

**Journal Article Review: Smith, Sabrina. “African-Descended Women: Power and Social Status in Colonial Oaxaca, 1660–1680.” *The Americas* 80, no. 4 (2023): 569–98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2023.56>.**

**By Carlos Morales**

In “African-Descended Women: Power and Social Status in Colonial Oaxaca, 1660-1680” Dr. Sabrina Smith discusses the case of Catalina de los Reyes, a woman of African descent who contested the illegal and unjustified seizure of her home in colonial Oaxaca. In this article, which was published in *The Americas*, Smith pieces together and analyzes the life and significance of Reyes. Despite social constructs that casts African-descent people as inferior, Catalina evidently owned a house of great economic and social value, which provoked the colonial powers of Oaxaca to make a claim for her household. While Reyes may be the focus of Smith’s article, she importantly discusses how black women in general retained and managed their properties in the Spanish colonial world. As evidence, Smith uses eyewitness accounts from the trials, showing the influence and social status of Reyes but also displaying the great efforts committed by colonial officials to delegitimize her claim to her home.

Before focusing on the case of Reyes, Smith outlines the setting of the Valley of Oaxaca and the broader demographics of the region referencing historian John Chance’s analysis of 1,720 marriages between free Black and ‘*mulato*’ people. To introduce this statistic, she establishes the presence of a Black community in colonial Oaxaca, while not overly large, but still significant enough to affect the social climate. As a relatively smaller portion of a larger colonial society, African and African descended people were rarely able to penetrate the landowning class which was predominately held by men who owned heavily mortgaged estates. Smith argues was even more reason that these men saw Catalina as a threat. She makes an

important clarification for the reader, noting that Catalina did not purchase the household, but Iberian inheritance laws allowed her to acquire it upon the passing of her father. This leads to one of the most important parts of Smith's article: the significance of Catalina's property and what it signified to the Bishopric of Oaxaca.

Despite African descendants in Oaxaca not having much social status or power, Catalina owned one of the most sought after and highly valued properties in Antequera, as it was next door to the episcopal palace. While this allowed some economic freedoms and even opportunities to raise funds for her family, Smith argues that it also made her vulnerable to attacks on her character and actions, which was done by the attorney of Bishopric of Oaxaca. Catalina was accused of allowing disreputable people and licentious activities in her home, while her property was also seen as a valuable expansion tool for the palace. However, Smith argues that Spanish elites were less likely interested in an expansion of the episcopal palace, but instead more focused on Catalina's visibility and potential influence within the cathedral domain. This is one of the most powerful aspects of Smith's article. The Spanish elites possessed much of the property wealth and thus relegated free Black men and women to lower positions in colonial society, such as housekeepers, domestic servants, and shopkeepers. This is shown through Smith's presentation of testimonies against Catalina, attempting to portray her as an unfit resident and property owner living in proximity to the city's cathedral. These testimonies are useful tools in displaying the true goals of Spanish elites, which was to purge Catalina due to her race rather than the architectural goals they claimed. But Smith counters the Church's narrative by including testimony from Catalina's peers and members of her social circle, who she herself called upon to testify in her defense.

In having witnesses in her defense, Catalina is shown to have a profound understanding of the social scheme the Spanish elite had created, as she chose four male witnesses and three of them were Spaniards. One of her witnesses Juan Diaz de Vargas confirmed that Catalina lived peacefully and she didn't cause any scandals in the city. Diego Henriquez also stated that she lived a relatively simple life and claimed the Spanish elite used their laws to confiscate property from Catalina. Henriquez owned a haberdashery, supplying clothing and accessories to men, making him a reputable business operator. Smith's inclusion of these witnesses and their statements is important to understanding the simple yet disruptive placement of Catalina. The eyewitnesses argued Catalina had a peaceful life, never mentioning any type of protest or call for change against the Spanish colonial system. But, as Smith shows, the mere presence of Catalina's house next to the city's cathedral was enough of a threat to the strict social hierarchy established by Spanish elite. While Catalina's case is certainly an extraordinary circumstance, Smith concludes by arguing this instance is an example of African-descended people using and creating avenues to defend, contest and even improve their social standing within the existing social hierarchy.