Douglas Catterall & Jody Catterall (eds.)


The burgeoning field of Atlantic World history has seen many important contributions to our understanding of migration, culture, trade, networking, slavery and the slave trade, and the transmission of ideas between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Women in Port, an impressive collection of eleven essays, an introduction, and a conclusion, adds to the ever growing list. Organized in three sections (or interpretative frameworks), it highlights to varying degree women’s experiences in the port cities of the Atlantic World. The book has an extensive geographical range, with little consideration given to what the editors call “national historiography.” Rather, readers are presented with a broad survey of women’s experiences from the British, Dutch, Portuguese, and Scottish experiences in Europe, the Americas, and West Africa (p. 7).

The authors have conducted archival research in England, Brazil, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Working almost exclusively from manuscript sources, they have successfully reconstructed the lives of women in disparate parts of the Atlantic World and exposed an alternative history of women that deviates from interpretations of women as marginal characters limited to the domestic sphere. Rather, the essays highlight women’s agency throughout Atlantic port cities, witnessed by the varying, and sometimes dominant roles women created for themselves during this period.

In the first section, “Metropolitan Frameworks,” the lens is trained on the experiences of local women in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, the British Caribbean, Philadelphia, and Seville, describing how they constituted their lives within the context of imperial influences and barriers. Not typical Atlantic world travelers or explorers, these were mostly nonelite women who did not actively pursue commerce, but whose lives were nonetheless impacted by the globalizing tendencies of Atlantic trading. Gordon DesBrisy’s essay on peasant women in Aberdeenshire illuminates this point clearly. Relying heavily on the published work of Alexander Skene (1685), he shows how poor girls and women in this Scottish town spun wool, producing coarse woolen cloth that was then shipped from Aberdeen to the Netherlands, where it was re-exported to the Baltic and other markets throughout the Atlantic.

The second section, “Traders and Travelers,” provides micro studies of women who defied cultural norms by actively operating in male-dominated spaces. These are compelling portraits. For example, Margaret Hardenbroeck directed a sizeable fleet of fifteen ships that was engaged in various aspects of Atlantic commerce; Marie Sandelin was considered to be the wealthiest and
most powerful woman merchant in seventeenth-century Spain; Ester Pinheiro sailed with her ships throughout the Atlantic world conducting business; and Jeanne d’Entremeseuse employed her networking skills to secure favorable trade.

While Sandelin, Hardenbroeck, Pinheiro, and d’Entremeseuse had extensive connections and were capitalized, the contributors offer us other examples of lower-ranked women who demonstrated a similar entrepreneurial spirit. Atlantic port cities were dynamic places and spaces. Metropolitan influences on gender relations were particularly strong, but we are reminded that in different jurisdictions, especially under the Dutch and the Spanish, women were given the legal authority to act on their husbands’ behalf, which many used to secure and sustain their socioeconomic status. Commerce was also central to many families, and many girls were exposed to it at an early age. Maria Van Rensselaer successfully ran her father’s brewing operations as a teenager after being trained by him. As Kim Todt and Martha Dickinson Shattuck note in their essay, “whether trading abroad, intra-or inter-colonially, or at home in New Netherland, gender did not determine participation” (pp. 184–185). These experiences highlight women’s agency, but as Junia Ferreira Furtado’s essay demonstrates, it is the fluid Atlantic context that created opportunities for women, regardless of class or social status.

The third section, “Interactions and Intermediaries,” moves away from women’s experiences within a European-dominated context, to one with a high degree of hybridization, citing examples from western Africa and the French Caribbean where women were not constrained by social and legal barriers, and as such had greater opportunities for social and economic advancement. This was most evident in essays by Ty Reese and Phillip Havik which show how local Fante and Fetu women, as well as those who were the products of Euro-African miscegenation, used their kinship ties and their unique knowledge of local customs, traditions, and Portuguese dialect to establish favorable trading relations that guaranteed an elevation in status.

Women in Port is a useful and informative historiographic contribution, one which challenges readers—maybe even forces them—to rethink traditional, monolithic stereotypes of women. As the editors put it, “we have wanted to suggest a possible mapping of gender onto our understanding of the Atlantic through the framework provided by its interconnected port cities” (p. 34). With this publication they have met their objective, greatly improving our collective understanding of gender and the Atlantic World.

Ahmed Reid
Department of History, Bronx Community College,
City University of New York, Bronx NY 10453, U.S.A.
ahmed.reid@bcc.cuny.edu