
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM B. TAYLOR, *Fugitive Freedom: The Improbable Lives of Two Impostors in Late Colonial Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021.

In this, his fifth monograph, William B. Taylor has written a wonderfully entertaining and accessible story about two Mexican *pícaros* who lived extraordinary lives at the margins of colonial society. As competent swindlers and cheats, Joseph Aguayo and Juan Atondo—the central protagonists in this work—are figures well known to us all. Literature, film, and even song, have carved out a space for these iniquitous and calculating types precisely because they are found everywhere—they produce publicly and in large scale the indiscretions we all envisage, and at times perform, in smaller degrees. Hence, we relate to them. *Pícaros* personify a universal motif because they tell us something profound about our basest instincts and unfulfilled desires; we are contemptuous of their depravity yet envious of the lives they live—lives full of excitement, adventure, and danger. Hence, we nervously enjoy throwing back a few cold ones with these treacherous types because their tantalizing and boastful tales of misadventure often provide us with a counterweight to our over-structured and regimented realities. They are as admirable as they are disdainful and one gets the impression that Taylor too seems to respect their unique cunning and storytelling capabilities. This inherent dichotomy makes the *pícaros* of Spain and Mexico, who seem to be mostly men, personalities that we continue to embrace.

Why, however, did men like Atondo and Aguayo, indeed anyone at any time and in any place, choose to live lives of crime? This is an open question that Taylor poses in this book, and while no conclusive answer emerges from its pages, this single historical probe manages to hold our attention across four exquisitely written chapters. In a sweeping Introduction, Taylor sets the historical stage for our two imposters while presenting us with a more manageable goal, namely to highlight who these men were “what they did over a number of years, what they valued, how they presented themselves to authorities and the public, and how they were regarded” (16).

Looking at the social development of vagabondage in Europe and New Spain, Taylor notes that these roaming, faceless characters typically thrived and came to the attention of royal authorities during periods of turmoil, uncertainty,

and confusion. Indeed, such imposters and vagabonds were long considered a threat to the established moral order “alongside witches, gypsies, and madmen” (7). But general typologies, useful as they are—and they are incredibly useful—only give us blurry intimations of the individual “actors” and “performers” themselves. It is in the “literary figure of the insouciant pícaro that shifty vagrants and hustlers emerge from the shadows as individuals more than stock characters, with histories and personalities” (11). This is an important point that sets the stage for the presentation of our two protagonists who from time to time had homes, wives, desires, passions, and who ultimately endured great emotional suffering at the hands of colonial authorities.

Chapters One and Two then tell the stories of Aguayo and Atondo, reconstructed through snippets of Inquisition documents. They portray the exploits, misadventures, and punishments of these men. Aguayo (b. 1747), for instance, was sentenced at the age of twenty-six to forced labor at the presidio in Havana for the crime of impersonating a priest and an officer of the Holy Office. Later, after he talked his way out of prison and returned to Mexico, he would once again be imprisoned for this very same crime. Had he not learned his lesson or was a life of crime too exciting to give up? Atondo (b. 1783) suffered a slightly different fate. Separated in time from Aguayo by over thirty years, he was the product of a different period, but he too gained the attention of the Inquisition for not only impersonating a priest but for actually collecting alms, hearing confession, and celebrating mass. But was impersonating a priest really that threatening of an act given that similar crimes were only lightly punished? Indeed, Taylor suggests that it may have been the manner in which both men dismissed and disrespected the power of the Inquisition that was the true source of their indiscretion. This is an interesting proposition given that the power of the Inquisition was at that time on the wane. Nonetheless, such criminal acts required both men to move from place to place with relative ease. To highlight just how mobile both Aguayo and Atondo were, Taylor incorporates two nicely drawn maps, one for each pícaro. These maps are important for the narrative structure of the book because they show the confined nature of their movements from town to town as they sought to evade authorities who had caught on to their nefarious dealings.

Their stories have many similarities, but they are each unique to their time and place. Their lies, however, represent an interesting point of inquiry that requires further research. Their lies were beautifully tailored to make sense, to toe the line between the fantastical and incredulous. These men were expert liars, acquired, presumably, through years of practice. But they also knew how to navigate the “margins of truth.” They were expert storytellers, telling the Inquisition what they wanted to tell and withholding what they didn’t want

people to know. This is a skill we all recognize and perhaps even admire. A detailed study of just how these lies were constructed, crafted, and delivered would be most welcome.

In chapters Three and Four Taylor delves deeper into the meaning of the pícaro as understood in literature and questions whether these two men fit the bill. The technical definition of a pícaro as conveyed through Spanish novels, such as the anonymously written *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* (1554) and Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599–1604), is placed in question, but in the end even if they do not fit the technical definition of a pícaro, they at least approximated his characteristics and behavior. This is all that is required in understanding how these two men navigated their colonial world using the tools at their disposal; they violated social rules that made sense to violate. One hopes that future scholars will extend this literary frame to encompass film, given that Mexican movies are full of these pícaro types, in order to trace the social evolution and reception of these characters in modern Mexican society.

Taylor asks intriguing questions about the behavior of these men. For instance, did Aguayo and Atondo know of and understand the literary pícaro? Was this then a case of life imitating literature? Was Atondo suffering from mental illness, namely bipolar disorder? Though madness never crossed the mind of colonial inquisitors, a modern psychological analysis may provide clues that might orient us in new and interesting directions. How did the Inquisition collect, arrange, and tell the stories of these two men? How did the Inquisition's phrasing and narrative structure alter the way colonial authorities and, later, social researchers read and understand these events. These are all important questions that deserve serious attention and Taylor does a nice job of presenting them to us in an uncomplicated and straight-forward way.

In all, this is an important book that gives us new insight into life in colonial Mexico. Presently, in order to get a glimpse into these figures, which are found all over Latin America as *malandros* and *choteadores*, one has access to only a handful of works, first among them is the well-known work by Lizardi, *El Periquillo Sarniento*. Taylor shows us that there were many other, possibly hundreds or maybe thousands of these characters who are waiting for their turn in the spotlight. This book is written in an accessible style that undergraduates, graduates, and lay people will all enjoy. Taylor's effort to contextualize the actions of these two men within a literary frame is both useful and interesting, giving the reader a better lens from which to analyze the actions and behavior of our two pícaros. Taylor even brings in film characters such as Wiley Coyote and places them alongside real-life imposters such as the much-reviled Enric Marco who swindled, lied, and impersonated a prisoner of a Nazi concentration

camp, in order to present their timeless nature. In all, this is a fun book, full of interesting insights and probing questions from a well-respected and practiced expert in the field.

Ignacio Martínez

University of Texas at El Paso

ERIKA DENISE EDWARDS, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020.

The last decades have seen a boom in the study of Afro-Latin American history. Scholars have explored varied forms of Black agency in the region, from religious to legal strategies, expanding the field beyond its previous focus on slavery. Edwards's book constitutes an important contribution to the study of the intersection of law, gender, and race in Latin America. Her study is the first to look at this intersection in Córdoba, Argentina. It thus decenters the study of Blackness in the River Plate region from Buenos Aires and Montevideo. It is also among the first to look at this intersection, especially with respect to Blackness, during the crucial period in which the newly independent Latin American nations were taking shape. For these reasons and many others, the book has been well received and should be required reading for anyone interested in understanding Latin America. The book, however, is not without its limitations. For one, it is short. Whether this results from a focus on a relatively small city might be a legitimate question to pose. But, as small rural towns are seldom the object of due attention from scholars, the focus on Cordoba is laudable.

The book is made up of six short chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. It also includes a very useful glossary for those that are new to the field. The introduction takes as its starting point the question of Black invisibility in Argentina. (It thus starts from George Reid Andrews's arguments about the dynamic of Black in/visibility in Latin America (as developed in, among others, *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives, 1600-2000* [Harvard University Press, 2016]). Edwards, however, identifies this invisibility as resulting not only from statecraft, but also from Blacks' own pursuit of whiteness. This is what is at the heart of Edwards's study: how *cordobesas* of African descent contributed to the formation of white Argentina and to their own invisibility by categorizing themselves and their offspring as white. Edwards thus re-periodizes these trends in Latin America. Where scholars have focused on twentieth-century campaigns of whitening (*blanqueamiento*) to try to understand why so many Latin Americans that present as Black do not identify as such, Edwards shows