



Vol. 14, Num. 3 (Spring 2017): 283-288

Reseña / Review

Nicole von Germeten. *Violent Delights, Violent Ends: Sex, Race, and Honor in Colonial Cartagena de Indias*. University of New Mexico Press, 2013.

Sexuality, Gender and Race in Colonial Cartagena

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Seventeenth-century Spain and its colonies in Latin America are often characterized by an ordered, patriarchal, and strictly religious society. A society where sexual agency and honor belong to men, whether as husbands and fathers or civil and religious leaders. Nicole von Germeten directly challenges this in her provocative and colorful study, *Violent Delights, Violent Ends: Sex, Race, and Honor in Colonial Cartagena de Indias*. Von Germeten argues the port city's women "took control of their own sex lives and used sex and rhetoric connected to sexuality to plead their cases when they had to negotiate with colonial bureaucrats" (von Germeten 3). Utilizing available archival material, specifically the surviving legal documents of civil and religious courts, von Germeten analyzes the various methods in which Cartagena men and women of all classes presented themselves to officials in the hopes of achieving a

successful judicial outcome. The result is a complex illustration of Cartagena society from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, one that provides “a new perspective on colonial sex” (von Germeten 11).

Acknowledging stories presented in court by both men and women were rhetorical tools meant to improve one’s standing before judicial officials, von Germeten nonetheless centers her work on the use of inquisition trial documents, cases that “hint at a pervasive practice of sexual magic, female sexual agency, and violence committed in the name of honor” (von Germeten 9). As she explains, and later reinforces, in her introduction and conclusion, this is not the first time a historian has examined Holy Office records or issues surrounding colonial sexuality. With clarity helpful to an outsider to Latin American history, von Germeten discusses previous studies on colonial sex and sexuality. She argues historians tend to emphasize themes of power and violence at the expense of understanding sex as a pleasurable experience as well as ignoring “the subtleties of day to day sexual interactions and how these interactions can reveal more about race, power, and gender relations” (von Germeten 233). In contrast, her work, admittedly takes an optimistic view of female sexual agency in colonial Cartagena; Von Germeten pushes the reader and her fellow historians to rethink their preconceptions of these women. She successfully demonstrates “women made choices when it came to their sexuality” and “actually experienced sexual desires, even if they were heavily influenced by economic necessity and social and gender hierarchies” (von Germeten 233). Thus, the author is able to use the surviving records of the Holy Office in Cartagena to reveal the complexities of sex and sexual relations in early modern Latin America. She also illustrates how cases pertaining to love magic and illicit sex could be used to further personal or political gain—within and beyond the physical boundaries of Cartagena and New Spain.

Fortunately for the reader, von Germeten does not inundate her audience with statistics to make her argument—how many cases of love magic, the number of women killed because of honor-induced violence—but rather emphasizes the human element of the selected cases in a smooth-flowing narrative. Arranged chronologically, her chapters cover Cartagena de Indias from 1600 to 1800, with emphasis placed on the early seventeenth century. Each of the eleven chapters revolves around a specific court case, highlighting “the political nature of female sexuality” while “focusing on a different aspect of this vibrant and dynamic facet of colonial life” (von Germeten 16). This approach, she argues, suggests “subtle changes in how Carthaginians understood

love, sex, marriage, and honor as these forces interacted with local institutions and the preoccupations of the crown and local bureaucracies” (von Germeten 17).

Although examining eleven separate cases, several themes emerge to unite von Germeten’s chapters and successfully prove her central thesis. As her first and last chapters prove, women throughout the colonial period sought to defend their sexual reputations through various means. Though this meant exposing their sex lives to judicial scrutiny, women and/or their dependents did so for both personal and political reasons (von Germeten 19–20). In the first instance, doña María de Montemayor accuses don Juan Ramírez of *estupro*—ravishment or defloration. In her presentation of the case details, von Germeten illustrates how doña María’s parents utilized rhetoric of “subjugated and abused innocence” to overcome don Juan’s “character bashing and aggressive investigation” and bring about his political ruin and disgrace in Cartagena (von Germeten 29). Despite the political motivation behind the case, doña María’s sexuality remained at the center of the discussion.

The same is true of doña Luisa Llerena, living in Cartagena nearly two hundred years after doña María, who “forged her own honorable identity despite her reputedly unconventional and spirited behavior” (von Germeten 208). Under attack for supposedly engaging in numerous illicit sexual affairs—with her husband’s permission, according to his military compatriots—doña Luisa utilized both her elite social lineage and testimony from fellow women in her social circle to defend her reputation. Though the contexts are situated in different times, both cases demonstrate the very political and public nature of colonial sexuality. Simultaneously, the author suggests colonial Carthaginians, “did not view female sexuality as simply something that could only be hidden or surrendered” but rather that “exposing her sexuality...was one very effective way for a woman to control her fate” (von Germeten 29–30).

Von Germeten also explores this theme of sex and honor through an examination of men’s acts. In seventeenth-century Cartagena, actual or perceived insults against a man’s honor could lead to violence; like the cases above, private acts become public, as men sought to assert dominance “through their control over their dependents’ sexuality” (von Germeten 54). As she demonstrates, this took various forms. In Spanish America, one case of personal dispute turned into an issue of imperial rivalries when the colonial government expelled a Portuguese man for supposedly speaking negatively about a young woman’s sexual conduct. In another, “status and competing colonial institutions” protected a man who inflicted violent

abuse on his female slave, considered a social and racial inferior (von Germeten 66). Although all the men examined in this section received minor, if any, punishment for their actions, von Germeten points out their cases likely would have never been documented “if some judicial authority had not...objected or protested violence done in the name of honor or sexual jealousy.” The author concludes “Colonial authorities...respected honor when necessary, or overlooked it when that better served their purposes” (von Germeten 69).

Another important theme found in several of von Germeten’s chapters are the practice of love magic and its implications across social, racial, and class divides. Although viewed by religious authorities as “illicit, disruptive, and even devilish,” Cartagena women nonetheless partook in such practices, as demonstrated in the case of doña Lorenzana de Acereto. Having married young to a much older man, she sought sexual satisfaction elsewhere, using love magic as a means of achieving “pleasure outside her combative marriage and unbearably stressful domestic setting” (von Germeten 53). Imprisoned by the Holy Office in part to bring down her lover, doña Lorenzana becomes the focal point of a larger case involving several women and one man of various social and racial backgrounds, a case that clearly illustrates the multicultural elements at work in Cartagena’s everyday life. Influenced by African and indigenous beliefs and practices of love and sexual magic, von Germeten argues, doña Lorenzana’s story “reveals a moment in the early seventeenth century when Carthaginians turned to European women of various races as the most skilled and effective sources for erotic spells and incantations,” (Germeten 32-33).

Through her presentation of this case, von Germeten further illustrates the diverse social circle doña Lorenzana moved in, with all participants—elite and plebian—pursuing love magic in the hopes of “improving their love life and encouraging sex that would lead them to happiness and economic gain” (von Germeten 34). Ultimately, however, doña Lorenzana, along with the two other elite women were spared harsh punishment by the Holy Office, as they “enjoyed the status and the privileges” of elite Spanish women (von Germeten 50). Even considering her public affair, the young doña also had the protection and defense of her husband, Like the other women examined in the book, doña Lorenzana worked to, “negotiate within the system.” Von Germeten argues though, that in this case, “her race and social status were perhaps the best weapons against the harsh and humiliating punishment suffered by her plebian cohort” (von Germeten 53).

Not all plebian women had the same experience with the Holy Office. Cartagena's most famous sorceress, Paula de Eguiluz, manipulated and won 'battles' against her inquisitors, clientele, competitors, and enemies—all despite her low status as a black freedwoman. Her trials, occurring throughout the 1620s and 1630s, illustrate how “seventeenth century inquisitors increasingly linked women's illicit and disruptive sexual desires to an unchristian world of demons, despite the belief in using spells and potions to aid love affairs among all social classes” (von Germeten 104). Paula herself played upon this link between sex and witchcraft in her many interactions with the Holy Office, negotiating better conditions (and better access to those women she accused of sorcery and pacts with the devil) by appealing to inquisitors' emotions and exploiting their fears with her excellent storytelling skills (von Germeten, 107). Even as she admitted to practicing love magic and having a demonic familiar named Mantelillos, Paula consistently maintained a personal sense of integrity in her confessions. Von Germeten argues that this suggests that Paula “believed in the efficacy of love magic and did not sell her skills purely for economic gain,” thus highlighting women's use of sex and sexuality to influence their fate (von Germeten 117).

For a woman like Paula de Eguiluz, love magic was her lifeblood, something she believed in beyond its economic value. For many Cartagena women, however, especially those lacking family wealth or support, love magic was a means of retaining a man's devotion and thus a chance at some degree of economic stability. Nearly all those arrested because of Paula's accusations “confessed to having sex with the devil...in the hopes of improving their economic situation” (von Germeten 125). Although these “physically painful and humiliating deals with the devil” did not translate into real-life improvement, the author argues that this association of sex with monetary gain or even permanent financial stability sheds light on women's “experiences and self and societal identity” (von Germeten, 131). In telling stories of sexual encounters with demons and satanic orgies, women certainly catered to inquisitors' fears, but they also drew upon their own painful and psychologically scarring experiences, both as a means of achieving practical goals and an attempt to free themselves from the Holy Office.

Looking at all eleven cases, it is easy to see how critics might perceive authorial bias in their selection; von Germeten herself recognizes this openly in her conclusion. It is important to understand, however, that while one could make this claim, it cannot be denied her book successfully challenges long-standing—and a still

held common view—that violence is central to colonial sexuality. The brilliance of von Germeten’s work is that she provides a nuanced examination and interpretation of archival material, bringing forth “the subtleties of day-to-day sexual interactions” in all its social and racial complexities (von Germeten, 233). *Violent Delights, Violent Ends* should thus be considered an important work for both Latin American specialists, as well as those from other disciplines looking to enhance their understanding of the intertwining of sexuality, gender, and race in colonial society.