

Tortorici, Zeb. *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Print. 327 pp.

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Zeb Tortorici's *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* analyzes Spanish colonization in the Americas through the prism of the unnatural to highlight how clerics and secular authorities employed natural law to regulate colonial vassals' sexual behaviors and actions. Specifically, this book examines New Spain, Spain's largest colonial possession in the Americas, founded in 1535 and lasting until 1821. Significantly, Tortorici's study includes cases from the often-neglected archipelago known as the Philippines, formally integrated into New Spain by 1565.

Conducting impeccable archival research throughout Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, and the United States, Tortorici has amassed an impressive corpus of 327 documents that detail the "sins against nature" from both criminal courts and courts of the Inquisition (8). Of these 327 documents, 127 address sodomy (87) and 144 mention bestiality (127). Tortorici provides statistics regarding deviant sexuality cases noting that 42.2% of the animals implicated in bestiality were female donkeys and that nearly 60% of the cases found occurred in the eighteenth century (136-137). Tortorici's impressive data set helps him to assess precisely how colonial authorities reified nature and attempted to control the behaviors and actions of subalterns in colonial New Spain.

Tortorici argues that nature constituted an "eminently teleological structure," which sought to ensure procreation so as to perpetuate the Spanish colonial project in the Americas (5). Focusing on the formulation "against nature" enables Tortorici to critique salient dichotomies that underline heteronormative ideologies within colonialism such as natural/unnatural, reproductive/sodomitical, and human/animal (13). Not only does Tortorici examine the permeable boundary between humans and animals through denunciations of bestiality, he also surveys one instance of *nabualismo*, a Mesoamerican concept similar to shapeshifting, which, by the late colonial era, carried negative connotations. Since Inquisition officials understood the *nabual*, i.e. the shapeshifter, as practicing some form of witchcraft, they depicted those accused of shapeshifting as being "outside of the natural order" (134). As Tortorici demonstrates, colonial society regarded those deemed of committing sodomy and bestiality as a threatening presence since sexual deviants did not follow natural law. Influenced by historical trajectories in the Old World, many elites and Creoles in New Spain associated savagery and the potential for monstrous transformation with indigenous, African, and racially mixed peoples. Thus, Tortorici argues that the concept of race actually functioned as "an index of animality" (132).

Building on the work of Ann Stoler, Tortorici illuminates how the archive operates as a repository of ethnocentric information that preserves socially constructed taxonomies that justify conquest and, therefore, attempt to create archivally stable categories—themselves resistant to such strict categorization (3-4). Tortorici highlights the problems inherent in archiving deviant sexuality as found in cases of sodomy, bestiality, and masturbation, which, due to the biases of contemporary observers, can only provide opaque windows into the acts themselves. Eyewitness testimony, itself encouraged by the Spanish judicial system, required that denouncers identify, observe, and document

these sins against nature so as to provide the most detailed account possible. Spanish colonialism thus created voyeurs of deviant sexuality but attempted to condemn and eliminate its perpetrators (89-90).

Tortorici also highlights the politics of archival access and preservation in his concluding chapter. He notes that the Federal Government forced Mexico's national archive, the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), to restrict archival access by shortening its hours of operation and placing caps on the number of documents that researchers can see each day (238). Moreover, Tortorici shows that the archivists themselves have shaped and altered the archive through the process of cataloguing by structuring language, sometimes euphemistically, to describe the documents housed in their repositories. In the AGN, Tortorici found a case of same-sex fellatio (1775) politely labeled as "having engaged in obscene touches [*tocamientos obscenos*]," but discovered the same case in the Bancroft Library described more straightforwardly as "counseling that sucking semen from men was not a sin" (37-38). Thus, Tortorici's two-pronged analysis destabilizes any notion of the archive as an impartial repository of information both in the process of archiving data and as the physical site where information is stored.

Tortorici avails himself of a unique methodology that seeks to "deprivilege heteronormative (and homonormative) ways of researching, writing, and archiving desire" (15-16). Using findings from queer theory, Tortorici queers the colonial archive to illuminate ephemeral desires and the illusory nature of imperial dominion upon subordinate vassals' bodies. By problematizing the archive as a "system of representation and as a physical place where documents are preserved," Tortorici shows that the cases and desires recorded represent projections of reality that can only provide momentary insight into the past (18). With respect to bestiality, Tortorici notes that the archive interpellates truth and fiction as some guilty parties penetrated animals but that these archival glimpses into the past have been mediated by colonial state agents such as notaries, scribes, clerics, and judges. Thus, Tortorici provides a welcomed theoretical intervention on the process of colonialism through his ruminations on sexuality, desire, and the archive.

Chapter one examines the visceral in relation to archival documentation. Tortorici notes how denunciators reacted as they set in motion the processes that would come to preserve ephemeral sexual acts that contravened natural law. Chapter two considers how voyeurism produced the records that colonial state agents used to collate, classify, and hierarchize to create and sustain juridical truths. In this chapter, Tortorici makes an important contribution to the long-standing active vs. passive debate, noting that he could not find any testimony that described male tops "as being more masculine, bottoms as more feminine or effeminate, or of either as being more or less worthy of punishment" (66). In chapter three, Tortorici considers how the legal evidence of sodomy depended on eyewitness testimony from both lay witnesses and medical experts. Typically, ordinary witnesses confirmed sodomy through sight, touch, and smell, sometimes noting the type of fluid, e.g. blood and semen, in and around the accused's genitals. Medical experts directly accessed the accused's body by poking, prodding and examining orifices such as the anus to see whether they could prove sodomy had occurred.

Chapter four's focus on animals serves to counter the anthropocentrism in many historical accounts and reveals how animals remain central "to the intimate workings of colonialism in New Spain" (128). Here, Tortorici notes that animals constitute archival documents themselves as vellum,

leather, parchment, and glue. Tortorici's analysis of bestiality highlights how humans have sought to manipulate animals' bodies due to their ephemeral desires, which can only be partly understood due to the opacity of the archive. Significantly, Tortorici asserts that most male perpetrators "chose female animals, making bestiality... a heterosexual, 'heterospecial' endeavor" (137). Tortorici suggests that male perpetrators viewed bestiality as a way to accrue sexual experience with women rather than as a direct challenge to the Spanish state. Chapter five connects the past to the present by examining Catholic priests' abuse of the confessional to solicit sexual favors. Tortorici makes a significant intervention in this chapter by devoting attention to the solicitation of males in the confessional, thus analyzing same-sex desire within asymmetrical relationships of power. Here, Tortorici interlinks memory with the archive, observing that priests accused of sexual misconduct were shuffled around "from parish to parish" until their crimes were forgotten (192). Chapter six highlights another transgression of boundaries by examining cases in which devout believers aspired to the divine to the point of erotic fulfillment. Some men and women used religious objects like crucifixes, pendants, and paintings to masturbate with or, otherwise, achieve orgasm with the goal of approaching the divine through physical and mental stimulation. While many of these cases hint at a certain interiority, Tortorici notes that they are uneasily positioned between the knowable and the illusory.

Inevitably, such an interesting and well-researched monograph generates additional questions that future researchers may wish to answer. With respect to spectacular punishments and the public shaming of those accused of deviant sexuality, *Sins Against Nature* does not address how identifying and abusing an outcast enhanced camaraderie and communal solidarity. Another issue raised after reading this book is how medical-legal forms of penetration kept those who poked, prodded, and examined the accused devoid of sin. Intriguingly, Tortorici illuminates the circular logic embedded in penetration as both a sign of dominance and an empirical way of understanding the world. For example, Tortorici states that a 1764 legal treatise recommended that surgeons insert a hen's egg into the anus of someone accused of sodomy to see whether the egg would disappear (100). If it did, then, presumably that person was guilty of committing the nefarious sin. Anyone who wishes to analyze these cases further can do so as Tortorici has graciously provided a link to his entire corpus of 327 documents relating to sexual deviancy, which can be found here: <https://archive.nyu.edu/handle/2451/40720>.

In sum, *Sins Against Nature* is a true tour de force. Tortorici has painstakingly searched numerous archives in Mexico. He has provided detailed notes and has integrated significant theoretical findings into his analysis. Tortorici has written an outstanding book that will, no doubt, shape the scholarly debates within Latin American history and sexuality studies for many years to come.