

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 13

Issue 4 *Volume 13, Issue 4 (Fall 2004)*

Article 6

9-1-2004

Astrid Cubano Iguina, Rituals of Violence in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico: Individual Conflict, Gender, and the Law

Ileana María Rodríguez-Silva

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Rodríguez-Silva, Ileana María. "Astrid Cubano Iguina, Rituals of Violence in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico: Individual Conflict, Gender, and the Law." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 13, 4 (2004): 426. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol13/iss4/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Rituals of Violence in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico: Individual Conflict, Gender, and the Law. By Astrid Cubano Iguina. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. x + 199 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth.)

Sifting through police and judicial records of late-nineteenth-century Puerto Rico can be an overwhelming task. While most of these records are incomplete, there are many documents available of a varied nature that are rich in details. Historian Astrid Cubano Iguina undertakes this arduous endeavor to provide a textured analysis of the significant cultural transformations island inhabitants experienced at a time of rapid expansion of agricultural capitalism and the Spanish colonial state's forceful modernizing attempts. Through a meticulous reading of sources such as police investigations, sentencing records, and judicial hearings in the island's northern district of Arecibo from 1860 to 1895, Cubano unearths the many subtle changes in the writing, practice, and popular appropriations of the legal system to highlight the ideological changes in gender, racial, and class prescriptions.

Instead of charting a linear history of the colonial legal system, Cubano provides a complex picture in which the legal framework appears as the site of continuous conflict and negotiation. The examination of everyday male rituals of violence, particularly fights—the most common offense during the period—serves as an entry point into the struggles through which laboring men and women, middle-class professionals, landowners, and colonial officials constantly redefined the legal terrain. The investigation of male violence serves too as a launching pad for unearthing the multiple forces at work internationally, regionally, and locally in the forging of modern subjectivities. In this story, the modern subject is always in the making, reconstituted through ambiguous, contradictory, and incomplete processes.

The author views "mild" interpersonal violence—violent crimes were less frequent—as a means through which community members negotiated day-to-day disputes. The gendered discourse of honor is recurrent, in most cases emerging as an effective script, intelligible to all social sectors as a means of sorting out conflict. While interpersonal violence was a permanent feature of island community life for centuries, it became a more salient trait late in the century, once the colonial state singled it out as a punishable act. The Spanish colonial state sought to modernize imperial ruling by incorporating more humanitarian—but not less hierarchical—disciplinary technologies. Forced labor systems disappeared, but a more complex web of police forces, criminal legal statutes, and reform institutions emerged to regulate the most intimate aspects of life. The reconceptualizing of the imperial body—a process evident in the state's efforts to appear reliable and consistent in the writing and dispensation of the law—also included the redefinition of individuals' bodies. Thus, male rituals of violence increasingly became an ideal site for state intervention.

The desire for a gentler type of man, capable of self-management, went beyond the colonial state's interest on discipline and order. Laboring men, and particularly women, engaged the law through direct accusations, witnesses' reports, and participation in their own defenses as a new means to regulate others and increase their chances of a better and more egalitarian life. At times, working people's use of the law pushed the legal framework in unexpected ways to subvert the hierarchical but "harmonious" order the colonial state and Creole reformers envisioned. The rationalization of the legal system, however, succeeded in preserving upper class, white, male privilege.

Cubano's command of primary sources and secondary literature is impressive. This is very evident in the last chapter, which is the most innovative. Rituals of violence were in excess of the law, serving as extralegal sites for the forging of political alliances between Creole elite and working-class men. These political alliances were key in the reformulation of the end-of-the-century colonial regime. On the other hand, the author's racialization of violence and/or her interpretations of evidence in this regard is less convincing. She argues that the freedom to inflict violence on others within a slave society defined white manhood. In mirroring upper class, white, male privilege, the free, male peasant's acts of violence—regardless of the inflictor's racial background—were a racialized mechanism to assert their superiority over others. The reading of interpersonal violence as an uncritical emulation of white privilege contradicts an understanding of male-to-male conflict as an open terrain for contestation in which multiple masculinities clash and others are forged. All the same, this study's uncovering of people's embracing, transforming, and challenging of new values provides a creative framework useful to all students of Latin America.

Ileana María Rodríguez-Silva
Department of History
University of Washington

Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico. By Camilla Townsend. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. xv + 287 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliographic essay, index. \$23.95 paper.)

Camilla Townsend's book is an entertaining interpretation of the early contact period in central New Spain. This work is innovative in two ways. First, she uses the biography of Marina, Malinche, or Malintzin—Cortés' slave, mistress, translator, and confidant—to piece together the events of the first twenty years or so of Spanish-native interaction. In so doing, Townsend gives voice to a pre-literate, but highly capable, woman who left little of a paper trail. Second, she quite explicitly acknowledges caulking the cracks between known, documented facts with plausible and reasoned speculation to