



Zeb Tortorici, ed.. *Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 256 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-28814-0.

Reviewed by Mackenzie Cooley

Published on H-Histsex (March, 2017)

Commissioned by Katherine Harvey (Birkbeck, University of London)

How much the world has changed since 1989, when Asunción Lavrin published her field-defining edited volume *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*. A generation later, Zeb Tortorici's edited volume *Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America* features histories once deemed unpublishable: sodomy, same-sex relations, bestiality, incest, and other “so-called unnatural acts,” as Lavrin puts it in her foreword (p. xii). This volume greatly expands the range of non-normative—although not necessarily rare—behaviors that shaped the sexual landscape of Spanish and Portuguese America. Bookended by contributions from Lavrin and Pete Sigal, this is a self-aware contribution to the historiography of sexuality.

Actors' categories and the archive organize the volume. Designed with the former in mind, the volume does not restrict itself to the progressive narrative of recounting now legitimate, but previously persecuted, sexual activities in colonial Latin America. Accounts of bestiality and incest appear alongside consensual homoerotic relations, because that is how contemporaries conceived of them. Contributions analyze histories that have proven notoriously difficult to trace in the archives, such as female-female sex. This careful attention to archival sources allows contributors to regularly contrast theoretical concerns

about sexual practice with actual prosecutions by judicial bodies.

Tortorici's introductory essay launches the volume with a brief foray into the history of science. Starting much earlier than most of the volume's essays, Tortorici takes a sixteenth-century text from New Spain as representative of colonial Latin American views on reproduction. If a fetus develops without sufficient heat, posited Alonso López de Hinojoso's 1578 *Summa y recopilación de cirugía*, “a woman comes out and she is manly” (p. 2). Tortorici's primary preoccupation, here and elsewhere, is with the category of the unnatural (*contra natura*). He goes on to explore definitions of nature, including phrases like *vaso natural*, *hijo natural*, and *alterarse la naturaleza*. Quite similar language was used in both Europe and its directly administered colonies; this raises the question how attitudes to sexual behaviors within a shared intellectual framework differed across the Atlantic. He contends that “‘nature’ (*naturaleza*), ‘nature’ (*natura*), and the ‘unnatural’ (*contra natura*) suffered a certain collapse under the weight of their own semantic internal contradictions, even as these categories continued to hold authority in the juridical and theological realms of colonial Latin America or the wider Iberian Atlantic world from the past to the present” (p. 17).

Following Tortorici's introductory chapter, the nine essays are organized into two parts: unnatural heresies and unnatural crimes. Part 1, "Unnatural Heresies," focuses on cases from inquisitorial and ecclesiastical courts in Cartagena, Mexico, and Brazil. Part 2, "Unnatural Crimes," likewise focuses on criminal records, drawing on secular court cases from Quito, Peru, and Mexico, though it also includes a personal confession from Chile. This division between heresies and crimes mirrors the jurisdictional distinction between ecclesiastical and secular, with the exception of the personal confession. However, Tortorici points out that the sources' distinction between heresies and crimes was not a perfect one: popular thought often amalgamated crimes, heresies, and sexual sins, and there was often considerable jurisdictional overlap in the prosecution of these transgressions.

Part 1, "Unnatural Heresies," begins with a rich microhistory by Nicole von Germeten. She draws out the convoluted story of a late eighteenth-century Cartagena cleric, whose sodomitical acts, abuse of the confessional, and eventual suicide embarrassed his Mercedarian superiors and brought on the wrath of the Holy Office. Beginning in the 1790s, similarly late in the colonial period, Nora Jaffary's "Sacred Defiance and Sexual Desecration" explores a case involving a poor woman of Spanish descent that more straightforwardly fits the category of heresy. María Gertrudis Arévalo's self-denunciation to her confessor led the Holy Office of New Spain to investigate her for the heresy of disbelieving that Christ resided in the Host (p. 43). Jaffary's interest, though, is in what Arévalo did with her disbelief: Arévalo used her female body as a vessel for desecration, smearing the cross with menstrual blood. She even claimed that she masturbated with the consecrated Host and holy images in an attempt to infuriate God into revealing his existence.

The third essay, Jacqueline Holler's analysis of diabolical sex among colonial Mexican women,

moves backward in time as much as two centuries. A dense piece that analyzes a wide array of sources, predominantly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Holler's "The Devil or Nature Itself?" contributes to an ongoing debate on the relationship between New Spanish and European beliefs about witchcraft, the devil, and magic. Expanding on Ruth Behar's studies from the late 1980s, Holler argues that the devil of the European witch hunts is not found in colonial Mexico, but rather the "more personal and anthropomorphized demon lover—a decidedly more 'natural' incarnation in that he took on the form of a human" (p. 59). The research behind this piece is considerable, but the distinction with Europe might be overdrawn as we do in fact find similar depictions of the devil in European witch hunts. This analysis primarily focuses on 18 dossiers concerning mixed-race and Spanish women accused of making demonic pacts, although Holler has identified 112 cases of demonic pacts in Mexico's Archivo General de la Nación.

The Inquisition emerges as a powerful prosecutorial force in this volume, but sodomy cases, especially in early modern Spain and its American colonies, did not always fall under its control. While most contributions to this volume feature materials from the Spanish colonies, Ronaldo Vainfas and Tortorici's co-authored contribution, "Female Homoeroticism, Heresy, and the Holy Office in Colonial Brazil," is exceptional for its focus on Lusophone sources. This essay closes part 1 with compelling comparative insights from both Vainfas and Tortorici's time in the Brazilian and Portuguese archives. The chapter elucidates many ways "in which sodomy was often treated as if it were heresy in Portugal and its colonies" (p. 77). It explores the definition of sodomy in the Lusophone world and how that definition helps to explain the archival absence of female sodomy cases.

Part 2, "Unnatural Crimes," begins with Martin Bowen Silva's reading of José Ignacio Eyz-

guirre's *General Confession* in an analysis that spans 1799 to 1804. "Experimenting with Nature" is an exercise in close reading of the observations Eyzaguirre made about his own sexual life and sins in late colonial Chile. While it includes details about Eyzaguirre's sexual forays, from youthful inquiry to masturbatory fantasy, this document was intended to be a list of sins rather than a description of his sexuality. Such a thorough reckoning of his actions offered Eyzaguirre the greatest chance to save his soul.

Was it a crime for two women to be found sharing a bed? Chad Thomas Black's "Prosecuting Female-Female Sex in Bourbon Quito" tells the story of Rosa Hidalgo and Andrea Ayala. In December 1782, they were surprised by the neighborhood magistrate, who barged in to find the two women in the same bed. After having been caught in a similar situation, Manuela Palis and Josefa Lara claimed that they were simply good friends who were both very fond of alcohol, despite rumors that their relationship went beyond attending parties together. Female-female sex has been notoriously difficult to trace in the archive. Two parallel case studies of women accused of "crimes against nature" in Quito in the 1780s are therefore exceptionally valuable. Black's analysis follows the records of judicial procedure from denunciation to sentencing and appeal. Black argues that "the lack of clear" masculine and feminine roles in these cases "calls into question modern scholars' reliance on a binary that demands adherence to masculine or feminine roles in same-sex relationships" (p. 126).

By contrast, masculine same-sex relations have proven easier to trace, if still challenging to interpret without anachronism. Fernanda Molina's "Sodomy, Gender, and Identity in the Viceroyalty of Peru" moves beyond the legal definitions of sodomy and argues that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century understanding of sodomy was diverse, and not reducible to "natural" or "unnatural" (p. 141). She stresses actors' categories of

self-definition, showing that sodomites "identified and self-identified" as *putos* and *bujarrones* (p. 154).

Two forms of forbidden sexual relations close the volume: incest and bestiality. Lee Penyak's essay on incest in central Mexico analyzes seventy-four criminal and ecclesiastical incest trials from 1740 to 1854. Penyak pays special attention to the difference between cases of consensual and forced relations among family members, and the tools that officials used to restore order within the family. When it was committed by close relatives, ecclesiastical and civil authorities found incest unnatural; when cousins sought to marry, however, they considered it understandable and natural if that union ensured that they were paired with social equals.

Milada Bazant's "Bestiality: The Nefarious Crime in Mexico, 1800-1856" argues that bestiality was part of rural male culture. There was no single punishment for men convicted of the "sin against nature" of bestiality (p. 188). Some of those convicted of the crime served years in prison (for instance, a mestizo servant convicted in 1800, who was caught in the act with a jenny), while others were merely fined (a mestizo mule driver who abused a mare). The legal defense emphasized the accused's "rusticity" and ignorance of Christian doctrine to contend that they did not know that they had committed a sin (p. 205). The animal was almost always killed "for having been polluted by human bodies and desires" (p. 209). The trio of core accusations—pollution, religious crime, and violation of the natural order—leveled against the practices explored in this volume come neatly together in the case of bestiality. Since the objections to bestiality were structurally similar to objections to other activities now widely regarded as perfectly legitimate, the case of bestiality points to the way in which the volume is organized according to colonial Latin American and not modern sexual categories.

Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America is a concise volume that features consistently high-quality essays. These essays are part of an active conversation in which contributors cite each other's and, especially, the editor's work heavily. Fully two-thirds of the contributors' essays cover the period from 1779 to 1804, although several of these include evidence from beyond that time frame. A broader temporal representation might have helped to showcase change over time. Likewise, the geographical balance, with four articles on New Spain and only one on Brazil, shows the inherent difficulty in attempting to cover the vast temporal and geographic expanse of colonial Latin American history. As Tortorici and Martha Few did with their 2013 volume, *Centering Animals in Colonial Latin American History*, Tortorici donated his portion of the book's royalties to the Grupo Gay de Bahia and other LGBT rights organizations in Latin America. With its collection of sharp essays based on truly exceptional archival sources, this collection will be a must-read for scholars interested in the history of sexuality in the Iberian American colonies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

Citation: Mackenzie Cooley. Review of Tortorici, Zeb, ed. *Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. March, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47988>



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