

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.

*University of California*  
*Los Angeles, California, United States*  
[cobrien@history.ucla.edu](mailto:cobrien@history.ucla.edu)

ELIZABETH O'BRIEN

#### 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

violence. The amulet became the topic of intense interrogations. For 4 months, the inquisitors questioned Viegas about the object's origin, production, and uses. Their heightened interest exemplified the early-eighteenth-century trend of people across the Portuguese empire engaging with the diverse range of practices and objects they associated with *mandinga*, a label not only used for the amulets themselves—*bolsa de mandinga*—but also to indicate the esoteric expertise (*feiticaria*) deployed to manipulate and control unseen forces. In this remarkable book, Matthew Rarey explores through the distinct discourses about *mandinga* that developed in Portugal's vast imperial territory between the late 1600s and 1835 specific ways in which enslaved and other marginalized people grappled with the bodily violations that they faced in their everyday lives.

Existing scholarship on *mandinga* has long demonstrated the importance of these amulets in African-originating cultures across regions such as the upper Guinea Coast, the Bight of Benin, Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. However, few actual pouches have survived—Viegas's being a rare exception. One of the reasons for their disappearance that Rarey proposes is the little value that these objects held for those who rejected beliefs about their powers. To them, the amulets and their contents were “insignificant,” as Rarey explains, citing the words of a Brazilian scribe who inspired the book's title. This tension between these objects' significance and insignificance is at the core of this book. Why, Rarey asks, did different people in distinct historical contexts—both people relying on *mandinga* and inquisitors or other authorities who persecuted them—look to “these ‘insignificant’ materials as manifestations of apotropaic powers and revolutionary potential” (14)?

To answer this question, Rarey analyzes various aspects of the pouches and their uses both thematically and chronologically. Chapter 1 explores how the ethnonym “Mandinka,” originally used to indicate a specific West African ethnic group, came to be commonly accepted as a label for the pouches and their powers, and what role European classifications of Africans played in this process. Chapter 2 investigates the pouches' contents and considers how and why the images and objects collected in them challenged the value systems and political and religious powers that asserted control over their users' lives. Chapter 3 concentrates on the written texts and drawings inside the amulets to argue that the promise of protecting the bearer against physical violence resulted from an understanding of the intimate connection between archival production and corporeal violence. Finally, Chapter 4 examines the importance of leather pouches and their talismanic texts to the 1835 attempt to overthrow Bahia's slave society, known as the “Revolt of the Malês,” and the fears that this prompted about these elements' use in spreading subversive knowledge.

Together, the four chapters present a rich and multi-layered story about *mandinga* discourses, which provides insight into the spiritual, economic, and political significance of the unassuming objects that came to play such an important role in popular responses to the interpersonal violence, cultural displacement, and institutional power produced by

the slave trade and the Portuguese colonial state. Rarey engages deeply with the literature and uses a wide range of sources as he develops detailed arguments about the amulets, their uses in countering the colonial gaze, and their function as portable archives. This inspiring book demonstrates how the smallest objects can still open a window to past worlds that have been ignored for so long. As such, the book is of interest not merely to specialists and students of the African diaspora and Black art history but to everyone interested in early modern material cultures.

*Radboud University*  
*Nijmegen, the Netherlands*  
[nino.vallen@ru.nl](mailto:nino.vallen@ru.nl)

NINO VALLEN 

### CATHOLICS IN COLD WAR MEXICAN POLITICS AND CULTURE

*Love and Despair: How Catholic Activism Shaped Politics and the Counterculture in Modern Mexico.* By Jaime M. Pensado. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. Pp. 358. \$85.00 cloth; \$34.95 paper.  
 doi:[10.1017/tam.2024.170](https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2024.170)

In a thoughtful exploration of Catholic participants in Cold-War-era Mexican politics and counterculture, Jaime Pensado lays bare many historiographic misconceptions. Rejecting notions of a religious worldview marked by its homogeneity, institutional rigidity, and reactionary politics, Pensado instead persuasively demonstrates the dynamic roles of Catholic thinkers. Using comprehensive evidence, he offers a vision of a sophisticated countercultural moment. The inclusion of religious activists reveals a non-militant, non-socialist, and increasingly tolerant ideology open to changing gender roles and spiritualities. He provides few absolutes but presents a largely sympathetic view of the center-right religious world, highlighting how actors swung from devotions of love to lows of despair.

Impressive sources develop and support this new vision. Pensado's archival work alone merits praise, using repositories from across Latin America, the United States, and Europe. Beyond this, 30 interviews flesh out clerical experiences and give voices to significant actors. An analysis of over 80 films reveals cultural struggles over ideas, images, and morality that played out on Mexico's silver screen in a golden age. Pensado also draws from Federal Security Directorate (DFS) surveillance files on Catholic activists and offers insight into governmental paranoia. Most voluminous, the combative Catholic journalism allows Pensado to trace how ideas and practices changed over time and in context.

Written in an engaging style, this book follows a rough chronological order as it addresses themes between the 1950s and the early 1970s. This key era includes postwar changes,