

## **Introduction to Roundtable Discussion: Nora Jaffary's *Reproduction and Its Discontents in Mexico***

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Article abstract

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## Introduction to Roundtable Discussion: Nora Jaffary's *Reproduction and Its Discontents in Mexico*

ERIKA DYCK

### *Abstract*

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### *Résumé*

*Il s'agit d'une brève introduction aux communications qui ont accompagné les discussions des participants à la table ronde chargée de décerner le Prix Ferguson. En 2018, la récipiendaire fut Nora Jaffary pour son ouvrage *Reproduction and its Discontents in Mexico: Childbirth and Contraception from 1750 to 1905*.*

Nora Jaffary's *Reproduction and Its Discontents in Mexico: Childbirth and Contraception from 1750 to 1905* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), the Canadian Historical Association's Wallace K. Ferguson Prize Winner for 2017, is a critical reappraisal of the history of medicine, science, religion, and gender in Latin America. Jaffary encourages us to revisit concepts of virginity and celibacy, motherhood and birth control, along with monstrosity, abortion, and midwifery through eighteenth and nineteenth-century discourses on spirituality, and emerging scientific discussions of biology and medical professionalization. The result is an intimate and nuanced analysis of reproduction that encourages us to pay closer attention to the fluid relationships between science and religion as they intersect in gendered spaces.

It was my distinct pleasure and privilege to chair the CHA Roundtable discussion on this award-winning book. The four panelists offer insightful comments into the quality of the study, but also the significance of its recognition by the CHA. Remarking that Nora Jaffary is only the second scholar of Latin America to have received this award, Luz María Hernández Sáenz draws our attention to how successfully Jaffary explores delicate intersections among colonial clergy

and legal authorities. Despite the localized context, these relationships move us beyond Latin America, encouraging Canadian scholars to take notice of how Jaffary teases apart different threads of discourse to reveal moments of tension and resistance, even under circumstances that appear oppressive. William French identifies Jaffary's appraisal of medical pluralism as one of the main contributions of this study, compelling historians to look beyond traditional versus modern practice to appreciate a more fluid exchange, one that includes strategic use of different systems of knowledge in order to aid in the process of reproduction and contraception. Achieving this in the context of Mexican history underscores the value of pushing past boundaries, both temporal and structural, to reimagine Mexican history as one not defined by distinctions in colonial and national periods, but instead offers a more gradual and perhaps even timeless interpretation of reproduction, and how discussions about it have changed over time. Christina Ramos applauds Jaffary's deft reconceptualization of midwifery and childbirth that place midwives at the centre of the story. She appreciates that Jaffary avoids "nostalgic narratives" of heroic midwives who later are replaced by male clerics or physicians who sanitize reproduction with their employ of science, thus modernizing childbirth, and with it, the nation. Instead, by drawing our attention to tropes about sexuality, chastity, and virginity, Jaffary helps to complicate our understanding of feminine virtue in the non-biomedicalized, colonial world. Finally, Jacqueline Holler, who organized and coordinated this discussion, shows us how Jaffary contributes to medical history with exhaustive archival documentation, illustrating how gender and medicine are deeply intertwined and profoundly shaped by religious and national discourses. Indeed, this is not a study of medicalization, but rather a national and gendered understanding of how childbirth continued to be a site of contestation for religious, scientific, and national ideals surrounding virtue.

Nora Jaffary describes having arrived at the topic while working in the archives where she discovered a woman tangled up in a legal dispute regarding her claims to mysticism, and the likelihood that she had procured an abortion. What follows is Jaffary's empathetic approach to assessing the claim from the woman's perspective. To do so, she reveals how she needed to appreciate the various layers of judgment that complicated such a case: contemporary concerns about virtue, motherhood, religious adherence, pseudo or even anti-science, and all the while being pregnant. Although the object of moral con-

cern may have centered around her pregnancy, the woman's crimes seemed mostly connected with spiritual heresy. For me, as a historian of medicine who specializes in madness and reproduction, Jaffary's determination to peel back the layers of criticism surrounding this woman is impressive. It helped to illustrate the kinds of transcendent experiences of vulnerability that persist in the historical record. Jaffary beautifully provides an example of how we might go about recalibrating those power dynamics by using historical inquiry to lay bare the threads of judgment, while extending dignity to those people who seemed to be caught on the wrong side of virtue.

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