

short biographies of important actors in the story and a glossary. This is an elite story, which deepens our understanding of the period and builds on the author's previous work.

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CRIME AS A WINDOW ONTO PUBLIC HEALTH, DAILY LIFE, AND
 BOURBON HEGEMONY

Death in Old Mexico: The 1789 Dongo Murders and How They Shaped the History of a Nation. By Nicole Von Germeten. Cambridge University Press, 2023. Figures. Tables. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 240. \$90.00 cloth; \$29.99 paper; \$29.99. doi:[10.1017/tam.2024.169](https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2024.169)

Nicole Von Germeten's book is a beautiful fusion of innovative storytelling and meticulous archival research. On the night of October 23, 1789, near the Zócalo in Mexico City, three men burgled the resplendent mansion belonging to don Joaquín Dongo, a Novohispanic aristocrat and an important crown official. Armed with machetes, the robbers massacred Dongo, his brother-in-law, and nine employees of the estate. The bloodshed represented an unprecedented level of violence, which horrified the public as well as crown officials.

In short, accessible chapters, Von Germeten draws on an impressive range of sources to delineate contextual aspects of the story. She explores the setting (including at the level of the home's architecture), the viceroys involved (Bucareli y Ursúa, Mayorga, the Gálvez brothers, Flórez, and Revillagigedo), the structure of the *audiencia* and *acordada*, the witnesses' testimonies and the week-long investigation, and other aspects of the case, including the perspective of the friar who proffered spiritual care before the criminals were garroted. She also presents a fascinating discussion of the murderers' social worlds. The perpetrators, don Felipe Aldama, don Baltasar Dávila Quintero, and the younger don Joaquín Blanco, were all Spaniards who "lived as rogues, creeping around the edges of polite society" (104). Once honorable men, all three "passed their days conning and intimidating their friends and relatives, before eventually turning to theft, robbery, and murder" (106). One, Aldama, had been successful as a mine manager in Cuautla before becoming violent. There, he murdered his friend when struck with the urge to steal his bag of 2,000 pesos. Aldama confessed to this chilling crime only after having been convicted for the Dongo murders (114).

Von Germeten's story makes every effort to decenter these perplexingly cruel men. I particularly enjoyed her rigorously researched speculation on how the victims who worked in the home might have spent their last day of life. Because historians lack biographical data on the workers, their perspectives have been excluded from other accounts. One servant worked as a laundress, one as a messenger, and the other, a *galopina*. Four others "remain anonymous due to their lack of identification in the

original documents” (35). Von Germeten humanizes these people by describing their labor, their living conditions, and how poverty affected their access to food and water. She honors them by imagining how they may have traversed the city, and with whom they may have interacted, on their last days alive.

The gruesome murders created a vast archival trail. Indeed, the crime was so abundantly documented that it shaped the modern True Crime genre in its eighteenth-century incipience. We learn from Von Germeten that True Crime analysis is characterized by formulaic stories that exalt authority figures, reaffirm social structures, and entertain consumers, partly with the “spectacle of tortured and dehumanized bodies” (4). The author cleverly appropriates the genre’s appeal, for example, by weaving clues throughout the narrative to intrigue her audience and keep the pages turning. And yet, Von Germeten resists the temptation to stick too closely to her sources. She critiques the True Crime genre, challenging triumphalist accounts that present “conventional ways to think about and discuss evil . . . while making a confident but dubious claim to accuracy, truth, and fact” (3). Her careful and eloquent introduction reminds historians to be self-critical about our own claims to truth and methods of discovery (3).

As a historian interested in gender and violence, I appreciated Von Germeten’s even-keeled approach to the topic of corporeal violence. She notes that murders and executions were both “almost routine” by the late 1780s (181). The Dongo murders themselves seemed to prompt a backlash from authorities, in that the 1790s saw a precipitous upswing in executions for property crimes as well as violent ones. For Von Germeten, this was a “cruel vengeance” by the courts (181). Other historians of the era will doubtless appreciate her findings, as they contribute to the broader scholarship on public health, daily life, and Bourbon hegemony. *Death in Old Mexico* is an outstanding contribution to Mexican history, as well as a creative and readable text. It is remarkable that Von Germeten has written a book readable for, and appealing to, True Crime aficionados and the broader public as well as students and scholars of history.

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AFRICAN DIASPORA AND BLACK ART HISTORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic. By Matthew Francis Rarey. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii, 288. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$99.95 cloth; \$26.95 paper.
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In July 1704, Jacques Viegas, an enslaved West African man, disclosed to Lisbon’s Holy Office a small pouch that he had been wearing on his body to protect himself against