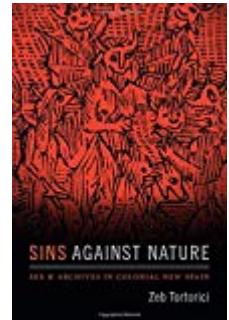




**Zeb Tortorici.** *Sins against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 344 pp. \$104.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-7132-8.



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In the fall of 2002, newly arrived in Quito, Ecuador, for my dissertation research, I was anxious and overwhelmed by the abundance of archival sources at the Archivo Nacional del Ecuador relevant to my project. An offhand remark about this anxiety to a friend led to an offer that changed my relationship to the archive entirely—he let me borrow a digital camera. Digital cameras, *de rigueur* in the archive of today, were a novelty at the time. And they were seductive. The digital camera seduced me with dreams of completeness and efficiency, and over the course of the next year, I took thousands of photos of complete manuscripts, racing to identify and copy every single case that met a set of criteria I made *ad hoc* to classify the boxes of folios I worked through.

As can happen with seduction, I later felt a measure of fear and regret. I was fearful I might have missed something by reading too fast, or by the archive's own mis-categorizations. And I felt regret upon realizing the herculean task of reading again, but more closely, the tens of thousands of pages I had collected. In the months (years) that

followed, I often re-experienced moments of surprise, joy, anguish, and disgust in processing again cases I had essentially forgotten.

The transition in the first decade of the new century to low-cost digital reproduction coincided with a series of books that returned focus to the materiality of archives and archival practices. Zeb Tortorici's *Sins against Nature* is both a product of and an extension to that renewed attention to the archive in the midst of the digital revolution. And it bears the marks of many of the same kinds of seductions and desires I experienced for “my documents” during my time in Quito.

Tortorici set out originally to write a history of illicit same-sex relationships in colonial Mexico. What he ended up with, to his reader's benefit, is something much more than that. As the title suggests, this book looks at an array of sexual acts that were categorized in colonial New Spain as *contra natura*, against nature, including sodomy, necrophilia, bestiality, masturbation, solicitation by priests, and profanations of divine congress.

Generally, scholars of colonial Latin America have treated these acts as discrete crimes or sins. In returning them all to the category of the unnatural, Tortorici helps to reconstruct an intimate and important conceptual space with implications far beyond individual acts of sexual transgression. This book is both a history of colonial power and the category of the unnatural and a meditation on archival practice and archival history.

Each chapter explores together three levels of an archival issue and an “unnatural act,” or class of unnatural acts. Tortorici uses the intimacy of the allegations to interrogate the archive and its interlocutors as much as the historical events they document, as well as interrogating the writer and reader. What is more, each chapter opens with a case or scene that elicits from the reader the shock or experience of its thematic thrust. In so doing, Tortorici makes the reader a participant in the dynamic that exists in tension between the historically documented acts, their archiving, and their rediscovery. It is effective and not the least bit shy. Indeed, the introduction itself begins with a minor violating a goat.

Chapter 1 opens with the violation of a corpse. There is also a case of fellatio involving liquor, pustules, and semen. These cases elicit in the reader a visceral response, which Tortorici uses to explore “practices of archival naming” (p. 29). In the archive, the violation of a woman’s corpse was inscribed as “profanation,” a bureaucratic term that alleviates the archivist charged with its categorization of the burden of plainly naming the horrifying content of the folio. In part because of this inscription, the historian (and reader of this book), though, are led to re-experience the original visceral revulsion in the shocking details. This is not to say that Tortorici’s treatment of this or any of the hundreds of dreadful cases is prurient or pornographic. With deftness, compassion, and significant self-reflection, this book invites its readers to experience both the intimacy and horror of its details as historical, as worthy of history.

The succeeding chapters follow this pattern of documenting the treatment of “unnatural” sexual crimes in their original moment, as well as their trajectories through archival categorization, the historian’s discovery, and the reader’s experience. Tortorici makes the reader complicit in his own struggles treating the material. It is very effective. Chapter 2 turns to voyeurism, through the eyes of a teenage witness to bathhouse sodomy but also under the researcher’s own gaze. Chapter 3 analyzes in the aggregate the gendered behaviors, gestures, and signs, and medical inspections used to indict those accused of unnatural sex. Tortorici sought to collect every extant case of unnatural sex in the national and regional archives of Mexico and in collections in the United States and includes digital photographs of a number of the manuscripts. Chapter 4 details the ironic archival preservation of animal presence in bestiality cases, where the judicial impulse was toward animal erasure. Authorities in colonial New Spain ordered the destruction of the donkeys, mares, mules, dogs, goats, cows, sheep, and birds violated by mostly young male perpetrators in an attempt to permanently wipe away community memory of the act. Yet memory of animals lives on in the archive, preserved in judicial documents ordering their erasure. Chapter 5, with particularly contemporary relevance, uses Inquisition records to demonstrate the church’s desire to cover up priestly abuse of the confessional. Tortorici terms this an archive of negligence, where institutional interests mattered more than victims and punishments. And, finally, chapter 6 explores desire through cases involving masturbation and religious objects, where the ecstatic longing for experience of the divine results in “unnatural” desire and profanation.

Students have told me that they wish this book came with a content warning but on subsequent discussion have come to recognize the sensitivity, vulnerability, and complexity with which Tortorici treats his subject matter. As a work that problematizes the journey of these stories from original inscription to archive to historian’s use and readers

consumption, this book is excellent. Tortorici's intimate narration of both the cases and his own archive experience opens consideration and conversation of fundamental ethical questions in the discipline. My only criticism of the book, though, is that its approach emphasizes the punctuated chronology of this archival journey. The reconstruction of individual, intimate moments is adept, but I was left at times wanting the cases to be more grounded in the social and cultural changes that occurred across the colonial period of New Spain. Chapters intersperse cases from different decades or centuries for thematic reasons, but out of time. The result is a temporality in three generic blocks: colonial, archival, contemporary. The seduction of digital reproduction and total collection can tempt the historian to see the set of cases as a whole, out of the specificity of their context. Returning the cases to the evolving social and cultural change over colonial time would only enhance the claims of this book.

The seduction, the titillation of archival discovery is not limited to research on sex. For many historians, it is the experience of research itself. And for that reason, *Sins against Nature* holds broad appeal, not only for colonial Latin Americanists or historians of sexuality but also for anyone teaching or practicing the craft of history.

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