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## **Reseña/Review**

Ondina E. González and Bianca Premo, eds. *Raising an Empire. Children in Early Modern Iberia and Colonial Latin America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

## **Childhood and Colonialism in Early Modern Iberia and Latin America**

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Ondina González and Bianca Premo argue that the original contribution of the essays in this collection is in showing how the study of childhood can reveal new aspects of the Latin American colonial experience. An important influence on their topic is Philippe Ariès's work *Centuries of Childhood*. Ariès wrote that an important step in the modernization of Europe came when children began to have a distinct identity and role in the family, as opposed to just being thought of as

miniature adults. Other scholars viewed the eighteenth century as ushering in modernity because this was the moment when parents began to feel affectionate ties to their children. A third way of thinking has been that parents' attitudes of affection did not change in the modern era. Although the contributors to this volume recognize the debt they owe to previous scholars, especially those who recognized that children were part of larger society and ideas about childhood were manipulated by those in power, they seek to move beyond the modernity debate as a framework for studying childhood. Although limited by their sources, the contributors also seek out the voices of children themselves, as well as the records of institutions such as orphanages, or official documents including apprentice contracts.

The first essay, by Isabel do Guimarães Sá, provides a very broad overview of childhood in Portugal from 1500 to 1800, with an emphasis on the "circulation" of children, meaning children growing up away from their immediate family. As is noted in the essays discussing Spanish America, children left their parents to be put in the care of wet nurses, to train for jobs, and to migrate where they could find more economic opportunities. Many of the sources for this essay are legal codes and other forms of prescriptive literature, which gives the impression that class and gender distinctions led to significantly different childhood experiences. However, Guimarães Sá concludes that boys, if not girls, of all socioeconomic backgrounds commonly shared the experience of childhood circulation.

Valentina Tikoff's essay provides a history of the orphanages in Seville from the late 1600s to the early 1800s. Through institutional policies and family strategies, many children who still had one or even two living parents ended up in the care of "orphanages." What we might think of as orphanages would more properly be called the foundling home in eighteenth-century Seville. This was simply the place where abandoned babies passed through before ending up in the care of a wet nurse, if they even survived that long. In contrast, the "orphanages" were more like boarding schools, where children might, for example, be trained as sailors.

Widowed parents pressed the authorities to admit their children to these institutions, which in fact became quite socially selective. Therefore, the residents of the so-called orphanages, even if impoverished, actually had the advantage of familial and official protection, in contrast to the much more numerous and truly marginalized street children of Seville.

Teresa C. Vergara also looks at children sent away from their homes in a very different setting. Her study explores rural Indians who chose or were sent to work in Lima, drawing heavily from a 1613 census of the city as well as documents relating to apprenticeships. She emphasizes that forcing Indian children to move to Lima and serve in Spanish households was a tool of imperialism, although she also mentions that many indigenous families, and even young children themselves, chose this path to upward social mobility. While some of the very young children might have had no memory of their previous life, others retained strong ties and as Vergara puts it, did not lose their “Indianness.” Again, gender plays a more important role than class in differentiating childhood experiences. Both elite and commoner boys might suffer years of unpaid apprenticeships, while elite girls remained with their families.

The most engaging chapter in the book is Jorge Rojas Flores’ study of the spiritual autobiography of a seventeenth-century elite Chilean girl called Ursula. Although the chapter depends almost entirely on this literary document, the author provokes readers to reconsider many of their biases and simplifications regarding childhood in the 1600s. By focusing on the details of one life, we move beyond broad and erroneous generalizations. For example, Ursula’s mother prayed desperately to protect her child’s health, belying ideas that pre-moderns did not have affective ties to their offspring. Ursula playfully took up the rituals of Baroque penance, a refreshingly light perspective on what we usually view as a harsh society full of painful corporal punishment and abuse of its weaker members. Her neighbors called Ursula “little old lady” because she did not play enough, proving that Chileans in the seventeenth century had a specific vision of normal childhood behavior. Contrary to common ideas of colonial Latin

American gender roles (and her nickname), Ursula did play in the city streets, even peeking into a brothel, and received a good education.

The next two essays offer a more sober perspective: Ann Twinam and Ondina González both explore the Havana foundling home, called Casa Joseph. Their statistics give us a grim picture of the short lives of the orphaned babies. González concentrates on the virtually impossible task of funding Casa Joseph, and how the Spanish monarch and local authorities changed their rhetoric to either justify or excuse contributing to the expenses related to caring for abandoned children. As a crucial stop for Spanish merchant ships, it was deemed more important to spend money on a clean water supply. González concludes with a dour assessment of the self-interest and lack of charity shown by the rich and powerful in Havana. One wonders if she is passing judgment on Havana or the miserable treatment orphans and foster children endure today?

Twinam turns to the repercussions of a royal decree in 1794, which gave orphans the “benefit of the doubt” in terms of their legal status, meaning that when they entered the Casa Joseph, they received all the privileges given to legitimately-born infants. The king claimed that the horrific number of infanticides in his domains inspired him to make this decree. Havana society found the new policy intolerable, as it gave status to individuals of uncertain origins in their racially-stratified, hierarchical society. They refused to comply, especially after a mother of twelve said all of her illegitimate sons should have full social privileges due to their status as orphans. In this essay, along with explaining the niceties of different categories of bastardy, Twinam provides happy examples of how some babies might have been only symbolically abandoned to protect the identity of their mothers, who later appeared at Casa Joseph as wet nurses. Fathers also supported supposedly abandoned children as their own.

The final essay returns to the issue of child circulation. Laura Shelton uses custody disputes in nineteenth-century Sonora to show how, in the era of liberalism, childhood became more of a commercial

transaction or an investment, as employers and guardians argued that they were owed the labor of the children they raised.

This is a relatively new field, and Premo admits in her concluding essay that some of the contributors, especially those working in the Luso-Brazilian world, depend almost entirely on secondary sources for the information they present in their essays. However, many archival and literary documents that shed light on children's experiences are accessible and widely available. The most obviously neglected sources in this book are last wills and testaments, which could illustrate a great deal about the subtleties of power and economics both inside and outside the family. At this stage, most of the essays seem more descriptive than analytical. Only in the conclusion do readers learn how early modern Iberians used different terms for dividing and classifying the stages of a person's life. Therefore, the basic definitions of the Iberian notion of youth and childhood in terms of the years these categories covered and the cultural meanings of these stages of life are not fully explored in these essays. Rojas Flores's essay was especially effective in complicating colonial Latin American childhood, but other essays slid into negative assessments of the treatment of children in the early modern era, their analyses replicating that of Ariès and his followers. While the authors do not focus on defining or defending modernity as their primary concern, they also do not always capture the elusive early modern Iberian understanding of childhood.