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Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico

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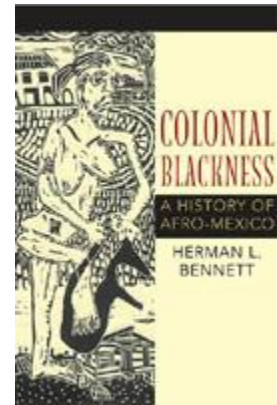
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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Herman L. Bennett. *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xvi + 227 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35338-2.



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Rethinking Black and Christian Lives in New Spain

"What happens to our understanding of black identity," Herman L. Bennett asks, "when its foundational trope, the slave, is no longer conceived of as a stable subject?" (p. xiii). It is interesting, given the current and frequent emphasis on undermining the historical and cultural obsession with the act of manumission, that this question has so rarely been posed. This is the question that Bennett attempts to answer through an analysis of ecclesiastical church documents in New Spain between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. His response describes the vibrant social and private lives of both enslaved and free persons as it seeks to eliminate the distinction between "slave" and "free."

Bennett positions his study as the response of an intellectually frustrated scholar to what have been the central academic tropes of the Afro-Latin experience: the dependence on slavery as a major social category, the constant desire of blacks to attain upward social mobility, the lack of emphasis placed on Catholicism as an important social force among blacks, the need to characterize all black cultural practices as forms of resistance, and the constant reiteration of the lives of enslaved persons as socially dead, following Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982). Bennett succeeds in opening new spaces for further investigation and fruitful research through raising new and compelling questions regarding the construction and present understanding of the Afro-Mexican experience, challenging preconceived notions of what it meant to be black in New Spain.

Through his central argument and extensive use of primary sources, Bennett undermines long-standing scholarly conceptions of black lives, or lack thereof, as tied to slave plantation economies. Bennett instead relocates this history to metropolitan centers with rich social networks, a move that allows him to demonstrate that the lives and loves of black Mexicans are not constructed around resistance, but rather are rich and multifaceted independent human experiences. As he departs from the previously mentioned academic tropes, Bennett describes a world of mulattos, Africans, slaves, and Creoles (all interwoven and fluid social categories) in New Spain whose identities as slave or free are far less important than their lives as Christian subjects. It is only through articulations of Christian identity, Bennett argues, that Africans and their descendants create independent identities in New Spain. The dynamic/active social lives located inside of those Christian identities rely not on upward social mobility but on forming and maintaining elaborate family ties and maintaining individual personal identities. But as Bennett locates these personal identities inside his conception of "colonial blackness," he cautions the reader against presupposing that blackness exists as a homogenizing social category. Instead, being black in New Spain meant bringing "a perspective, a way of seeing, if you will, to the historical experience," which allowed blacks to define their own social lives as they interacted with other social groups (p. 214).

Despite Bennett's enormous theoretical scope, his source material has a difficult time carrying his argument. Bennett's study is entirely dependent on a detailed analysis of Catholic reformation marriage, concubinage, and cohabitation records between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, primarily in Mexico City, but also in Michoacán. If Bennett's only claims were that the Catholic Church sought to regulate Africans and their descendants as part of a Christian population and that blacks in Mexico were not socially dead, his sources would be very convincing. However, since Bennett is arguing for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of collective black identity, this source appears flat and one-dimensional. In his careful study of the ecclesiastical records, stories abound of Africans and Creoles whose kinship networks extend across the colonial Spanish caste system and across the geographic space of New Spain, and that were maintained in many cases as long as the individual was alive. In the face of these stories, Bennett can quickly and confidently undermine any claim that blacks in Mexico suffered a socially dead existence. Similarly, Bennett has no trouble convincing the reader that the Catholic Church, in its disciplining and regulation of black lives, gave little consideration to social category or ethnic identity when granting marriage dispensations or punishing misbehaving Christians. In these stories, free blacks, who have frequently been seen in other histories as posing problems to the hegemonic social order, never

seem to pose problems to the Catholic inquisitors as social beings; it is only when they lose their commitment to Christian virtue that the church deems it necessary to regulate them.

Yet it is this focus on the ecclesiastical response to black lives that alerts the reader to a potential snag in Bennett's chain of argument, one that he seems unwilling to acknowledge in the text: the myopic and highly problematic nature of his sources. Ecclesiastical records may convincingly show when the church found it necessary to interfere in black lives, but they cannot demonstrate that it was solely the church through which black social lives were formed. They may show what punishments and regulations the church chose to impose on black lives, but they cannot say exactly what effect this discipline had on daily existence. Finally, and most important, they present a highly problematic construction of personal identity, one that Bennett seems to take at face value, but one that must have been filtered through black social lenses to manufacture useful identities for the inquisitors. While Bennett finds repeated invocations of blacks knowing each other since birth to be convincing proof that blacks maintained lifelong social relationships, we are given no hint of precisely how those social ties were forged, maintained, or even if they were true as presented to the panel. In other words, why did people choose to present themselves the way they did in front of the Inquisition council? Can we trust that people were always honest about how long or how well they had known one another? And, finally, how were these relationships maintained in the face of great distances and unreliable communication?

Colonial Blackness by no means lives up to its own subtitle: "A History of Afro-Mexico." It is rather a thoroughly researched, but at times argumentatively overstated, argument about the black experience in New Spain. Clearly, Bennett intends *Colonial Blackness* to be an extension of his previous study, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640* (2003). *Colonial Blackness* uses similar source material and presents a similar argument, but addresses some of the criticisms leveled at the first book, primarily through an expansion of its scope both geographically (outside of Mexico City) and temporally (beyond 1640). *Colonial Blackness* is the better developed of the two works, and anyone wishing to engage with Bennett's argument should begin with *Colonial Blackness*. The thesis of this book, to reorient our perspective in order to understand Afro-Mexicans, is fascinating and long overdue. In presenting questions that challenge the very foundation of traditional historical analysis of Afro-Mexicans, Bennett lays a strong foundation for future research that can only add to the richness and complexity of understanding that he introduces. The real strength of *Colonial Blackness* lies in

its reframing of the discussion away from slavery and recognizing the diverse social and private lives that constructed an understanding of black identity. Unfortunately, its unquestioning reliance on its source material prevents *Colonial Blackness* from fully uniting its ambitious and welcome theoretical framework with appropriate evidence.

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