

In *this* lettered city, even slaves who can't read or write do! Jouve-Martin's splendid study of "black" Lima at the height of Spanish colonial bureaucracy in Peru fills an inexcusable lacuna in the historiographies of race and literacy in the Americas.

Scholars in recent decades have noted that Spain's overseas machinery redundantly tied the exercise of power to literacy – largely by regulating access to reading and writing among colonials, while generating countless documents aimed at conferring legitimacy on every aspect of life. Whatever failed to be consigned in writing did not exist for the *status quo*, and perhaps the most exciting studies have aimed at showing how Indians (some were formally taught to read and write) appropriated the tools and practices of the lettered city for purposes ranging from the mere assertion of legal rights under to the subversive assimilation of oral and ritual traditions to the dominant culture.

No study of this sort would have seemed fruitful, even possible, for African-origin populations prior to the publication of Jouve-Martin's "Slaves of the Lettered City: Slavery, Writing, and Colonialism in Lima (1650-1700)." The fact that slaves were denied juridical personhood, and that they were officially precluded from learning to read and write, no doubt has perpetuated the misperception that blacks, whether free or not, remained *de facto* segregated, strictly speaking, illiterate, and accustomed to a life void of meaningful public agency. This, Jouve-Martin informs us, was far from the case: Lima's *negros*, *mulatos*, and *zambos*, who rose to nearly half the city's population during this period of vice-regal stability, not only participated in the production and dissemination of literate culture, but also made active use of letters – even though most did not themselves know how to read or write – in order to enhance their own social status, to protect economic interests, to advance political causes, or to assert religious beliefs.

The case Jouve-Martin makes for the proliferation of literacy among the members of Lima's African-origin population hinges on a set of crucial qualifications: while slavery has traditionally been conceived as a rather monolithic institution operating more or less uniformly across different milieu, a more nuanced picture of African-origin populations emerges when one considers the multiple ways in which individuals or groups came to participate in diverse contexts; while it may be true, as classic historiography of race has repeatedly shown, that blacks in *haciendas* and plantations had little or no contact with letters, interaction with literate culture in a burgeoning city like vice-regal Lima was unavoidable, even for the city's most disenfranchised inhabitants; while colonial blacks might be narrowly conceived as a solid underclass with interests distinct from those of the Spanish elite, *criollos*, Indians, and *mestizos*,

little internal cohesion in fact existed among African-origin individuals who claimed radically different ethnicities and whose motivations were at least as diverse as the hierarchical *casta* system that discriminated among them; and, perhaps most importantly, while literacy has tended to be narrowly construed as a sole agent's ability to read and write, it can be more fruitfully construed as the activity of a group of individuals variously engaged in the production, dissemination, and enforcement of a body of writing. Simply stated, the fact that someone cannot read or write – as European nobility had long bragged of not doing – does not automatically preclude him or her from participating, and even instrumentalizing individuals or communities involved in the production of letters. The best books always teach their readers how to read them. Jouve-Martin cleanly draws the parameters of his case for the reader. And he proceeds to develop this case with lucidity, concision, and a sense of accountability and purpose rarely found in studies written in the wake of colonial and postcolonial theorizing. The author meticulously draws his argument from a broad range of documentation consulted in Lima's archives – from petitions, to contracts, to complaints, to legal suits, to trial minutes, to manumission letters, and to wills. And while this book is modestly offered as "case" study, the author never loses track of its broader implications for our understanding of everyday life in the colonial Americas.

The case Jouve-Martin makes for the proliferation of literacy among the members of Lima's African-origin population is unprecedented, but not a hint of sensationalism runs through the pages of this rigorous work. In fact, the author exercises such restraint in his interpretation of the sources, that an imaginative reader may sometimes find himself pushing the cart in front of the horse. Indeed, the conclusions to this book may strike some readers as overly modest, given the suggestiveness of the examples that breathe life onto its pages. But this too may be the signature of a discrete scholar wielding a virtuous argument. *Esclavos de la ciudad letrada* is sure to remain a classical reference for specialized readers focused on the complex transactions between orally and literacy in the colonial period, as well as for a broad educated readership interested in the early transatlantic slave trade and the development black culture in the Americas.