

**UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL BULLETIN
ANNOUNCEMENT**

Florida International University
University Graduate School

Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Abstract

Hacking the Law: Enslaved Litigation, Freedom and the Digital Archives in
Late Colonial New Granada, 1760-1810

by

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This interdisciplinary study explores a digital archive, the “Negros y Esclavos” series of the Archivo Nacional de Colombia, both quantitatively and qualitatively. It reveals quantitative patterns in 203 of the lawsuits the enslaved brought for freedom during the late Spanish colonial period. It also provides a close reading of a sample of these lawsuits to demonstrate how African and Afro-descendant litigants argued over value, legal access,, and the worth of the enslaved black body in late colonial New Granada (Colombia). Dynamic ideas of the ‘the market’ influenced these arguments during a period of heavy reform under the Spanish Bourbons. The late colonial period was a time of increased Crown intervention in the colonies, especially marginal colonies like the Viceroyalty of New Granada. The *alcabala* tax, the promulgation of the Código Negro of 1789, and new administrative changes reeled in the authority of creoles and enslavers. In the midst of this reform, enslaved people continued a legal tradition of adapting and hacking Ibero-American law concerning the enslaved, even as they increasingly used the courts to set prices for their freedom. The study reveals how Black litigants broke from traditional legal arguments founded on social debt and obligation and advanced the ideas of themselves as contractual actors with set value to claim freedom for themselves and their families.

Additionally, this dissertation connects this question of value to the role of the archive in writing the history of the Black experience in the Americas. It draws on interviews with archival experts and explores twenty-first century African Diaspora scholarship on archives to provide a new history of this digital series, showing how it can be viewed as part of a larger effort to reconcile the dehumanizing nature of data with mixed methods to animate Black lives in the digital archive.

Date: March 29, 2024
Time: 12.00 p.m.
Place: MMC, SIPA II 301

Department: History
Major Professor: Dr. Bianca Premo