The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic. By Pablo F. Gómez. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 318 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

Reviewed by Claire Gherini, *Fordham University*

In *The Experiential Caribbean*, Pablo F. Gómez explicates the development of an embodied epistemology among black practitioners in the seventeenth-century Spanish Caribbean. Gómez uses a number of terms for the men and women who became practitioners, including black ritualists, ritual healers, and "Mohanes" (11), an Amerindian term for religious healers. Their encounters with sufferers produced what he calls the "Caribbean experiential": "a variegated array of novel knowledge-making practices based on these sensorial experiences" (3) that healers deployed in their efforts to cure sickness. The term conveys two phenomena: the primacy of sensory experience in black healers' reading of the sick body, and ritualists' performative deployment of their sensory-based spiritual power to build a medical authority distinct from other practitioners in the region.

Gómez's work joins studies on the history of science and medicine in the Caribbean that decenter older, Eurocentric narratives of the rise of empiricism and Enlightenment rationality. Some of this scholarship excavates African diasporic modes of medical thinking, though most focuses on how European perceptions of the incommensurability between African and European ways of knowing marginalized Afro-Caribbean people as mere sources of folk wisdom rather than credible interpreters of specimens and antidotes.[1] But Gómez goes considerably further by suggesting that the empiricism that scholars once associated with the Scientific Revolution emerged not in the academic societies of Protestant Northern Europe but in the healing rituals of seventeenth-century Afro-Caribbean practitioners. Not all readers will be convinced by this argument, but Gómez does provide an astute rendition of the emergence, at the

[1] Susan Scott Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Karol K. Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana, Ill., 2006); John Savage, "'Black Magic' and White Terror: Slave Poisoning and Colonial Society in Early 19th Century Martinique," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 635–62; Kathleen S. Murphy, "Translating the Vernacular: Indigenous and African Knowledge in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic," *Atlantic Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 2011): 29–48; Christopher P. Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012); Julie Chun Kim, "Obeah and the Secret Sources of Atlantic Medicine," in *From Books to Bezoars: Sir Hans Sloane and His Collections*, ed. Alison Walker, Arthur MacGregor, and Michael Hunter (London, 2012), 99–104; Miles Ogborn, "Talking Plants: Botany and Speech in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," *History of Science* 51 (2013): 251–82; James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017).

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hands of Afro-Caribbean people, of the shared beliefs and expectations that mediated the relationship between the region's sufferers and healers.

The book begins with the material conditions that created these shared beliefs. For Gómez, the region's diverse populations explain the rise of the experiential, as the inability of Europeans to gain a demographic majority kept physicians from replicating in the Caribbean the outsized interpretive power that they maintained in Europe. Simultaneously, forced transportation of diverse African ethnic groups to the basin ruptured the intergenerational transmission of healing cosmologies tied to any one kingdom or region. Belief in a sacralized natural world, however, was common among black diasporic communities and supplied a unifying set of premises that made the experiential intelligible to individuals of diverse origins.

The absence of a dominant system for diagnosing and curing sickness enabled the experiential to gain traction among African residents and their descendants. Experiential knowledge resonated particularly with black Caribeños because they shared the conviction that the landscape was haunted by ancestors. Black ritualists manifested their abilities to corral the power of spirits before diverse communities of Afro-Creole onlookers and patients, cementing their unique healing authority in the process. Ritualists did not accomplish the elaboration of the experiential into a distinctive way of knowing on their own; each retelling of a Mohan's sensory communication with the natural world generated expectations among audiences about the rituals and physical objects constitutive of black practitioners' spiritual power. Experiential knowledge represents, for Gómez, not the survival of a specific healing tradition but Afro-Creoles' creative response to the cultural violence wrought by coerced dislocation.

Gómez's archival dexterity is on full display as he charts the development of the intellectual culture of black healers and its movement across the Spanish Caribbean. Scholars of the Iberian Atlantic have noticed elites' patronage of black practitioners but have struggled to identify them in the archives in significant numbers. Gómez fills this lacuna by pulling testimony about healing activities from approximately one hundred Inquisition cases that were lodged with Cartagena's Holy Office, with occasional reference to Cuba and Venezuela as well.

Practitioners' and witnesses' testimony reveal that economic competition drove ritualists' self-fashioning in the medical marketplace. Black healers faced the challenge of inventing replicable systems of diagnosis and healing that were, on the one hand, symbolically intelligible to polyglot and ethnically diverse audiences and, on the other, distinguishable from those of their rivals. To set their work apart from competitors, black healers manifested their position as human channels to the world of spirits who, for example, told them of a plant's specific curative powers, determined a hurricane's path, or singled out an individual for chronic pain. And the successful ritualists maintained a porous, cosmopolitan practice, absorbing therapeutic techniques from other healing traditions while foregrounding sensory performances that spotlighted their

unique capacities to communicate with the dead. A black ritualist might chant insensibly, convulse, and pull objects such as toads or sticks from a patient's orifices and follow up with therapeutics adapted from physicians such as the administration of purges. "Bodily knowledge hustlers" (47) is the phrase Gómez uses to describe black ritualists' economically driven intellectual rapaciousness.

Gómez's book raises the question of how the Caribbean experiential related to other methods of corralling firsthand experiences into a system of knowledge making. Gómez oscillates between three positions. First, as he writes in his introduction, the Caribbean experiential "existed both in parallel and in conversation with European-sponsored projects that explored the natural world" (3). Citing scholarship on the role of European noblewomen and artisans in the development of experimental practices, Gómez suggests the experiential's overlap with these groups' methods.[2] The experiential in this instantiation shares similarities with European empirical methods but remains exceptional in its adherents' belief in a sacralized natural world. But the experiential is, secondly, "the existential and cognitive basis of early modern Caribbean cultures of knowing the world" (97). Here the experiential is a creative amalgamation of traditions surviving the African diaspora with local experiences in the Caribbean, a distinctively Caribbean invention developed in isolation from the empiricism practiced in North America and Europe. Lastly, there is the experiential's historiographical rather than its historical significance. Gómez describes the experimental as "an epistemological revolution" (3)—an Afro-Creole invention that instituted an Atlantic-wide challenge to the hegemonic basis through which the natural world was studied and known.

Toward the end of the book, Gómez focuses on the third point, that the experiential was the precursor of the empiricism that used to be synonymous with the Scientific Revolution. Gómez claims that the similarity of Caribbean ritualists' experientialism to that of the Scientific Revolution has gone unrecognized because their religiosity clashes with dominant narratives associating empiricism with secularization. "It is difficult to imagine," he writes, "a semi-nude, non-Castilian speaking *bozal* occupying the same intellectual space as that of European philosophers and natural historians while producing powerful experiential evidence that defined the region's emerging epistemes" (188). Similarly, early modern Caribeños were engaging in mystical practices that do not "fit within the dogmatic epistemological frameworks articulated by current histories of the Atlantic" (189). The seeming incommensurability of the two traditions, Gómez argues, explains historians' failure to appreciate black ritualists' revolutionary prioritization of the senses as instruments of knowledge.

This last claim may sit uneasily with the insights of recent scholarship. Twentieth-century scholars, to be sure, argued that a singular historical event, which they referred to as the Scientific Revolution, occurred in western Europe

[2] Pamela O. Long, *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400–1600* (Corvallis, Ore., 2011); Alisha Rankin, *Panaceia's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany* (Chicago, 2013).

in the middle of the seventeenth century. A defining characteristic of this paradigm shift, they argued, was the demise of empiricism's association with the world of occultism and its ascent as a positive scientific value. Recent work, however, has dismantled the idea of a unitary Scientific Revolution.[3] This literature has not only established that Europe's artisanate and nonlearned created methods to transform an array of firsthand experiences with matter into knowledge; it has also shown how empiricism's associations with mysticism remained vibrant long after their supposed disentanglement. Sixteenth-century metallurgists, for example, engaged in narratives and fasting rituals that connected the mysticism of the biblical magi to metallurgists' bodily capacity to improve upon nature.[4] Though Gómez cites this literature in his introduction and the book's initial chapters, as the text progresses his claims for the similarities between the spiritual inflections of artisans' and black practitioners' experimentalism disappear, and readers are left with an older model of a paradigm shift in natural knowledge with ritualists as its principal agents. Revisiting recent literature would have defined what was singular about black Caribeños' sensory empiricism and identified its similarity with the forms analyzed by historians of medicine in early modern Europe.[5]

Mohanes never toppled a knowledge associated with university-based medical education because, as Gómez shows in the first part of the book, the Caribbean's physicians were never powerful enough that they could opt out of competing with ritualists for clients, let alone set the terms for how the natural world would be interpreted. Instead of a story of challenging and overturning, what Gómez has provided is a far more interesting tale of adaptation and creativity in the face of dislocation and competition. Gómez's book provides a wonderful picture of the Spanish Caribbean's "intellectually eclectic spaces" (174).

[3] Scholarship on empiricism's importance within the Atlantic world's artisanate and other nonlearned groups include Londa L. Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds., *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2005); James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew, eds., *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World* (New York, 2008); Daniela Bleichmar et al., eds., *Science in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, 1500–1800* (Stanford, Calif., 2009).

[4] Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago, 2004); Neil Kamil, *Fortress of the Soul: Violence, Metaphysics, and Material Life in the Huguenots' New World, 1517–1751* (Baltimore, 2005); Charles Webster, *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time* (New Haven, Conn., 2008); Rankin, *Panaceia's Daughters*, 110.

[5] Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi, eds., *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Charles T. Wolfe and Ofer Gal, eds., *The Body as Object and Instrument of Knowledge: Embodied Empiricism in Early Modern Science* (Dordrecht, Neth., 2010). A subset of the literature on empiricism in early modern medicine has uncovered its importance for women's domestic medical work. See for example Montserrat Cabré, "Keeping Beauty Secrets in Early Modern Iberia," in *Secrets and Knowledge in Medicine and Science, 1500–1800,* ed. Elaine Leong and Alisha Rankin (Farnham, U.K., 2011), 167–90.