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Review of Jane E. Mangan and Sarah E. Owens, editors, *Women of the Iberian Atlantic*

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Jane E. Mangan and Sarah E. Owens, editors. *Women of the Iberian Atlantic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. 272 pp.

Focusing on empire and gender, this volume defines the Iberian Atlantic through the activities and agency of a wide variety of women. The volume achieves its aim of using “detailed and systematic studies” of real women to challenge historical stereotypes with an impressive collection of varied, well-researched essays that connect with each other on multiple levels (5). The essays explore how women’s activities in healing, ritual, literacy, and family connect to the politics and economics of empire. This approach challenges our understanding of the nature of the Iberian empires by demonstrating both how empire shaped gender and how women shaped the empire. The volume is clearly organized into a first section with an overview of the field; a section on law, marriage, and family; a section on healing; and a final section on African women in the diaspora. One of the strengths of the book, however, is how well the essays connect between as well as within these thematic groupings.

The volume begins with the big picture as Lisa Vollendorf’s essay argues that examining movement across the Atlantic enables scholars to analyze both specific, distinct experiences, and the commonalities that sprang up between diverse groups and people as women navigated belief, religion, laws, and economic systems throughout the Atlantic. Allyson Poska challenges scholars to step beyond their comfort zone and embrace comparative history by asking what the critical factors were that determined gendered experiences and if there were, in fact, any common gender norms in the Iberian Empire. These two essays define the geographical space for the rest of the volume, which attends to women’s experiences in far-flung corners of this vast and diverse empire and builds connections between the different cultures, races, and classes studied. The nuns of the convent of Jesús María in Mexico City provide a compelling image of the unexpected aspects of women’s experiences in the empire, as Nuria Salazar Simarro and Sarah E. Owens use health care to analyze the protection, economic support, and treatment that women of Spanish, indigenous, African, and mixed races received from the convent. While there was a strict hierarchy that put wealthy white women at the top, all women were treated when they were ill and the convent displayed remarkable agency in demanding the best health care available. Ras Michael Brown’s work on female spiritual healers in nineteenth-century Cuba, and Timothy Walker’s essay on the indigenous folk healers in the Portuguese colonies who drew cultural knowledge from all over the Atlantic worlds illuminate the different healing traditions that convents drew on. They also provide compelling insights into active contributions very different women made to healing across the Atlantic.

The networks formed in this vast empire could be built on kinship as well as healing skills and were shaped by the constant interaction of different cultures. Jane Mangan analyzes the way indigenous mothers in Peru interacted economically with their mestizo children by using the emerging markets of colonial cities, the financial support of their Spanish male partners, and Iberian legal codes to provide economic support for illegitimate children they were often not allowed to raise. Likewise, Carla Gerona argues that Spanish women in east Texas actively formed kinship ties (which often coincided with economic partnerships) with people from a multiplicity of ethnicities, even if they had to violate Spanish law and moral codes to do so.

Women's agency across the empire is a theme of the book which explores its benefits and costs. Ida Altman argues that Spanish women contributed to the creation of a stable Hispanic society in the Caribbean that permanently transformed the lifestyles of indigenous women. In this case, networks between one group of women were not necessarily beneficial to women of a different race or class. Some indigenous women were experts on nature and healing, and Hugh Glenn Cagle argues that their knowledge shaped the "creative compromise" of colonial science and challenged the process of professionalism in the sciences, much to the dismay of European male scientists. Women were voters in the societies that represented different African nations in colonial Cuba, where, according to Matt Childs, their numerical superiority shaped elections of leaders and financial decisions, and challenged their male colleagues.

In answer to Poska's question, it appears that there were commonalities in the gendered experience in the Iberian Atlantic, but this book does a marvelous job reminding us of the concrete differences, hierarchies, challenges, opportunities, and risks that faced women as active participants in the culture clashes of the Iberian Empire. Using gender as a lens through which to interpret empire provides a more nuanced view of the Iberian Atlantic which suggests that the domination of European male cultures was at best a long and complicated process that was not always completely effective. The framework of gender also strengthens our understanding of the particular experiences of many of the different women who participated in this complex cultural exchange.

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