

Terrazas Williams, Danielle: *The Capital of Free Women: Race, Legitimacy, and Liberty in Colonial Mexico*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 296 pp.

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In *The Capital of Free Women*, Danielle Terrazas Williams meticulously reconstructs fragments of the lives of free African-descended women of means as they navigated the racial circumscriptions of Spanish colonialism in New Spain. Terrazas Williams argues that free African-descended women consistently engaged in practices that approximated them to the standards of Iberian honor, thus circumventing some of the constraints of Novohispanic racial hierarchies. These practices entered the colonial archive via free African-descended women's use of the notary public's services. Notarized documents possessed a degree of public and legal veracity that free African-descended women utilized to assert their social legitimacy. In this sense, the materiality of a notarized document served to partly offset Iberian honor's metaphysical prescriptions and expectations of status and behavior. But more importantly, Terrazas Williams' reading of notarial sources provides a valuable point of entry into the ways in which free African-descended women constructed their standards of legitimacy.

Methodologically, *The Capital of Free Women* employs a regional approach that foregrounds the town of Xalapa from the inception of the Iberian Union until the early decades of the Bourbon reforms. Nested in the crossroads of the Camino Real, Xalapa linked Mexico City to the port of Veracruz and, in turn, to the broader Atlantic world. Terrazas Williams suggests that Xalapa's transatlantic importance, economic promise, and diverse market opportunities could have been attractive factors for free African descendants seeking to advance in the social ladder. Indeed, Terrazas Williams demonstrates that free African-descended women's economic involvement in Xalapa was constant according to the town's seventeenth-century historical record.

Throughout the book's six chapters, Terrazas Williams rigorously fleshes out notarial documents to delineate how free African-descended women married, inherited, and expanded their wealth across generations, possessed and administrated properties, purchased, sold, and freed enslaved Africans (on one occasion, family members), and established connections with powerful members of Novohispanic society within and beyond central Veracruz. Free African-descended women's entry into the colonial archive was considerably episodic, however. Terrazas Williams states that notarial documents offer partial information about free African-descended women's lives, particularly that which they deemed relevant to record to secure their social legitimacy. Moreover, there are instances in which several years could elapse before the services of the notary public were once again solicited by free African-descended women. Despite the many questions notarial documents leave unanswered, Terrazas Williams utilizes the available information to frequently propose ingenious historical speculations that allow the reader to envision circumstances and outcomes that would otherwise remain silent in the archive.

Importantly, Terrazas Williams notes that by the mid-eighteenth century, free African-descended women's presence in the colonial archive gradually became silent or alienated. Seeking answers to this archival shift, Terrazas Williams makes a significant historiographical proposition that considers the effects of the Bourbon administrative reforms in their endeavor to increase royal revenue. Xalapa's economic importance stimulated the interest of King Phillip V, who selected the town as the host of the first crown-led regional market fair (*feria*) in 1720; Xalapa continued to host *ferias* until 1778. Terrazas Williams contends that the magnitude of the *ferias* led to the displacement of Xalapa's local businesses, including those operated by free African-descended women. Thus, *The Capital of Free Women* provides stimulating insights regarding the economic effects of the reforms and how these intertwined with matters of race and gender on a local scale.

Following these lines, Terrazas Williams also suggests the possibility that, at some point, free African-descended women lacked sufficient means to procure the services of the notary public. Another proposition speculates that the notary public lost its standing among African descendants as a legitimizing institution. Nevertheless, these considerations remain inconclusive due to the very limitations of the notarial documents. As Terrazas Williams remarkably articulates, "We too will have only approximations of their lives, in the best of cases. Most women generated only fleeting glimpses into their worlds as discouraging as the illegible script of the shaky-handed apprentice charged with drafting notarial truth" (p. 13).

Historians will find in *The Capital of Free Women* a beautifully written and thoroughly researched book that contributes substantially to the archival possibilities for reconstructing and understanding Afro-Mexican's impact on Novohispanic society. Terrazas Williams has masterfully produced a significant addition to the advancing historiography of the African diaspora.