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## Andrew B. Fisher and Matthew D. O'Hara, eds. Foreword by Irene Silverblatt, *Imperial Subjects: Race and Identity in Colonial Latin America*

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## Book Reviews

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*Imperial Subjects: Race and Identity in Colonial Latin America*. Edited by Andrew B. Fisher and Matthew D. O'Hara. Foreword by Irene Silverblatt. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. xiv + 303 pp. Table, notes, bibliography, index. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.)

*Imperial Subjects* is a comprehensive anthology that digs deeply into the framework of colonial society, addressing the complexities of race and cultural identity and the relationships that evolved among its historical actors. The selections made by the editors of this volume, Andrew Fisher and Matthew O'Hara, reflect a dynamic series of studies that address an untold number of questions pertaining to race, ethnicity, and identity. Together, these works effectively capture the voices of elites and plebeians alike in geographically and culturally diverse regions of the empire.

The history of Latin America has been described as a labyrinth. The trajectory of the twists and turns along the maze that emerged after the first generation of conquest was fueled as much by the intricacies associated with racial, ethnic, and cultural identity within this eclectic milieu as it was by other, more discernible forces that drove colonial society. Social stratification after the conquest reflected much more than the dictates of blood-line and phenotype or, in the case of *pardos* and *mulatos*, one's *naturaleza*. More importantly, the concept of *calidad* usually mirrored other factors beyond biological traits, such as one's occupation, language, or dress. Identity was a fluid social construction with a foundation imbedded deeply within the labyrinth. The editors of *Imperial Subjects* rightly point out that "Clumsy efforts to classify racial and ethnic diversity, such as the Spanish *sistema de castas*, which comprised a series of elaborate social categories based primarily on an individual's descent and lineage often held little significance in daily life" (p. 5).

Two of the selections published herein focus on alliances and conflicts between different social groups. In the first chapter, Jeremy Mumford reconstructs the contentious relationships between the Crown and the indigenous "Lords" and their Spanish counterparts in Peru's early history, while Sergio Serulnikov's essay highlights a strange alliance between Creole elites and urban plebeians in La Plata (Bolivia), resulting from a mutually antagonistic issue with Crown officials.

*Imperial Subjects* also situates the themes of race and identity within a variety of colonial contexts. In his essay, David Tavarez underscores the complexity of the evolving and very fluid social environment unleashed within New Spain, where even common categories such as *indio* and *mestizo* held no hard lines of distinction, particularly among individuals who chose to camouflage their identity when it benefitted them. Jane Mangan's contribution delves into the plebeian nuances of racial hierarchies and categories in the



markets of the great silver city of Potosí in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Cynthia Radding's chapter on borderland societies in New Spain and Charcas in South America underscores the challenges populations faced on the fringe of empire, characterized by the presidio, Jesuit missions, forced labor regimes, migration, and commercial mining.

Several contributors focus their attention on slavery and the question of social status. Mariana Dantas' chapter discusses the mining district of Minas Gerais, Brazil, where the institution of slavery dominated the economic structure. There, enslaved blacks faced different challenges in fashioning a place in a society that held the promise of manumission at rates higher than in many other parts of the Americas. In a similar vein, Ann Twinam's chapter is particularly insightful and complements the body of the essays in this volume by demonstrating how blacks, *pardos* and *mulatos*, in late-colonial society had the possibility to alter their place in society through a *gracias al sacar*, a royal petition to rid themselves of "pardo-ness." In essence a background investigation, this process was rife with testimony to determine if one's genealogy included Muslim or Jewish ancestry. If the investigation and supportive testimony cleared the individual, then the appellant was awarded "white" status, which in turn opened educational opportunities, membership in guilds, and other benefits. In her study, Maria Elena Díaz turns to the slaves of El Cobre, Cuba, and how they fashioned "social identities" through dialogue with civil and ecclesiastical authorities. In a unique and unprecedented situation, these slaves became direct property of the Crown, not of individual Spanish owners, and were successful in carving out a political space for themselves by attaining "pueblo" status and a certain degree of self-governance.

Finally, Karen Caplan's contribution takes us past 1821 and into the early years of independence in Mexico. Her study focuses on how indigenous communities in Oaxaca and Yucatan retained "traditional expectations of state obligations and community responsibilities" with the anticipation that the new state authorities would continue to respect the "special" relationship from which they had prospered under Spanish colonial rule.

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly aware of the complexities of colonial society. It is imperative that historians incorporate a number of perspectives to enhance our understanding of this unique period, especially within the studies on race and identity. *Imperial Subjects* does just that. The respective authors approach the subject through a variety of perspectives, incorporating unique themes, all of which are backed by solid archival research. Through these studies, the labyrinth has been tamed just a little bit more, adding to our knowledge of colonial Latin America.

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