

[Cromwell on Altman and Wheat, 'The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century'](#)

Review published on Thursday, December 5, 2019

Ida Altman, David Wheat, eds. *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 326 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9957-3.

Reviewed by Jesse Cromwell (The University of Mississippi) **Published on** H-LatAm (December, 2019) **Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54201>

Between the voyages of Christopher Columbus and the rise of sugar slavery in the latter seventeenth century, a gap has existed in the historiography of the Caribbean. Simultaneously, most historians of Latin America have perceived the Spanish Caribbean in this period as nothing more than a stopover shunting Europeans to the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru and a historical dead end to understanding the eventual maturation of the mainland colonies. In *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century*, a host of contributors seek to rectify these misperceptions. The volume's editors, Ida Altman and David Wheat, contend that "the Spanish Caribbean was a multidimensional milieu characterized by many of the features we associate with Spanish America at later stages of development" (p. xvi). More broadly, they and the book's authors ask the reader to consider that "the early Atlantic world depicted here, centered on the Caribbean and the site of varied and constantly changing interactions among people of indigenous, European and African origins ... arguably was the crucible in which the modern world was forged" (p. xx). In sum, the shared intention of this collection is to recover the dynamic and foundational essence of the sixteenth-century Spanish Caribbean from sparse documentation and teleological historiographical treatments that have obscured it.

To support its wide-reaching arguments, the book is divided into five parts: 1) "Indians in the Early Spanish Caribbean"; 2) "Europeans in the Islands"; 3) "Africans in the Spanish Caribbean"; 4) "Environment and Health"; and 5) "International Commercial Networks." In part 1, Lauren MacDonald explores late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Dominican efforts to convert indigenous people in Hispaniola through the use of instructive parallels—in particular, between powerful and discursive indigenous idols (*cemís*) and the Christian cross. She finds remarkable persistence of Indian belief structures and selective diplomatic adaptation in the way that leaders like the Taino chief Guarionex approached Christianity. Cacey Farnsworth documents moments of cultural and political misunderstanding that led to the Revolt of Agüeybaná II in 1510 in Puerto Rico. Farnsworth argues that Puerto Rico represented a difficult conquest for the Spanish and is exemplary of the "new conquest history" (p. 26) of colonial Latin America that emphasizes the role of indigenous diplomacy and identity in the outcome of events. The intersection of law, enforcement, and business forms the focus of Erin Stone's essay on the Indian slave trade from 1503 to 1542. Spanish and German slavers and Caribbean officials evaded lax regulations and derived profit from trafficking tens of thousands of indigenous people far from their origins and into diverse work.

Citation: H-Net Reviews. Cromwell on Altman and Wheat, 'The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century'. H-LatAm. 12-05-2019.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/23910/reviews/5502853/cromwell-altman-and-wheat-spanish-caribbean-and-atlantic-world-long>
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

Part 2 begins with Ida Altman's microhistory of Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa, a Cuban *hacendado* who worked behind the scenes to influence politics on the island in the 1530s. Porcallo's involvement in brutally crushing native and Spanish unrest in the fledgling colony so endeared him to elites and government officials that they worried about the security of Cuba when he left for a conquest expedition to Florida. Adding to Altman's study, Shannon Lalor profiles two elite women in 1530s Cuba. Doña Guiomar de Guzmán and Doña Isabel de Bobadilla both extracted crown concessions, consolidated wealth, and successfully utilized litigation to advance the interests of their families in the absence of their husbands. Lalor convincingly argues that the respective strength of their networks on the island (as opposed to those in Spain) accounted for disparities in their fates. Brian Hamm finishes part 2's emphasis on Europeans by investigating Portuguese immigration into the sixteenth-century Spanish Caribbean. While traditional understandings of this phenomenon have emphasized Spanish uneasiness with Portuguese immigrants as potential crypto-Jews, Hamm contends that Portuguese immigrants integrated well into the sixteenth-century Spanish Caribbean and were more likely to be accused of religious and military collaboration with English and French corsairs than with the Sephardim.

In part 3, changes in the transatlantic slave trade and diasporic social connections elucidate the role of Africans in the early Spanish Caribbean. Marc Eagle explores shifting routes of the slave trade to the Caribbean from 1530 to 1580. His quantitative analysis exposes how slave trade pathways that had been characterized by voyages of trial and error and wartime disruptions became more standardized, profitable, and numerous over the course of the period. David Wheat studies adaptations and continuities among the Biafada, an ethnic group of West Africa's Upper Guinea Coast. While enslaved Biafadas in late sixteenth-century Havana increased their ethnic diversity through selective marriage and godparentage arrangements with other groups like Angolas, they also maintained diasporic allegiances with fellow Upper Guinean groups in the city and antipathies toward Mandinga groups who had enslaved them in Africa.

Environmental and public health studies make up part 4 of the book. Joseph Clark conceptualizes the three relocations of Veracruz, Mexico, between 1519 and 1599 as a power struggle between metropolitan business interests and local livability. The city's inhabitants sought to move it inland to limit exposure to disease and foreign attack whereas transatlantic merchants and bureaucrats preferred a city more coastally located for port transactions. In his chapter on Caribbean hospitals, Pablo Gómez charts the shift from local and disorderly responses to epidemics to state-driven care. The rise of the fleet system and the transatlantic slave trade overwhelmed local capacity to deal with disease and forced the Spanish imperial government to intervene and transfer control of hospitals from city councils to religious institutions.

In the final part of the volume, Spencer Tyce and Gabriel de Avilez Rocha assess the influence of transatlantic commercial networks on the early Caribbean. Tyce analyzes the Welsers, a South German merchant firm that engaged in indigenous slave raiding, African slave trading, and mining in Santo Domingo and Venezuela between 1500 and 1540. Tyce offers the Welsers' Caribbean misadventures as an example of how the story of Spanish America was often one of failure and not strictly Spanish at all. In the volume's last chapter, Avilez Rocha traces links and causal relationships between the Azores and the Caribbean. The islands were a space where goods, including enslaved Caribbean indigenous people, from the conquests were redirected, often through illicit means. Avilez Rocha reminds the reader that early Caribbean patterns of theft, violence, and captivity rippled

outward across the Atlantic.

Overall, *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century* conveys the foundational character of the region for the immediate postcontact Americas while also allowing room for debate and more subtle articulations of the period's historical diversity. A tension exists between this idea of the Caribbean as blueprint and several of the volume's essays, such as those of Gómez and Stone, which stress how improvisational some of the first stabs at transatlantic empire were. Sometimes the roughness of imperial planning came from the competing agendas of metropolitan and local stakeholders, as Clark posits for peripatetic Veracruz. In other cases, as Altman, Lalor, and Hamm demonstrate, Caribbean entrepreneurs used patronage and gray areas to bend regulations meant to routinize systems and to diminish the power of overseas subjects. The essays of Stone, Tyce, Eagle, and Avilez Rocha all showcase how violence and captivity that at first seemed chaotic could achieve a methodical profitability even if some ventures ended in failure. These authors and several others in the volume also argue that profit dovetailed with the evolving complexity of commercial enterprises and population demographics in the Caribbean. Finally, as a counterbalance to tidy narratives depicting indigenous and African groups driven into extinction or submission, MacDonald, Farnsworth, and Wheat privilege stories of negotiation, autonomy, and cultural durability in the subaltern Caribbean.

Altman and Wheat have edited an admirable work of recovery and reinterpretation. In it, established and emerging scholars get beyond the stale emphasis on well-worn early Caribbean topics, such as indigenous demographic decline, piracy, and colonial underdevelopment, through imaginative and rigorous use of a limited primary source base. Researchers of the region will appreciate these new approaches and the detailed bibliographies supporting them at the end of each chapter. The volume's expansive geographic focus, which moves beyond the Antilles to cover locales in the Caribbean basin (Venezuela, Mexico) and the wider Atlantic (the Azores), is also a welcome feature. Some parts of the book achieve a greater internal cohesiveness than others, as is natural of any edited collection. A more substantive critique concerns periodization. Despite the volume's commendable insistence on evaluating the sixteenth-century Caribbean's dynamism on its own terms, the essays in it say very little about how, why, or whether the Spanish Caribbean transformed into a largely depopulated and economically stagnant periphery by the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, educators will benefit from assigning the book in its entirety to specialized classes or using its many valuable individual essays to fill in the cracks of Latin American, Caribbean, or Atlantic history syllabi.

Citation: Jesse Cromwell. Review of Altman, Ida; Wheat, David, eds., *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. December, 2019. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54201>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).