

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Volume 4, Issue 1 (Winter 1995)*

Article 6

12-1-1995

Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*

Sabine McCormack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

McCormack, Sabine. "Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 4, 1 (1995): 96. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol4/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain. By Fernando Cervantes. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. x + 182 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.50 cloth.)

This learned and supremely intelligent book assesses the impact of European beliefs in the devil in New Spain from 1519, when the Spanish arrived, to the mid-eighteenth century. Separate chapters, which follow a roughly chronological sequence, describe the workings of these beliefs as they affected Mexico's diverse population of Indians, mestizos, mulattos, *castas*, and Spaniards. The book is constructed around three interlocking arguments. First, the author posits that beliefs about the devil held by the educated elite cannot be usefully studied in isolation from those held at a popular level, and vice versa. Second, beliefs held and expressed in New Spain are examined in the context both of their European origins and of the changes they underwent in Europe during the period under discussion. Finally, and this is the most incisive and original aspect of the argument, the author shows that beliefs in the devil, which changed substantially during this period, were themselves the product of a larger tension between the realms of nature and grace, body and

soul, as understood by realist and nominalist theologians, and by their more philosophically minded successors of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

With respect to Indians and the process of their conversion to Christianity, Cervantes has made a significant addition to an increasingly sophisticated literature regarding the diverse levels of communication between Indians and missionaries and the religious practices that resulted from it. He contrasts an initial period of missionary endeavor when indigenous religion was viewed as simple paganism, a form of worship which lacked effective knowledge of the true God but carried no special stigma, to missionary efforts after the 1530s, when Indian religion was defined as idolatrous and as a demonically inspired perversion of true religion. Hence, where others have seen the process of evangelization as perennially superficial, and as leading to the clandestine practice of non-Christian rituals, Cervantes argues that Indian Christianity was real, but that fixation on the presence of the devil in human affairs prevented missionaries from observing this reality and making appropriate allowance for cultural difference within Christian practice. Indeed, this fixation made the insistence of Indians that they were not involved in any demonic pact inaudible, and moreover prevented the emergence of an alternative vocabulary.

This line of argument gains momentum and power when Cervantes turns to the religion of the non-Indian population of New Spain. Here, the devil, no longer perceived as the autonomous agent and enemy of God known to medieval monastic piety, acted as the instrument of an all-powerful but capricious deity, with the result that pious Christians could perversely view demonic possession as a mark of divine favor, a means whereby their sinful selves were refined and purified. It was with the emergence of this disturbing dilemma, during the last decade of the seventeenth century, that the Inquisition began discouraging enquiries into demonic possession and pacts with the devil as being "best left alone" (p. 136). In Europe, meanwhile, the cosmos animated by spiritual beings—be they devils or angels—that underpinned the forms of piety in which the devil could figure so prominently, was supplanted by a Newtonian, mechanistic universe. In his concluding argument, Cervantes shows that this shift did not apply in the same terms to New Spain, where instead, Clavigero's interest in historical process re-emphasized the uniqueness and difference of pre-hispanic Mexican culture and historical experience.

The Devil in the New World is a book that merits more sustained reflection and discussion than this space allows. One might question particular arguments, for example, Cervantes's analysis of Indian perceptions of the devil (p. 56) and his emphasis on the demonic in the thought of Acosta (*passim*). Nevertheless, the book has come to stay. It is a work of significant learning, equally at home in the Inquisition archives of Mexico and the intellectual and

cultural history of Europe and the Americas, in the historiography of popular cultures and of the cultures of elites. It spans a period of some three hundred years within a coherent argumentation and a method of demonstration that is both detailed and convincing. And last but far from least, the author studies the crucial, albeit often tenuous link between the New World and the Old, the Old and the New, displaying all the way a deeply humane capacity for listening to voices that spoke in each of these worlds.

Sabine McCormack
History Department
University of Michigan