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In *Life and Society in the Early Spanish Caribbean: The Greater Antilles, 1493-1550*, Ida Altman, professor emerita of history at the University of Florida, calls for a deeper understanding of the societies found in the Greater Antilles, which were "forged in violence and structured by coercive relationships" (p. 2). Altman successfully argues that the interactions among the islands' multiethnic inhabitants created distinctive societies and "unprecedented forms of interethnic relations" (p. 6). In her work, she explores the experiences of Spaniards, non-whites, and women in these important social and economic centers, and she successfully expands understanding of early Caribbean life and society.

In her research, Altman faced archival challenges in accessing non-white voices, with non-white narratives relegated "to the shadows while Europeans emerg[ing] sharply" (p. 3). She addresses this challenge by including an abundance of individual narratives (many of which include those on the margins of society, even tangentially) to guide and support her argument. Altman's extraordinary use of individual stories is one of the book's greatest strengths. She provides unparalleled dedication in reconstructing each historical actor's background as much as possible, whether or not they left a large footprint in the archive (such as the Columbus family and the "Three Isabels").

Altman combines social and economic themes to expose how disease, power struggles (both political and religious), gender roles, violence, and enslavement constructed society in the Greater Antilles. The islands in the Greater Antilles differed by topography, economy, resources, and inhabitants; no two islands had the same experience. In each chapter, she discusses phenomena central to the broad construction of the Spanish Caribbean, often centered on the more easily accessible Spanish narrative. Altman carefully inserts Indigenous, Black, and female perspectives into her overall narrative whenever possible, with attention to how these groups interacted with Spaniards on these issues.

In the first chapter, which sets the scene of the early Spanish Caribbean, Altman emphasizes the lasting impact of the encomienda system and Spain's intentions to emulate Iberian societies in the Caribbean islands through religion, politics, economy, and education. Chapter 2 covers the "dangers" of the Caribbean, including risk of disease both Spaniards and non-whites faced, foreign attack, and resistance from Indigenous and Black...
Altman argues that these dangers "structured life and expectations for all groups" living in the Spanish Caribbean, including non-whites (p. 35). Access to and forms of health care for Spaniards, Indigenous groups, and Blacks are covered extensively along with Spanish attempts to reduce the islands' susceptibility to attack. Altman discusses how Black and Native people were able to exert agency through resistance and how their resistance (and Spanish fear of future resistance) affected the conditions of non-white society in the Caribbean.

The third chapter moves to several key components of Caribbean society's construction. Altman outlines Spain's efforts to replicate Iberian power and government in the Caribbean and Indigenous resistance to those efforts. Other topics include crime, corruption, violence, and non-whites' engagement and confrontation with these phenomena. Chapter 4 uncovers the Spanish Crown's attempts to structurally implement and "enmesh" the Catholic Church and its clergy into their Caribbean holdings (and the lives of Natives on the islands) (p. 99). The church's role and its clergy's position in the Greater Antilles "reflected many of the same factors that structured nearly every other aspect of life in the early Spanish Caribbean" (p. 130).

The transformation of Caribbean societies and their economies is illustrated in chapter 5. Altman challenges the assertion that "economic decline and demographic catastrophe defined the decades after 1520 or so," arguing instead that "the reality was more complicated" (p. 132). Altman maintains that the changes (in population, infrastructure, and agriculture) that took place in small towns and large urban centers throughout the Greater Antilles led to economic diversification and increased stability of the Caribbean islands. Chapter 6 focuses on the role gender played in the early Antilles, for women living on the islands and those who remained in Spain. Like her struggle in finding non-white experiences in colonial archives, Altman found that Spanish and Indigenous women "left behind a far more limited and often only indirect record of their lives" (p. 161). Addressing this challenge, Altman illustrates the diversity of the female experience in the Caribbean through the "Three Isabels" she encountered in the archives (among other, lesser-mentioned women). Altman offers a concise conclusion to her work, followed by a glossary and substantial note section.

Altman's *Life and Society in the Early Spanish Caribbean* is a wonderful starting point for any student or scholar wishing to broaden their understanding of this transformational period of transatlantic history, with a dedication to illuminating non-white experiences. Altman's inclusion of non-white and female voices (when sources are available) makes this work distinctive, while also maintaining a baseline for those unfamiliar with this era of Spanish history. Altman successfully adds complexity to established understandings of early Spanish Caribbean society, through her use of individual experiences, exhaustive research, challenge of colonial archives, and accessibility.