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Practicing Debt and Transforming Freedom in Colonial Peru

Abstract:

Throughout the Americas, enslaved men and women understood that the transition to freedom required financial ability, legal acuity, and public reputation. With a focus on the coastal town of Trujillo on the northern Peruvian coast, this paper argues that legal manumission—the notarial written document and a complete payment—did not result in the status of a freed person. Instead, enslaved men and women understood that a freed person projected public knowledge that one could be responsible for one's own debts in a city of lettered *vecinos* and honorable *vecinas*. This paper pairs debt agreements with legal manumission agreements, all painstakingly matched from seventeenth-century notarial transactions, to examine how enslaved men and women controlled the payment and the record of their self-purchase for conscious transformations into publicly known freed people. Building on the work of Kathryn Burns, José R. Jouve Martín, and Danielle Terrazas Williams, I argue that the act of recording a debt at notarial offices meant that African-descent people made public an often private agreement, entering into the municipal written record as authors to manage their finances with sole liability and the reputation to repay. In a highly gendered transition, enslaved men articulated their abilities as patriarchal providers within women enslaver's households, while enslaved women employed debt agreements to present themselves as *vecinas*, or municipal subjects, with preferred surnames, and claimed *casta* identities that reflected an honorable status. By engaging in debt, enslaved people took one step towards freedom.

Bio:

Rachel Sarah O'Toole is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of California, Irvine, where she teaches classes on colonial Latin America, the African Diaspora, and sex and gender. Her monograph, *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru*, received the 2013 Latin American Studies Association Peru Section Flora Tristán book prize. With Sherwin Bryant and Ben Vinson III, she co-edited *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora* (2012) and with Ivonne del Valle and Anna More, she co-edited *Iberian Empires and the Roots of Globalization* (2019). She has published articles on the construction of whiteness, masculinity within slavery, African Diaspora identities, indigenous politics, and gender influences on racial constructions, and is currently completing her second monograph regarding the meanings of freedom in colonial Peru.