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REVIEWS

Damned Notions of Liberty: Slavery, Culture, and Power in Colonial Mexico, 1640–1769. By Frank T. Proctor III. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 296. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Tables.

Damned Notions of Liberty marks an exciting and important contribution to the literature on slavery in the Atlantic World. Recent scholarship on Mexico has spotlighted the colony as a unique (yet possibly representative) example of various forms of agency, ranging from the ability to manipulate colonial institutions for individual gain to utilizing magic and witchcraft to gain leverage in local communities. In light of the accomplishments of recent works, Proctor challenges us to consider several correctives. One addresses the long-term ability of Mexico to serve as an incubator for African and black culture. Through re-examining the corpus of marriage records prior to 1650, Proctor reaffirms what others have already found: there was tremendous endogamy amongst slave populations that was ethnically-based. However, Proctor adds a subtle shift in how the evidence can be interpreted. Given the tremendous cultural proximity and interactivity that many African populations enjoyed, Proctor suggests that we broaden our view of endogamy to accommodate cultural relationships that did not conform to narrow ethnic designations. In other words, he notes that culturally endogamous unions could involve marriages between individuals of different but related ethnicities. Using this calculus, Mexico emerges with substantially greater degrees of African slave endogamy than hitherto imagined. By association, this high degree of endogamy could produce stronger African influences on black life.

Proctor even posits that endogamous forms of black behavior survived the 1650 fault line (where most scholars trace a substantial decline in Mexican slavery). While accurately conceding that the late seventeenth century was a time of mulatto ascendancy, wherein the rise of creole blacks expanded exponentially, Proctor's revisionism de-emphasizes some of the significance of this demographic change. Rather than inevitably muting African-based cultural expressions, Proctor sees the rise of the new mulatto class as generating other possibilities for African cultural preservation, since these mulattos were probably more tethered to slave life than has been previously taken into account. The critical link comes in construing the marriages between free or enslaved mulattos and black slaves as endogamous (rather than exogamous) unions. Although not overtly stated, Proctor's idea intimates that older, seventeenth-century forms of black marital endogamy probably adapted to eighteenth-century realities. Hence, as

the black population reconstituted itself physically over time, endogamy adjusted accordingly, shifting from ethnic to somatic expression. In the process, the cultural gap between blacks and mulattos may have been far less distinct than we have been led to believe, at least during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In no uncertain terms, Proctor's ruminations are fascinating and deserve further attention and debate from specialists.

If the potential imprint of African or black culture was greater in Mexico than once thought, what did it look like? Proctor again offers interesting perspectives. Building upon the work of Joan Bristol, Serge Gruzinski, Colin Palmer, Laura Lewis, Herman Bennett, and others, chapters two and three propose that we not consider blacks and mulattos as part of an amorphous *casta* middle group in society, but rather that through assessing familial networks and expressions of magico-religious beliefs we consider the existence of a distinct Afro-Mexican consciousness. Proctor does not assert that such a consciousness was evenly and collectively felt across the broader black and mulatto populations. Yet he does demonstrate how in particular moments and instances, we can find the influence of West African cosmologies in Afro-Mexican behavior. He also demonstrates how in the realm of magico-religious practices, there were discernable differences between how Afro-Mexicans executed their arts, as opposed to Amerindians, mestizos, and whites. Finally, given the great number of Afro-Mexicans tried before the Inquisition for transgressions of witchcraft and sorcery, Proctor notes that instead of perceiving these cases as efforts by colonial institutions to assert their authority, we should view them as evidence for the pervasiveness of these forms of ritualistic behavior among certain black population groups.

In addition to its insights into Afro-Mexican culture, *Damned Notions of Liberty* makes a number of other important interventions. On the one hand, Proctor invites us to consider an afterlife to Mexican slavery that is often overlooked. He posits that while 1640 may have represented a tremendous decline in slave imports, slavery itself survived longer as a robust institution, particularly since sugar and woolen textile production kept slavery active in Veracruz, Morelos, and Queretaro, among other regions. The real decline in slavery took place after 1769. By examining slave prices (which were pretty steady from the 1650s until the early eighteenth century) Proctor demonstrates a consistent slave demand, one that raises its own paradox: how could Mexico's needs possibly be met during an era when imports had declined so precipitously? The answer lies in natural reproduction—Mexico represents an early example of slave reproduction meeting market demands. Extraordinary fertility was recorded, especially in urban areas. Placed in a broader Atlantic context, from 1640 to 1769, Mexico looked a lot like the Chesapeake and South Carolina, and for much of the eighteenth century, Mexico's fertility indices exceeded those of its North American counterparts.

On the matter of slave agency, *Damned Notions of Liberty* is equally provocative. Over the years, scholars have become increasingly attuned to the fact that there were multiple forms of slave resistance that fell far short of advocating outright freedom. Through

simple acts of defiance, blasphemy, and other means, slaves often sought more limited goals that included avoiding punishment, better treatment, the ability to live with families, etc. By means of their belligerent actions, slaves seemingly manifested an understanding that the power of masters was not absolute. Proctor examines these more everyday forms of master-slave relations to assess their value to the notion of slave agency. In the process, he challenges the concept that the quest for personal freedom was an inevitable and natural consequence of slave agency. Indeed, Proctor maintains that the dichotomy drawn between slavery and freedom over the years has worked to obscure our ability to see accurately the realities of the colonial world. In colonial Mexico, it might be better to say that slaves sought the ability to control their own slavery—its terms, its outcomes, and its rhythms—rather than seeking outright freedom. Proctor further strives to dispel notions that slave agency (at least in Mexico) aspired to attain even partial or fractional freedoms for the enslaved. Such rhetoric, he notes, overprivileges the importance of liberty as an endgame, while also introducing a vocabulary that may not have been appropriate to the world of colonial Mexico prior to 1770.

Ultimately, Proctor maintains that slave conceptions of liberty were different from those we've come to expect in modern times. It behooves modern scholars to recognize that prior to the late eighteenth century slave agency was multivalent and fit within the vocabulary of a pre-Enlightenment era. Proctor supports his claims by closely evaluating the motivations behind a variety of key episodes of resistance in Mexico, in addition to examining a series of "liberty suits," cases in which slaves petitioned for individual freedom. One is struck by the limited degree to which liberty suits articulated a sense of slave freedom; if anything, these documents confirmed the power that masters and colonial institutions had over slave life.

Damned Notions of Liberty offers us a textured view of a complicated world. While powerful as a synthetically crafted, holistic argument, its chapters can also be read individually to provide penetrating gazes into slave realities. The book will not go without its critics. Just how far can we push the idea that personal freedom was not at the heart of slave identity and agency in New Spain? Some might even argue that Proctor's interpretation effectively re-shackles the enslaved in their master's chains. These readers will miss the point. Proctor's goal is to both substantiate and temper the boundaries of slave agency by making it more historically grounded. Proctor's thesis is one that can be tested in a broader Atlantic context, and his study of liberty suits seems to offer new angles on understanding a master's power, angles that may refresh how we assess slave-owner authority elsewhere. Additionally, his work on slavery certainly realigns how we think about free coloreds in Mexican society. Given deeper ties to slavery, how do we now synthesize Afro-Mexican experiences, and what is the effect on Mexican society as a whole? Armed with *Damned Notions of Liberty*, this generation's historians will find a basis for reevaluating long-held assumptions, and possibly for setting out to rewrite the story of the black experience.

Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD

BEN VINSON III

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