

## FREE WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT

*The Capital of Free Women: Race, Legitimacy, and Liberty in Colonial Mexico.* By Danielle Terrazas Williams. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. 296. \$65.00 cloth. doi:10.1017/tam.2022.69

With this new book, Terrazas Williams has contributed a superb work of scholarship on free women of African descent in the Americas. Drawing from meticulous research in hundreds, possibly thousands, of notarial documents and other sources, she weaves together engaging stories which bring to life the family ties, economic decisions, and social networks of the freedwomen of Xalapa. With a tone and style maintaining a delicate balance between compassion and concise elegance, this book draws the reader in through eloquent storytelling well-grounded in a deep knowledge of the historiography and the archive.

The focus of the book is on recounting what is knowable about the lives of women and their families, often across three generations. While deeply concentrating on individual experiences, Terrazas Williams also contextualizes these partial biographies within the political and economic events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Living in an important stopping point on the journey from the port of Veracruz inland to Mexico City or Puebla de los Ángeles, the residents of Xalapa experienced the effects of international trading fairs and devastating pirate attacks. Terrazas Williams vibrantly presents this global context side by side with precise details, such as what jewelry women owned and the exact measurements and locations of their homes and land.

The women under discussion made their livings by inheriting money, slaves, and property; marrying prosperous men; managing or supplying mules for overland convoys; running inns and boarding houses; owning plantations; renting out the labor of their own enslaved workers; or in various other ways left silent in the notarial archive. Terrazas Williams emphasizes how these women worked within Novohispanic legal structures and customs to present themselves as effectively as possible to notaries. Their goals included preserving their legacies by passing on their wealth and property, stressing whenever possible their legitimate marriages resulting in treasured children.

Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of social and cultural capital, as well as economic capital, offer a theoretical background for the individual life stories. Even in cases when these women could not claim most of the markers of the Spanish elite—for example, if they had been enslaved or were born out of church-sanctioned marriages or had had illegitimate children themselves—they found ways to network with men recognized as among the wealthiest and most powerful in the region. Terrazas Williams posits that a motivation for these persistent efforts by women to place themselves within the notarial record and in the orbit of local leaders might have been the prejudices they faced, which presumed their “immodesty and illegitimacy” (76). They were also wealthy enough to organize posthumous chaplaincies or donate to confraternities during their lifetimes.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this book is the author's efforts to deal with complex situations. Like other prosperous women of African descent who resided in port cities such as Cartagena de Indias, Terrazas Williams's subjects are not always heroic or morally perfect. One of the most fascinating cases examines the decisions made by a woman named Polonia de Ribas who enslaved her own brothers for decades, despite having an African mother who arrived in New Spain as a slave herself. Ethical complexity makes these women more human and offers readers, especially undergraduates, challenging food for thought and discussion. Throughout the book, Terrazas Williams does not tell a simple, comfortable story; instead, she makes her readers think.

This book demonstrates that scholarship on African-descent individuals in New Spain has reached a new level of sophistication. The book's readability makes it an excellent option for teaching and inspiring undergraduates, although scholars will also learn from it. It is heartening to read such a well-written and thoughtful work of history. Both learned and accessible, this book proves that academic historical scholarship can still spark readers' emotions and imaginations.

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## MAROON EXILES IN THE TRANSATLANTIC

*Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone.* By Ruma Chopra. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. Pp. 328. \$35.00 cloth.  
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Ruma Chopra uses the experience of Maroon exiles as a framing device for a wide-ranging account of the Maroons as a distinct people, and also as a lens for looking into the complicated relationship between slavery and freedom in the British Empire after the American Revolution. The broad, transatlantic context of Chopra's work stretches from Jamaica, through exile in Nova Scotia, and to Sierra Leone. The ambitious geographic scale of the work situates the relatively familiar story of the Maroons as a case study to examine the broader debates over the nature of the empire.

Chopra notes three major contributions of the work: an examination of the Maroons "exposes the possibilities and contradictions of anti-slavery discourse" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the context of post-revolution loyalism plays an important and understated role in the Maroon drama; and Maroons formed a creole society distinct from both the white planter class and the enslaved of plantation society (6-10). Overall, the group is presented as "dispossessed in relation to whites but empowered in relation to other blacks" (4). Chopra's provocative work persuasively