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Book Review: Bianca Premo. *The Enlightenment on Trial: Ordinary Litigants and Colonialism in the Spanish Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

By Ashley Cendejas

The Enlightenment on Trial: Ordinary Litigants and Colonialism in the Spanish Empire by Bianca Premo explores preconceptions about the Enlightenment era in Europe. Premo, a distinguished history professor at Florida International University, specializes in Iberian and Latin American History, with a particular focus on law in Spanish colonies.¹ In *The Enlightenment on Trial*, she concentrates on the Enlightenment's legal influence on residents of the Spanish colonies, especially how marginalized groups used the legal system in Spanish America to sue the powerful tyrants who abused them. The analysis, careful consideration of case-by-case context, and the in-depth research highlight Premo's expertise and dedication to the people studied.

The Enlightenment on Trial looks at specific cases regarding marriage, indigenous community members against leaders, and enslaved people against their masters. Premo analyzes cases in two specific cities in colonial Spain: Mexico City, Mexico, and Lima, Peru. The author takes into consideration the contexts of the two major cities, their historical significance, populations, and roles in terms of legal resources. Alongside the two metropolitan studies, Premo also examines more rural regions in both Mexico and Peru: Oaxaca, Mexico, and Trujillo, Peru. The comparison of the two cities and two rural towns provides a crucial comparative research method in Premo's monograph, emphasizing how access to legal resources in particular places shaped how residents of Spanish colonies utilized Enlightenment discourse in legal courts to

¹ Florida International University - Digital Communications, "Bianca Premo," FIU Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs, accessed January 13, 2026, <https://sipa.fiu.edu/people/faculty/history/premo.bianca.html>.

resist oppressive powers. The choice to study such diverse regions allows for more accurate research, as it explores the differences in legal cases and their diverse populations.

Premo argues that the Enlightenment and its supposed original, revolutionary ideas were not exclusive to Europe, but also spread to the Spanish colonies. The book highlights the ideas brought about by the Enlightenment, motivating people living under colonial rule to utilize legal resources as a form of resistance against oppressive powers. As phrased by Premo, “Spanish imperial culture was a suing culture,” and this tradition surely continued to the Americas. The author examines the cases of people in rural areas, with little to no formal education in law or literacy, and how the Enlightenment’s growing interest in law expanded legal opportunities for many marginalized communities. Analyzing the pursuit of legal advancements and the quest for justice allows the author to honor the perseverance of people living in the colonies.

Premo also brings attention to the complicated process in which many litigants in civil court cases sought justice. These efforts can be seen in cases such as Agustin Carabeli, an enslaved man suing his owner for abuse, and Maria Micaela Vega, a woman suing her husband for abuse. Both parties, for their distinct cases, sought the work of public scribes to draft the initial paperwork, document their testimonies, and produce other legal documents. These scribes would have to produce an argument strong enough to compete with that of the other party’s lawyer, as in these cases, representing people with a disproportionate level of power. By acknowledging this imbalanced ratio of legal resources, Premo sheds light on the efforts litigants made to receive justice for the abuse they experienced.

The author mentions in her introduction that the book aims to honor the efforts of oppressed communities in the colonial Americas and provide a comparative analysis of legal resources between rural areas, spanning the power dynamics within social classes. Premo’s

extensive research on these vast topics allows readers to develop a thorough understanding of the legal system in the colonial Americas, including why people of lower social status seeking justice was so revolutionary, and how the Enlightenment influenced the accessibility of the legal system. Premo's care for the topic and especially the individual litigants in the monograph is a product of her in-depth research and her deep respect and high regard for her historical subjects.

The Enlightenment on Trial is thoughtful and expansive in its approach to understanding how the ideas of the Enlightenment operated beyond Europe and impacted the experiences of ordinary people in the Spanish colonies. Premo's careful attention to social class, geography, population, and its impact on legal resource accessibility allows readers to move beyond abstract theory and focus on the voices of those who are most often excluded from historical narratives. By examining both major urban centers and rural regions, Premo demonstrated how legal opportunities varied across space while remaining accessible enough for even marginalized individuals to challenge authority. This layered analysis deepens our understanding of how revolutionary it was for enslaved people, Indigenous community members, and women to pursue justice within a colonial legal system designed to uphold hierarchies of power.

Additionally, I valued the manner in which Premo considered the many actors and processes involved in colonial litigation, particularly the role of scribes and intermediaries who enabled ordinary litigants to navigate complex legal systems. Her attention to the procedural challenges faced by those with little education or social standing highlighted the persistence and strategic thinking required to bring cases before the courts. Rather than portraying the Enlightenment as a distant European movement, Premo effectively illustrated how its legal and philosophical ideas were adapted and mobilized by colonial subjects seeking relief from abuse and injustice. This comprehensive and empathetic approach underscores the author's respect for

the individuals she studies and reinforces the book's broader argument about the significance of law as a tool of resistance in the colonial Americas.