

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

By Billy Mejia

Colonial Mexico (or New Spain as it was called after the Spanish Conquest) was an important time period which featured an expansion of colonialism in the Americas and the forced arrival of tens of thousands of enslaved Africans to what would become present-day Mexico. Within this history, many of the stories of free African descended women are not widely known due to the lack of interest from scholars. Danielle Terrazas Williams (Associate Professor of History at the University of Leeds) changes the way in which the history of African descended women in colonial Mexico is told in *The Capital of Free Women: Race, Legitimacy, and Liberty in Colonial Mexico*. Williams goes into detail about the lives of these women in colonial Mexico and the importance of "socioreligious" status within the legal, economic, and social hierarchies of Spanish rule. This review will be broken down into five different sections looking at the important aspects of Williams's work as a whole as well as the broader implications that this work has towards the lives of these women in colonial Mexico.

Williams begins by addressing the story of Soledad and how her tale has been popularized in Mexican society over time. The story goes that Soledad was imprisoned due to a powerful alcalde accusing her of witchcraft because of her rejection of his advances towards her. In the prison cell, Soledad finds a piece of charcoal and begins to draw with it. Surprisingly, once the guards go to check on Soledad later in the day, all they find is a mural of Soledad sailing away with Soledad nowhere to be found. However, Williams compares the story of Soledad to the lives of real African descended women in Mexico and questions why the stories of these women have not made as much of an impact as Soledad. Williams argues

that the lives of Black women are crucial in understanding colonial Mexico, despite their lack of attention in the extant historiography. The impact which these women had on colonial Mexico cannot be understated and the influence which they had on the slave trade and society as a whole. Williams' primary geographic area of research concentrates on Veracruz, which was a major slaving port during the era of the transatlantic slave trade, the nearby municipality of Xalapa, and the colonial capital of Mexico City. The majority of the book looks into the importance which Xalapa had on travelers from Veracruz to Mexico City, usually stopping in Xalapa as a midway point between the two as well as African descended women who lived in Xalapa. Within Xalapa, African descended women carried out important economic roles as slave owners, merchants, and landowners. By focusing on these and other occupations held by African descended women, Williams demonstrates the multifaceted ways these women strove for "social legitimacy" and exercised profound knowledge of New Spain's legal and economic customs.

Although only existing in small quantities, Williams speaks about the sources and the importance that they carry on retelling the stories of the African descended women. These sources are mainly located in the archival collections held in present-day Xalapa and Veracruz. These archival sources, consisting mainly of Notary documents, focus on the different aspects of the African descended women's lives from economic connections (loans and land ownership) to everyday life (social importance and personal accounts). Even though archival sources are relatively scarce, Williams exhibits deft research skills by referencing a diverse range of historical documentation and ultimately creating vivid partial biographies of African descended women from the colonial period. One impactful example of this can be seen with the story of Catalina De Morales and her two daughters. Williams tells the story of Catalina by

mentioning the strength which Catalina had to fight for her daughter's freedom to the alcalde mayor. Catalina's licenciado, Juan de Bera Betancourt had issued a clause in his will which stated that both of Catalina's daughters were to be sent as enslaved servants in a convent of nuns in Puebla de los Ángeles after his death. However, the will also stated that if the nuns did not want to receive them, then both daughters would be granted freedom. As it turns out, the nuns did not want the daughters but this did not mean that they were free, as Catalina still needed to petition for their freedom with different documentation to secure their liberty. This story is very impactful and serves to embody some of the agency and important duties which women of African descent carried out during the colonial period.

Williams uses a mix of historical storytelling with real world examples from African descended women to create a better understanding of the argument for the reader. This can be broken down into the colonial history of Mexico and the microhistory of different stories of everyday people, which were found in the archival sources. The colonial history methodology can be seen all throughout *The Capital of Free Women: Race, Legitimacy, and Liberty in Colonial Mexico* with the mentioning of certain places and events like the slave trade and Xalapa for example. Colonial history is integral to this book as it provides the reader with essential information needed to understand where the argument for the book stems from. At the same time, it is important to use this colonial history to connect the history of the Spanish to the newfound history of the African descended women. This ties into the microhistory of these women as many of the archival sources used in this book are about everyday women living in colonial Mexico. The microhistory allows for Williams to present examples to support her argument within the context of colonial Mexico and provide more of an understanding towards a place in history which is not usually focused on.

Throughout the book, Williams provides strong and thought-provoking case studies to support and further advance her central argument. Williams' retelling of the story of Polonia de Ribas and her two brothers, Juan and Geronimo de Irala, for instance, is one of her most noteworthy case studies. In the story, it is mentioned how Polonia traded two of her slaves for two men from one of Xalapa's most important businessmen at the time. It is later stated however that the two men were Polonia's brother, but even after the trade, Polonia kept her brothers as slaves for 25 years. It is stories like these in the book which show the reader how influential these women were to society in colonial Mexico and how important social legitimacy was to these women. At the same time, having these stories in the book gives context to the time period and shows the amount of power which women had in colonial Mexico. Given that the Black population in present-day Mexico has historically been marginalized, Williams' partial biographies of African descended women in the colonial period are particularly powerful stories, especially for undergraduate students and the general public.

Overall, Williams effectively proves her points about the importance of social legitimacy for African descended women in colonial Mexico and the impact which they had on society in places like Xalapa. Although the amount of archival sources are scarce, Williams does well in using the sources to their best potential in support of her argument. The continuous transition between historical analysis and specific examples from the sources allows for Williams to create an interesting and insightful look into the lives of African descended women in colonial Mexico. The combination of different people into one group, that being of African descended people, does leave room for improvement as it can be seen within the book that different groups of people had different experiences than others.

Categorizing everyone into one group does not provide the full picture of the lives of these women and does not take into account how different titles could have changed these women's lives drastically. Williams does provide different examples of women's stories however, which still gives the reader an insight into how different these women's lives were but could be built upon if their background was specified. Williams provides a look into a part of history which is mainly glanced over at times and gives the reader an opportunity to learn more about African descended women in colonial Mexico and the way in which their lives were influenced by the importance of their social status.