Fugitive Freedom: The Improbable Lives of Two Impostors in Late Colonial Mexico. William B. Taylor. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. Maps. 224 pp. $24.95. Hardcover ISBN 9780520368569.

Since the publication of *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca* more than fifty years ago, William B. Taylor has given us numerous intricate and intimate portraits of life in New Spain. In *Fugitive Freedom*, he gives us the charlatans, Joseph Aguayo and Juan Atondo, two men multiply prosecuted by the Mexican Inquisition on the principal charge of impersonating priests. Through the pair, Taylor examines the evolution of colonial society in the second half of the eighteenth century: the introduction of more rigid social order under the Bourbons, the decline of the Inquisition, and changing social and political mores among common people. His lens extends beyond New Spain, too, as he contemplates the motivations and psychology of fraudsters across space and time, comparing his impostors to more recent charlatans, like Bernie Madoff, Enric Marco, or Elizabeth Holmes. The result is a book that is at once intricate in its description of late-colonial Mexico and expansive in humanistic inquiry.

The book is structured elegantly in four short chapters, surrounded on one side by a sweeping introduction that locates the problem of fraud within the particularity of the late-colonial world—a rigid social world and a physical world of surprising mobility—and on the other by a conclusion that contemplates what two imposters might tell us about the concept of freedom in Enlightenment-era Mexico. The first two chapters take the book’s two subjects separately, beginning with Aguayo. Born in Guanajuanto in 1747 and rejected by his father, Aguayo attained an incomplete education and turned to vagrancy in his teenage years. His interrupted schooling—partly spent with the Jesuits—proved useful to a lifelong career as a conman, as he used his command of language to convince people he was someone he was not—usually, a member of clergy. For this deceit, he appeared before the Inquisition three times, in 1770, 1771, and 1773, and was ultimately given the relatively harsh punishment of exile to Cuba (from which he returned after fourteen years). Atondo was born in 1783 in Mexico City, during Aguayo’s period in Cuba. In his own description, he was the descendant of an Old Christian line that had fallen on hard times. Though he aspired to the priesthood, he was betrayed by “worldly ‘appetites’” and an “‘obstinate heart’” (61). In 1815, amid the War of Independence, he began to pose as a Franciscan priest, giving many Masses and hearing many confessions until he was finally found out.

In both cases, Taylor weaves intricate narratives from the copious records of the Inquisition. He puts these to excellent use, placing a complex set of files in a chronologically digestible order and sidestepping the typical issue of reliability of coerced testimony—not by ignoring it, but by factoring it into his own narrative recreation. One thing both recreations underscore is the often surprising mobility Aguayo and Atondo—both white creole men—enjoyed. Though they ran afoul of the Inquisition and spent extended periods in confinement, each moved through Mexico (and Cuba) expeditiously, both freely and on the lam, using the physical mobility the colonial world afforded to evade the immobility of its corporate, class, and caste systems. At times, evidence of their mobility underscores what we do not know about them. For example, when Aguayo returned from Cuba, a later inquest (and, thus, Taylor) was able to extract a broad chronology of his movements in exile, but we have little insight to how his experience in Cuba may have differed from his earlier years in Mexico, how it informed his later career, or simply how colonial Cuba differed from Mexico as a landscape for early modern con artists.

One of the dominant lenses through which Taylor understands Aguayo and Atondo is the literary trope of the *pícaro* or rogue, which he examines in chapters three and four. Here, Taylor contributes especially to our understanding of the popularity of picaresque literature in Mexico, allowing the evolution of a new stock character to stand as a metaphor for the evolution of Spain's colonial project: away from older notions of social hierarchy and toward "an unsettled social order, into a world of appearances where a code of honor might be invoked, but hardly applied" (115). In chapter four, he compares Aguayo and Atondo to the *pícaro*, wondering openly whether they or others understood themselves as *pícaros* and if so, what that might mean. Were they dangerous or harmless? Impudent or comical? Could their crimes—falsely giving Mass and hearing confession, thereby endangering the souls of unsuspecting faithful—be redeemed, either in their own lives or for modern readers?

Ever an engaging writer, Taylor's prose lends to vivid recreation of the scenery of late colonial Mexico. The book's detail and verve, along with Taylor's penchant for provocative questions make *Fugitive Freedom* ideal for the undergraduate classroom, including not only courses on Latin American history, but on the historian's craft as well. It is the questions—Did they model themselves on *pícaros*? What kind of freedom did they seek? What drove them to fraud?—that make *Fugitive Freedom* great, allowing readers many ways to understand Aguayo, Atondo, their deceptions, and the society they deceived. Many of these questions are unanswered (or, as Taylor readily admits, unanswerable), giving readers much to contemplate. At times, we are also left with a sense of imbalance between local narratives and central argument, as thick descriptions of Aguayo and Atondo's escapades yield to lofty questions with no clear resolution. Ultimately, though, Taylor leaves us with a thorough emplacement of Aguayo and Atondo in late-colonial Mexico and a compelling explanation of what their lives might tell us about freedom, mobility, and attempts to regulate both in late-colonial Mexico.

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