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Sherry Fields, Pestilence and Headcolds: Encountering Illnesses in Colonial Mexico

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Book Reviews

Pestilence and Headcolds: Encountering Illness in Colonial Mexico. By Sherry Fields. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. xxi + 188 pp. notes, bibliography, glossary. \$60.00 cloth.)

Because disease and death have afflicted people more intensely and frequently in the past than they have since the last half of the twentieth century, attention to medicine, health, and causes of disease pervaded everyday life and were reflected in basic cultural beliefs and practices. In *Pestilence and Headcolds*, Sherry Fields describes not only the illnesses colonial Mexicans suffered, how they were treated and by whom, but also explores the cultural beliefs that both indigenous Mexicans and European colonists used to explain why they became ill. The historiography of disease in colonial Mexico focuses largely on the consequences of serious epidemic crises that plagued the colony for three centuries before the introduction of smallpox inoculation and vaccination and of public health measures reduced the severity of epidemic disease. Fields, however, argues that endemic disease caused colonial Mexicans greater concern on a daily basis and thus deserves greater attention in the historical literature.

After providing a summary of epidemic and endemic diseases and afflictions that people in colonial Mexico suffered, Fields surveys the "medical marketplace," or medical practitioners and caregivers. She found that the scarcity of trained and licensed physicians, surgeons, barber surgeons, phlebotomists, pharmacists, and midwives (the latter were not actually licensed but supervised by officials of the *Protomedicato* or medical board) allowed many unlicensed illegal healers to proliferate in the colony. For example, only four "certified doctors" practiced in Mexico City in 1545, and only an average of 3.35 bachelor degrees in medicine were granted between 1607 and 1738 (p. 53). It is no wonder, then, that Mexicans resorted to traditional *curanderos*, barbers, and divine healers, and appealed often to the healing saints and "virgins," such as the Virgen de los Dolores, the Virgen de los Remedios, and the Virgen de Guadalupe, among others.

The core of the book explores Nahuatl and European theories of disease. Nahuatl people believed that disease was caused by supernatural powers, primarily gods and spirits. Europeans explained the causes of disease through the "humoral" theory inherited from the Greeks through Hippocrates and Galen, who argued that disease resulted from an imbalance in bodily humors, or fluids, such as phlegm, blood, and black and yellow bile. At times, however, especially during severe epidemic crises, even Spaniards feared God was visiting his wrath upon the earth.

Despite the seemingly vast differences in these two belief systems, both considered the effects of hot and cold and of dryness and moisture. Both maintained that environment and life style or behavior affected what happened to the body, resulting in some similar approaches to avoidance and treatment of illness. Aztec society urged moderation in all things, especially in food, drink, and sexual activity. Furthermore, since filth, or *tlazolli*, could cause illness, attention to bodily and household cleanliness by bathing and sweeping was essential to maintaining health. When the *tlazolli* invaded or polluted a person, confession, fasting, or bloodletting rituals cleansed the afflicted. The Spanish likewise emphasized controlling diet and behavior to prevent an imbalance in the humors, and when disequilibrium occurred, they resorted to purges and bleedings. And, while Spaniards seemed to exhibit an aversion to water for bathing, they did fear dangers in their surroundings, particularly in filth and noxious airs or "miasmas," which sometimes resulted in efforts to clean up the environment. Similar approaches to health and illness facilitated the incorporation of some native beliefs and practices into the dominant Spanish colonial culture.

Although *Pestilence and Headcolds* serves as a useful overview of the everyday encounter with disease in colonial Mexico, one will not find much new information or sources of evidence. Fields bases her study on well-known published codices, such as Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of Things of New Spain*, the *Relaciones Geográficas*, the community reports compiled for Philip II, colonial medical treatises, published letters, and the existing secondary literature on Aztec, European, and colonial Mexican medicine. She did consult letters of the eighteenth-century countess of Miravalles in the Archivo Manuel Romero de Terreros in Pachuca and found ex-voto images, painted in appreciation to a healing saint, in a Oaxacan museum. These last, only eight or so images, do not appear in the expensive printed book but can be viewed online through gutenberg-e.org.

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Naturaleza e imperio: Araucanía, Patagonia, Pampas, 1598-1740. Por Margarita Gascón. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Dunken, 2007. 183 págs. Ilustraciones, mapas, notas, bibliografía, índice. Precio no disponible.)

It is always good news when books about frontier areas of colonial Latin America are published. This text by Margarita Gascón is on the list of those welcomed works. Gascón argues in her book that local natural conditions and continental defensive needs of the Spanish American empire between the end of the sixteenth century and the first four decades of the eighteenth century contributed to the articulation of a frontier from the Pacific