

introduction to this scholar's innovative work on visual and textual representations of Latin America through the lens of natural history.

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## EARLY MODERN ATLANTIC

*The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic.*

By Pablo F. Gómez. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp. 314.  
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Pablo Gómez's book fills a significant fissure in our understanding of the processes and countervailing forces at play in the production of knowledge in the early modern Atlantic. Gómez argues "that rather than depending on references to first principles, tradition, or dogma, black Caribbean ritual practitioners' power and knowledge-creating strategies were based on experiential phenomena they manufactured anew on the basis of localized successes in different Caribbean locales" (3). Black ritual practitioners were at the forefront of creating and circulating authoritative medical knowledge. In order to prosper, practitioners deployed "sensorially evident practices that demonstrated a capacity to effectively understand, classify, and manipulate the natural world" (3).

The seventeenth-century Spanish Caribbean was interconnected by a vast web of local, intercolonial, and transatlantic commercial networks that fueled economic expansion. The black urban Atlantic ports of Havana and Cartagena were primary points of disembarkation for voluntary and coerced migrants. Consumer demand for enslaved laborers was insatiable. Captive Africans arriving in the Spanish Caribbean originated principally from the Upper Guinea Coast, West Central Africa, and the Bight of Benin. By the mid 1600s, a large segment of Cartagena's population consisted of African descendants who were born free or had gained their freedom through manumission. Consequently, black ritual practitioners living in Cartagena "did not face the same pressures to conform or adapt to European cultural norms as did their counterparts" in New Spain and Peru (31).

In the Spanish Caribbean, suffering, pain, and death were ubiquitous for settlers, regardless of their ethnic origins or social status. Beyond the walls of the region's largest port cities, hospitals were "derelict properties" that did not nurture therapeutic practices (55). "Landscapes of healing," Gómez argues, were "created anew through the multiple encounters that occurred between mostly black historical actors" (40). The communities that black healers lived and practiced in were critical spaces in shaping

epistemological boundaries because “public consumption and validation of health practices determined the types of medical treatments” that would endure (83).

At the heart of this remarkable book are the fragmented lives and experiences of 102 practitioners of African descent, recovered primarily from Cartagena’s Inquisition office, an especially rich documentary source that Gómez has exploited, much to his advantage and the reader’s delight. The largest group of practitioners consisted of those born in the New World—*criollos*. The second and third largest groups originated in the Upper Guinea Coast and West Central Africa, respectively. Although over half were women, few details were recorded—save formulaic denunciations. Practitioners exchanged information regularly about their experiences with the sick. Gómez argues that in the Caribbean’s highly competitive health marketplace a majority of the practitioners were themselves products of the new cultures arising in the region (60). Creativity and imagination were indispensable tools.

Black ritual practitioners were of varied linguistic and cultural origins. Consequently, they engaged in a “new sensorial imbrication of Atlantic threads” that set in motion the experiential revolution (96). People dwelling in the early modern Caribbean inhabited, experienced, and interpreted the world in a way much different from our modern discourses rooted in sanitized classification. Healers like Francisco Mandinga, described as “one of the most prodigious creators of the sensorium” in seventeenth-century New Granada, were engaged in an intellectual and material struggle to control, manipulate, and explain the human body (106). Others, like Antonio Congo and Domingo de La Ascención, used tobacco smoke to make invisible spirits discernible to those they healed, “transforming the immaterial into the tangible” (109). Black ritual practitioners’ triumphs in the early modern Caribbean marketplace “had less to do with anticipating” the effects of their herbal remedies “than with cleverly reading and influencing the socio experiential healing context” in which they practiced (133).

Several archival and contemporary maps of the Caribbean, as well as tables listing the treatments and medicines prepared by practitioners, are helpful in understanding their geographical mobility and the materiality of their trade. An explanatory note is helpful in understanding how Inquisition depositions were collected from non-Spanish speakers. Gómez’s boldly argued book is a welcome contribution to the history of science and medicine in the early modern Caribbean. This book will be of interest to historians investigating the intellectual and cultural histories in the Atlantic World and African Diaspora.

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