

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Francis Rarey. *Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. xiii + 288 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$26.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1985-5.

In *Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic*, Matthew Francis Rarey uses archival records of the Portuguese Inquisition in Lisbon to trace the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history of enslaved Africans and others of African descent who were arrested in connection with the production of protective amulets called *bolsas* or *bolsas de mandinga*. In the book, Rarey argues that these objects, dismissed as “insignificant” by Portuguese inquisitors, are critical to understanding art in the Black Atlantic world and should be viewed as “an evolving discourse that intersects with early modern debates over race, identity, diaspora, vision, and value” (5). By positioning the objects as dialogic, Rarey resituates *bolsas* as not only from the Catholic Luso-Brazilian context of the archives in which they were found, nor as purely African artifacts. In doing so, Rarey highlights the amulets’ movement through different locations and competing power structures across the Black Atlantic world.


In the first chapter, Rarey explores the many names for apotropaic objects in West Africa, but notes that congruent with the rise of the Mandinka ethnic group as preeminent traders of gold, ivory, and slaves, the term “mandinga” became identified with this wide range of objects. Such objects were used by White, Black, Indigenous, and mixed-race individuals located throughout the Atlantic world in such diverse locations as Africa, Portugal, and Brazil. Within this widespread heterogeneous milieu, use of the word “mandinga” crosscut ritual, linguistic, and cultural barriers and rendered a wide variety of apotropaic objects identifiable and transferable across the Black Atlantic world.

In Chapter Two, Rarey explores the contents of the prolific *bolsas de mandinga* and enters the debate surrounding the use of the terms *Catholic*, *Islamic*, and *African* to label such contents. Rarey’s adept against-the-grain reading of the archival documentation by Portuguese inquisitors is the highlight of this chapter, and indeed, the entire volume. Moving beyond the inquisitors’ often disparaging descriptions of the contents of the *bolsas de mandinga*, Rarey unearths the systems of exchange between mandinga-makers and users that demonstrate that enslaved Africans maintained widespread commercial networks that transected the entirety of the Black Atlantic world. Employing the record of *bolsa* maker Jose Francisco Pereira as a case study, Rarey convincingly argues that Pereira refashioned his need for self-preservation as an effort to make sense of the religious plurality and violence caused by Atlantic slavery.

In Chapter Three, Rarey skillfully weaves together unpublished handwritten papers to assert that “Mandinga-makers and users knew of the transformative role papers played for officials and elites, and that already in the early 18th century, they understood and strategically responded to contemporary arguments about the intimate relationships between racialized and other corporeality and spectacular violence” (129). These writings, which represent some of the earliest writings by enslaved Africans, demonstrate their desire to reconceptualize the violence of their daily lives, writ large on enslaved bodies, by harnessing the power of the written word to their own ends.

In the fourth and final chapter, Rarey analyzes the trial records of participants in the Revolt of the Malês to document the changed perception of *bolsas* by the colonial ruling class. Early understandings relegated the *bolsas* to the realms of the insignificant or the superstitious, viewing them as defensive talismans only. By the time of the Revolt of the Malês in 1835, colonial powers attributed an offensive, malevolent, anti-colonial intent to the *bolsas* carried by those who participated in the revolt. The result of this correlation between *bolsas* and anti-colonial violence was regular searches and seizures by authorities seeking owners of these rebellious works of art.

Overall, Rarey’s book is a valuable addition to the historiography of apotropaic objects in the Black Atlantic world. Rarey is somewhat limited through use of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century archives curated by Portuguese Catholic inquisitors, which privilege the voices and interpretations of the hegemonic elites. Nevertheless, Rarey convincingly reads into the silences of the archives and finds ways to evoke the voices of the subaltern Atlantic world, resulting in an impeccably sourced volume that offers deep analysis of emic and etic interpretations of *bolsas de mandinga*. Rarey documents the multipolar religious, racial, and diasporic contributions to the construction and use of these “insignificant things” over several centuries, and in the end, establishes that they are not at all insignificant, but instead were important strategically curated assemblages that served as pragmatic tools for survival in the Black Atlantic world.

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