Eighteenth-century Spanish officials stood aghast as charlatans, sinners, and villains infested the Crown’s precious American colonies. In the viceroyalty of New Spain, Joseph Lucas Aguayo y Herrera and Juan Atondo were two such conmen, dedicating their lives to deceit and sin. Among their many crimes, Aguayo and Atondo impersonated priests with varying degrees of success. However, perverting the Eucharist and confession threatened the eternal souls of those subject to their duplicity. But why did Aguayo and Atondo choose this life of crime, and were they as depraved as the Inquisition feared?

In four splendid chapters, William B. Taylor shows how political and economic disruptions facilitated the rise of “shady opportunists,” like Aguayo and Atondo, who preyed on the pious (p. xii). According to Taylor, Spanish colonial rule “remained a work in progress right to the end” (p. 4). Political and spiritual unification meant “putting people in their place,” so an influx of rootless strangers threatened the consolidation of the empire (p. 6). Colonial laws placed vagabonds and beggars in the same category as gamblers and prostitutes. Elites grew anxious as droves of unknown faces entered their towns.

To provide the details of Aguayo’s and Atondo’s transient lives, Taylor analyzes several Inquisition trials and a dossier of related information. Aguayo testified before the Holy Office on three occasions (1770, 1771, and 1773). A final note from the office of the archbishop of Mexico in 1792 shows that Aguayo had been arrested once more for impersonating a priest near Guanajuato. Charges grew against Aguayo as his former victims sought retribution for his deceit. For his part, Atondo remained in custody for three years (circa 1815-18), just before the Mexican Inquisition disbanded in 1820. Remarkably, Atondo wrote unbiden thirty pages of script about his life. He cited his “obstinate heart” as the driving force for his “scandalous and criminal excesses” (p. 73). Though a final ruling remains lacking, Taylor highlights that the prosecution viewed Atondo negatively as a heretic and charlatan.

In the second half of his book, Taylor compares Aguayo and Atondo to the literary picaresque genre, questioning whether these two historical rogues were worthy of redemption. Indeed, Aguayo and Atondo deliberately chose the con to swindle plebian men and women. For Taylor, their indifference toward women was “chilling” (p. 123). It seems, though, that Aguayo and Atondo
were nonviolent criminals. Descriptions of Aguayo's slight physique suggest that “he was harmless” (p. 124). Moreover, Atondo's “periodically unsettled, erratic behavior, insomnia, inflated self-esteem, and sudden urges and appetites suggest manic episodes” (p. 128). Although twenty-first-century mental health terms cannot be used in eighteenth-century historical studies, Taylor implies that Atondo may have been somewhat unbalanced.

Aguayo seems to have been more of a loner than Atondo. Aguayo “never married or mentioned lovers, and claimed to have no friends” (p. 136). Atondo once made a comment about being rejected by his father, revealing his deracination early in life. Although twenty-first-century readers may empathize with Aguayo and Atondo as pícaros, meaning rogues, Taylor elucidates just how these two small-time imposters threatened to undo the colonial rule as it consistently struggled to maintain sociopolitical coherence.

Taylor concludes that the liberty Aguayo and Atondo experienced drifting from one town to the next was not the type of freedom described by eighteenth-century philosophes but rather a fugitive freedom. Although Aguayo and Atondo likely enjoyed their hoodwinking, they remained on the run to avoid a prison sentence. Mobility jeopardized the Spanish social hierarchy because refusing to stay put made it more difficult for elites to control the masses. Indeed, it is simply remarkable that these two con artists survived for so long on the run. In sum, *Fugitive Freedom* weaves together extraordinary Inquisition cases to illuminate the cracks and imperfections built into the edifice of the Spanish Empire. No doubt, historians, students, and enthusiasts of colonial Mexico will take delight in Taylor's sharp analysis and supple prose.

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