

Douglas Catterall, Jodi Campbell, eds.. *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800*. Leiden: Brill, 2012. xviii + 443 pages \$177.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-23317-1.



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Published on H-World (June, 2014)

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Women in Port, the twenty-fifth volume in Brill's Atlantic World series, edited by Benjamin Schmidt and Wim Klooster, explores the lives of women and their diverse social and economic roles in early modern Atlantic ports. This compilation of essays represents a welcome addition to the series and to the historiography of the Atlantic world, offering a fresh perspective on women's experiences and activities in a selection of Atlantic port cities located in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Rather than focusing solely on groups of women in specific regions, or women of a particular social status, religion, or ethnicity, the essays in this volume address the lives of women across multiple eras and locales and between socioeconomic and ethnic/racial groups. Notarial records, business accounts, trade directories, tax records, and court cases, among other sources, are mined in innovative ways to reveal the crucial role that local women with various backgrounds played in Atlantic maritime communities from approximately 1500 to 1800.

Acknowledging that the field of Atlantic history, while firmly established, is enmeshed in ongoing methodological debates regarding its relevance, agenda, and precise chronology, the editors, Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell, claim the volume nonetheless “demonstrates that a destabilizing hybridization constituted one of its guiding principles” (p. 3). They point to several “hybridizing forces” that impacted Europe, Africa, and the Americas, specifically “the rise of mixed-lineage groups,” “the inherently unstable reality of state-building and economies rooted in enslavement,” and “gender”—“perhaps the most Atlantic-wide of them all,” arguing that the volume's eleven essays draw attention to the remarkable flexibility of gendered norms in port communities (p. 3). Such elasticity in prescriptive gender codes, they point out, emerged as a result of the frequent intersection of “local and extra-local worlds” and “rapidly circulating people, goods, and ideas” that Atlantic maritime exchange engendered in port cities (p. 5). Indeed, women in maritime zones often circumvented institutional roadblocks de-

signed to curb the full participation of women in the economies of their home communities or in broader imperial mercantile networks.

The volume is divided into three sections, “Metropolitan Frameworks,” “Traders and Travelers,” and “Interactions and Intermediaries,” each containing a brief editorial introduction followed by several essays. Section 1 explores non-elite women in European or colonial metropolises, including Triana, Aberdeen, Philadelphia, and multiple ports in the Leeward Islands. More affluent women who traversed the Atlantic or took advantage of trading networks, such as Spanish and Portuguese immigrants to France, women of Dutch descent in New Netherland, and mixed-lineage women in port cities of the Portuguese empire, are discussed in section 2. The final section focuses on lower-status women who served as intermediaries in hybrid imperial spaces ranging from Britain’s Cape Coast Castle in West Africa to the ports of French Saint-Domingue.

These are rich, well-researched essays that delve into a variety of different issues related to women in early modern Atlantic maritime worlds. Contributors use microhistorical case studies of particular women or groups of women to highlight the intersections of gender, social class, and ethnicity/race in shaping women’s fortunes in—and between—ports throughout the Atlantic basin. Although a myriad of factors influenced women’s experiences in early modern Atlantic ports, the essays persuasively demonstrate, as the editors argue, that “[women’s] activities gave them an important, if not always dominant, role in the more fungible segments of port populations, the articulation points for stability in perennially chaotic communities” (p. 9). Less persuasive is the editors’ claim that the contributors have traced “metropolitan translations moving from Europe *and* Africa to the Americas as well as between Africa and Europe where gender is concerned” (p. 34). While essays by Ty M. Reese and Philip J. Havik consider how European traders de-

pendent upon partnerships with local African chiefs and elders adapted to West African gender norms that empowered local women (sometimes at the expense of European women), the majority of the essays are concerned with the movement of women, commercial products, and capital between Europe and the Americas. Yet, on the whole, the essays demonstrate the extent to which women of all walks of life availed themselves of the opportunities resulting from the constant flux in Atlantic port communities.

Highlights from a sample of the essays illustrate how the contributors effectively fulfill the majority of the collection’s central objectives in a variety of New and Old World contexts. Alexandra Parma Cook’s examination of sixteenth-century notarial records, especially wills, from the Triana district of Seville shows how women took advantage of their unique position in a port city (and the frequent absence of male kin) to engage in a number of commercial activities and demand legal rights for themselves. Gordon DesBrisay demonstrates that the ebb and flow of the seventeenth-century Atlantic trade in woolens impacted the economic lives and fortunes of many women in Aberdeenshire, a northern, seemingly isolated European region traditionally associated with poverty and marginalization. In her analysis of trade directories from Philadelphia between 1785 and 1805, Sherllyne Haggerty reveals how, despite their restricted access to capital and credit, female laborers participated in multiple economic sectors, including trading, accommodation, textiles and clothing, and taverns and lodging. Similarly, Natalize Zacek’s examination of white working women in the eighteenth-century Leeward Islands shows how, “whether they established themselves as shop-keepers, as hoteliers, or as proprietors of taverns and punch-houses,” non-elite white women exploited the opportunities available in Atlantic port towns and “simultaneously distinguished themselves from prostitutes,

indigents, and other elements of the lowest rank of white womanhood in these islands” (p. 129).

Kim Todt and Martha Dickinson Shattuck’s analysis of seventeenth-century court and notarial records reveals that the Dutch legal system, which allowed women to participate in commercial activities, was transplanted in New Netherland, giving them equal access to court and notarial proceedings. Júnia Ferreira Furtado argues that the constant movement characterizing the port cities of the Portuguese empire allowed women, including those of mixed lineage, to acquire independence and achieve social mobility. Using business and notarial records, Dominique Rogers and Stewart King challenge the long-held association between free women of color in Saint-Domingue and widespread prostitution. Instead, they demonstrate the numerous dynamic roles these women played in Saint-Domingue’s ports, especially in Cap Français, the colony’s economic center, trading, working as housekeepers, investing in real estate, and renting out their slaves and urban property for profit.

This is a valuable compilation of essays that explores new directions in world history, complicating much of what we think we know about women’s lives and economic activities during the early modern era. It is a dense volume and one that, I imagine, would be difficult to assign to undergraduate students in world or Atlantic history courses unless they are already well versed in early modern European and colonial history and accustomed to challenging texts. The wide variety of essays and lack of a clear chronology or attention to major Atlantic-wide events, such as wars, revolutions, political instability, and intellectual and religious movements, makes for absorbing reading for scholars, particularly world historians, but may complicate matters for a less-informed audience. That said, the contributors have successfully challenged assumptions about male economic dominance and female subordination in numerous early modern urban or maritime

sites and will no doubt inspire multiple avenues for further research. The volume will attract readers interested in world history, Atlantic history, urban history, colonial and imperial studies, and women and gender studies more broadly.

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Citation: Brooke N. Newman. Review of Catterall, Douglas; Campbell, Jodi, eds. *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

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