, it is as a synthesis that *Pestilence and Headcolds* will likely be most useful. Rather than a systematic analysis of a well-defined corpus, the book is more interpretive: a broad meditation on how people thought about, understood, and experienced health, illness, and injury (whether mortal or not) in the colonial world. As such, the book may

add relatively little to the overall empirical “database” contained in the general historiography, yet it clarifies and contextualizes issues that a more traditionally conceived initial monograph might overlook while questing for depth rather than breadth, addressing sources large in number yet narrow in scope. By reconsidering previously known yet distinct bits of information holistically, Fields paints a landscape rather than a portrait.

For example, Fields revisits some published and unpublished first-person sources—such as epistolary collections and travelers’ journals—and notes that they almost invariably contain lengthy digressions regarding their authors’ overall state of health. While historians seeking other kinds of information will tend to ignore such digressions as superfluous and irrelevant, Fields highlights them as expressions of an ever-present anxiety in colonial lives: the knowledge that even the slightest illness, the tiniest injury, and the mildest infection could quickly lead to death. From such sources, Fields contends that we cannot understand colonial encounters with illness as analogous to our own. Sickened, she argues, was not an occasional inconvenience disrupting life patterns, it was an inextricable part of the patterns themselves: a persistent shadow demanding unceasing attention in both prevention and treatment. Thus, far from mere “small talk,” these digressions are (literally) deadly serious windows into the sickness culture of the time, personal accounts of healing and illness, doctors and charlatans, boons and banes.

Pestilence and Headcolds is organized thematically rather than chronologically, the better to address the myriad ways that colonial subjects pursued health: scientifically, culturally, religiously, and even economically, as a commodity for purchase. The book opens with an overview of the illnesses present in Mexico before and after the Spanish conquest, from the most terrifying epidemics to the nagging annoyances described in early modern correspondence. It continues with a taxonomy of “health care providers,” from the midwives of Nahua Tenochtitlán, to the elite medical doctors of the imperial Protomedicato, to the unsanctioned folk healers who operated in the provinces. The next two chapters overview two distinct biological and medical belief systems: first, Nahua conceptions of the supernatural sources of illness; and second, a primer on Galenic humoral theory as practiced in medieval and early modern Europe. Finally, the fifth and last chapter addresses the intersection of religion and medicine in Catholic New Spain: how colonial subjects at all levels of society understood wellness as influenced in part by divine figures. This final discussion,

while all too brief, contains an illustrated analysis of several beautiful colonial *ex-votos*, pious art depicting and giving thanks for miraculous cures.

The first, second, and fifth chapters contain the bulk of the author’s original insights. The main criticism one may make of the book is that a universalist take on the whole three hundred years (and more) of a vast, socially diverse, and ethnically complex New Spain inevitably blurs certain distinctions and confuses certain issues. For example, when historians intentionally straddle the Spanish conquest in their periodization, the purpose is generally to identify cultural continuities and changes among native peoples. However, the chapter on Nahua medicine, derived largely from the *Florentine Codex* and other sixteenth-century documents, remains disconnected from the larger narrative. Thus, although the author cites Spanish frustrations with the “superstitious” folk practices of colonial native communities as *prima facie* evidence of continuity, the book’s overall structure reinforces the sense that 1521 represented a transformational break with the past in Mexico.

Finally, the reader will occasionally sense—in a number of extended historiographical digressions and block quotes—that this monograph retains several “dissertation-like” narrative and stylistic qualities. As it is published as an open-access electronic book (by the e-Gutenberg project at Columbia University), it illustrates some of the possibilities and challenges of academic e-publishing. Specifically, the e-book format allows for the inclusion of content that would probably be edited out or refined further to meet the space restrictions of a traditional print version. In some cases, this might be liberating for the author as well as useful (and more affordable!) to the reader, while in other cases it could demand less precision and originality in academic prose. At different moments, *Pestilence and Headcolds* illustrates both of these scenarios.

The book will be of broad interest. For its readability and breadth, it will appeal to advanced undergraduates interested in the overall theme of early modern Atlantic medicine, and its synthesis of previous scholarship will direct them to other places in the historiography. Interested nonspecialists will learn much from Fields’s ability to clearly explain and situate premodern medical concepts and their relation to religion, culture, and social practice. Finally, professional historians will appreciate how *Pestilence and Headcolds* expands the discourse on colonial medicine beyond mass epidemics and morbidity and into the realm of economics and the everyday routines of health maintenance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Peter Villella. Review of Fields, Sherry, *Pestilence and Headcolds: Encountering Illness in Colonial Mexico*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31466>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.