

The Women Who Threw Corn

This book tells the stories of women from Spain, North Africa, Senegambia, and the Canaries accused of sorcery in sixteenth-century Mexico for adapting Native magic and healing practices. These non-Native women – the mulata of Seville who cured the evil eye; the Canarian daughter of a count who ate peyote and mixed her bath water into a man's mustard supply; the wife of a Spanish conquistador who let her hair loose and chanted to a Mesoamerican god while sweeping at midnight; the wealthy Basque woman with a tattoo of a red devil; and many others – routinely adapted Native ritual into hybrid magic and cosmology. Through a radical rethinking of colonial knowledge, Martin Austin Nesvig uncovers a world previously left in the shadows of historical writing, revealing a fascinating and vibrant multiethnic community of witches, midwives, and healers.

Martin Austin Nesvig is Professor of History at the University of Miami and a fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. He is the author of five books, including *Ideology and Inquisition: The World of the Censors in Early Mexico* and *Promiscuous Power: An Unorthodox History of New Spain*.

The Women Who Threw Corn

*Witchcraft and Inquisition in
Sixteenth-Century Mexico*

MARTIN AUSTIN NESVIG

University of Miami



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009550529

DOI: 10.1017/9781009550505

© Martin Austin Nesvig 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
 of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
 place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009550505

First published 2025

Printed in the United Kingdom by CPI Group Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Nesvig, Martin Austin, 1968– author.

TITLE: The women who threw corn : witchcraft and Inquisition in sixteenth-century
 Mexico / Martin Austin Nesvig, University of Miami.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge
 University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024061368 | ISBN 9781009550529 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781009550543 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009550505 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Witchcraft – Mexico – History – 16th century. |
 Inquisition – Mexico – History – 16th century.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BF1584.M6 N47 2025 | DDC 133.4/3097209031–dc23/
 eng/20250311

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024061368>

ISBN 978-1-009-55052-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
 or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
 publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
 remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-55052-9 — The Women Who Threw Corn
Martin Austin Nesvig
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

for Asunción Lavrin

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page viii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction	I
PART I WITCHES AND THEIR ENEMIES IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD	
1 Demonological and Anti-sorcery Theories in Spain	31
2 Mesoamerican Magic-Medicine	55
3 Inquisitions, Sorcery Investigations, and the Law in Mexico, 1521–1571	75
PART II MAGIC IN THE 1520S AND 1530S	
4 Nahua Women Teach Iberian Women How to Cast Spells	95
5 A Multiethnic World of Magic	123
6 African Witches of Mexico City	137
7 Bad Girls Club: Moriscas, North Africans, and Canarians in Mexico	160
PART III THE CULTURAL HYBRID HEALER-WITCH	
8 The Evil Eye and a Mysterious Tattoo	189
9 Healing and Magic in Oaxaca and Michoacán	216
10 Mulatas Incorporate Peyote and Patle	232
11 Catalina de Peraza, Canarian Bad Girl Personified	260
Afterword	277
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	287
<i>Index</i>	303

Figures

1.1	San Hipólito convent (c. 1900)	page 11
1.2	Panoramic view of Tenochtitlan and the Valley of Mexico before 1519	12
1.1	The 1508 edition of <i>De Lamiis et phitonicis mulieribus</i> (Concerning Seductress-Witches and Fortunetelling Women) by Ulrich Molitor	33
1.2	Sixteenth-century woodcut of a witch riding a goat to a meeting with the devil	34
1.3	Woman tossed onto the bonfire before a bloodthirsty crowd	36
1.4	Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, <i>El Aquelarre</i> (1797–8)	39
2.1	The <i>tlacatecolotl</i> (owl-man)	63
2.2	The <i>tetlanochili/alcahueta</i>	71
4.1	Coatlicue statue (fifteenth century)	101
4.2	Codex Fejérváry-Mayer showing Tezcatlipoca, identified by his missing foot, and his essential connections with war and sacrifice	119
7.1	Fashion, costumes, and clothes in Italy under Spanish fashion (c. 1590–1610)	163
7.2	Kabyles woman, Algeria (1922)	169
8.1	Midwife speaks to a newborn baby	194
8.2	Xipe Totec (left) and Quetzalcoatl (right)	207
10.1	Peyote (<i>Lophophora williamsii</i>) in bloom	233
10.2	The <i>tlacualchiuhqui</i> (cook) using a metate	250

List of Figures ix

11.1	Mineral de Pozos, abandoned mining town, Guanajuato, Mexico	265
A.1	Núria Espert (right) in the lead role of Celestina, with Carmen del Valle (left) playing Melibea, in the stage adaptation of <i>La Celestina</i> , Spain (c. 2004)	279
A.2	José de Brito, <i>Mártir do Fanatismo</i> (<i>Martyr of Fanaticism</i>) (1895)	280
A.3	Carolina Otero (c. 1890), La Belle Otéro (1890s)	282

Acknowledgments

As is always the case, I could never have written this book without multiple forms of support. The experience of writing this book was unusual, for me at least. I've been working on the research and ideas contained here for a long time, but the active writing of the book primarily took place in the spring and summer of 2023.

I owe multiple intellectual debts to Asunción Lavrin, for whom I dedicate this book. I trace much of my work as a historian to her scholarship. Ages ago, long before I even thought I would become a professional historian or had met her, I read her foundational classics on the history of women and sexuality in Latin America – while I was working on an M.A. at San Diego State University on the history of homosexuality in Mexico. Her works opened my eyes to what was possible. Now, much later in life, I count her as one of my most important interlocutors. My gratitude overflows for the opportunity to have become friends with someone who was an intellectual hero. As I completed this book and as I continue with other projects, Asunción has been ever present, offering lengthy, erudite, witty, urbane observations in our long-distance friendship.

Others have been instrumental in the completion of this book. Nicole Von Germeten has been a critical source of support and writing-style advice. Her careful reading of multiple chapter drafts, ideas, proposals, and articles – many related to this book, some not – has been invaluable. Her own work has been an example to which I aspire. Edward Polanco I simply cannot thank enough. He provided a critical and careful reading of the book manuscript. Moreover, he has been my constant Nahuatl tutor and important font of knowledge of Gucci Mane and Peewee Longman. David Tavárez has supported me in innumerable ways over the years and

Acknowledgments

xi

he gave this book manuscript the kind of close reading that only someone with his particularly vast knowledge of ethnohistory and language could give – saving me from several embarrassing errors.

I also thank the two readers for the Cambridge University Press. They offered excellent observations. They helped me craft a leaner and, I hope, more interesting book. Cecelia Cancellaro has been a champion of the project from the get-go – huge thanks for believing in the book.

For multiple reasons, I also thank Rafael Castañega, Antonio Rubial García, Tatiana Seijas, Yanna Yannakakis, Zeb Tortorici, Stephen Halsey, Camilo Vera, Charles Bartlett, Cameron Harvey, Daniel Figueroa, Raphael Folsom, Angela Willis, John “Fritz” Schwaller, Robert Schwaller, Matthew O’Hara, Mark Lentz, Susan Deeds, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Adrian Masters, Miguel Alejandro Valerio, Ida Altman, José Carlos de la Puente Luna, Richard Conway, Anderson Hagler, Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, Chad Black, Stacey Schwartzkopf, Kathryn Sampeck, Amara Solari, Emily Michelson, Mary Noll-Venables, Scott Taylor, Matthew Restall.

Funding and institutional support have come from a Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship from the American Council for Learned Societies, sabbatical leave from the University of Miami’s College of Arts and Sciences, and a faculty fellowship from the University of Miami Center for the Humanities. I also thank the University of Miami’s College of Arts and Sciences Dean Leonidas Bachis and current and immediately previous Chair of the university’s History Department, Ashli White and Hermann Beck, for their support. The staff of the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City was ever gracious in providing access. Huge thanks to Linda Arnold, who provided me with digital files of Inquisition materials from the now impossible to consult files at the AGN.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to present portions of this book at invited lectures where audiences offered feedback. In particular, I thank the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (Dorothy Ford Wiley Lecture, Program in Medieval and Early Modern Studies), Virginia Tech (Edward Polanco), the University of California, Berkeley (Tom Brady), and San Francisco Theological Seminary (Christopher Ocker, the Muilenburg-Koenig Seminar) for their generosity.

Last but hardly least, my eternal gratitude to Paty for reminding me that the world doesn’t revolve around academia, to Bruno Kropotkin for reminding me to take time out for the park, and to the friends of Bill W., for everything.

Abbreviations

ACCM	Actas del Cabildo de la Ciudad de México
AGI	Archivo General de las Indias
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación
Boyd-Bowman	Peter Boyd-Bowman, <i>Índice geobiográfico de cuarenta mil pobladores españoles de América en el siglo XVI</i> , vol. II, 1520–39 (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1968)
c	capitulum; chapter of the law or treatise
CPAGNot	Catálogo de Protocolos del Archivo General de Notarías de la Ciudad de México, Fondo Siglo XVI, Online, ed. Ivonne Mijares, Seminario de Documentación e Historia Novohispana (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2014)
exp	expediente; file
f	folio; page number of an archival document
FC	(<i>Florentine Codex</i>) Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, <i>Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España</i> , 4 vols., ed. Angel María Garibay K. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1969)
Gerhard	Peter Gerhard, <i>A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain</i> , rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993)
Inq	Inquisición; Inquisition archival section
lib	liber, libro; book in a long work, treatise, or the law
Molina, VC	Alonso de Molina, <i>Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana</i> (Spanish to Nahuatl) (Mexico City: en Casa de Antonio de Spinosa, 1571)
Molina, VM	Alonso de Molina, <i>Vocabulario en lengua mexicana y castellana</i> (Nahuatl to Spanish) (Mexico City: en Casa de Antonio de Spinosa, 1571)



With the request and grant of my SUP account, I hereby confirm that I understand and will comply with the following guidelines:

- That I have read and fully understand the company's Information Security Policy
- Your SUP account is created within the Cambridge domain. Make sure that you are connected to the VPN when using it.
- Should you need to install software – please raise a Software Request via [Ivanti](#). This ensures that the ITAM and Security team has vetted the software.
- For any additional software installation (not part of the default build), you must raise a Software Request via [Ivanti](#).
- SUP account left inactive after 90 days will be automatically disabled. You would have to raise a new request to reactivate your account.
- Any misuse of your SUP account rights will result in the revocation of your account and where that misuse resulted to malfunction of the device will be build back to Gold build.

JOANNA ENCOMIENDA

Signature over printed name

18/08/2023

Date