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Urban Slavery in Colonial Mexico: Puebla de los Ángeles, 1531-1706 (extracto).

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Introduction

On 14 December 1650, a young black man by the name of Baltazar de los Reyes was sold to an illiterate Spaniard in the city of Puebla de los Ángeles. News of the sale quickly reached the entire community of the San Pedro hospital, where de los Reyes worked alongside his mother, Sebastiana Paramos. Nurses, servants, cooks, both enslaved and free, had all been embroiled in the contentious dispute between de los Reyes and Alonso Fernández, the hospital's administrator. In early September, a disagreement between Fernández and de los Reyes escalated to the point of violence. The administrator claimed that the young man attacked him with a weapon. In retaliation, Fernández threatened to sell the young man out of the city and into a sugar plantation (*ingenio*).¹ As administrator of the San Pedro hospital, Fernández was well within his rights to sell an undisciplined slave. He held power of attorney for this particular corporation, one of many slave-owning hospitals, colleges and convents in Puebla.

Shortly after their confrontation, Baltazar de los Reyes fled for Antequera (modern-day Oaxaca City), some 200 miles to the southwest. The archival record does not reveal why he chose to flee in that direction or whom he was seeking. Regardless, flight was a dangerous proposition for an enslaved youth. De los Reyes was now removed from the circle of family, friends and workplace acquaintances that had provided safety and community in Puebla. It effectively transformed him into a runaway slave, an *esclavo buído*, subject to corporal punishment and imprisonment by authorities with no ties to his community or the San Pedro hospital. Bounty hunters along the Puebla-Antequera road would be informed of his escape and remunerated for his capture. Sure enough, by early December, bounty hunters had captured de los Reyes and sent him to the Antequera jail. He would soon be sold *in absentia* by two men 200 miles away.

The bill of slave purchase signed by Alonso Fernández on 14 December 1650 might seem like just another harrowing, but all too common, slave

1 Archivo General de Notarías de Puebla (hereafter, AGNP), Not. 3, Box 101, 1650 December, 27r.

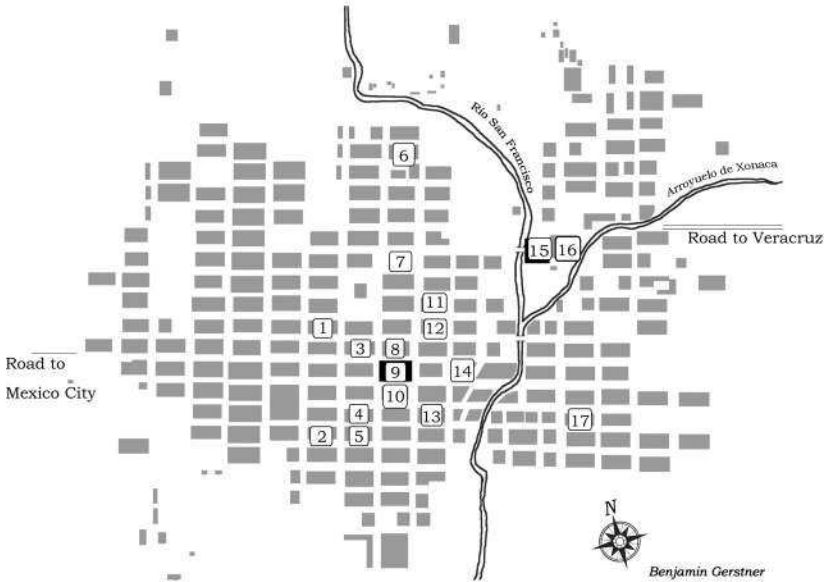
transaction in a Spanish American archive. After all, some 20,000 bills of slave purchase are archived in the city of Puebla for the seventeenth century alone. In this case, a runaway slave had been captured and sold in exasperation to a new master. This type of transaction was fairly common in the urban centers of colonial Mexico, especially when slave owners were unwilling to pay the cost of recovering their human property from a distant location. At first glance, this was exactly what happened to Baltazar de los Reyes. One master transferred the rights to a slave's labor, body and the prestige conferred by his ownership to another master. In a paper-centric society, the buyer and seller each received a notarized original of the transaction, while the local notary retained a triplicate for record-keeping.

Paradoxical as it may sound, the sale of Baltazar de los Reyes to another Spaniard represented a true triumph for an enslaved family.² Despite her legal status as an enslaved person and a single mother, Sebastiana Paramos orchestrated the entire transaction. Despite his status as an imprisoned runaway slave, de los Reyes secured a new life in a notarial process in which he was transacted as chattel. And despite the threats of the hospital's administrator, a son would return home, close to his mother. True, Baltazar de los Reyes would remain enslaved, but he would not, under any circumstance, become a fieldhand in some forlorn plantation. He would remain in Puebla, surrounded by friends, siblings, patrons, acquaintances, foes and former masters, as well.

In her quest to keep her son close, Paramos enlisted the aid of numerous allies: nurses, church ministers and her other unnamed sons. As an experienced hospital worker, she understood that any hospital administrator could be held accountable to the bishop and the seventeen other members of Puebla's cathedral council. Despite its medical services, the San Pedro hospital was ultimately a religious institution under the jurisdiction of the bishop and his auxiliaries. Appealing to such powerful religious figures was a particularly useful approach for a worker in the San Pedro Hospital. The cathedral complex was just three blocks south of her workplace, a five-minute walk at most (see Figure 0.1). In an undated statement (*memorial*), Paramos appealed to the bishop for assistance. She "and her sons had served the poor for many years" as hospital workers under other administrators, all of whom had treated them better.³ In defending her right to remain close to her son, Paramos also claimed the moral high ground of motherhood and responsibility. De los Reyes could have never attacked or even feigned to harm Fernández for a simple reason: "As his mother and in the time of other [hospital] rectors, I have always disciplined him severely." Paramos boldly discredited the administrator's accusations as nothing more than "a sinister account."

2 AGNP, Not. 3, Box 101, 1650 December, 27r. 3 Ibid.

Puebla de los Ángeles, 17th century



Key

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 1 - Convent of Santa Catalina | 10 - Cathedral |
| 2 - Convent of Santa Inés | 11 - Convent of Santa Clara |
| 3 - Convent of the Santísima Trinidad | 12 - Hospital of San Pedro |
| 4 - Convent of La Limpia Concepción | 13 - Convent of San Jerónimo |
| 5 - Church of Santa Veracruz | 14 - Jesuit College |
| 6 - Church of San José | 15 - Slave Market after 1624 |
| 7 - Convent of Santa Teresa (Carmelites) | 16 - Convent of San Francisco |
| 8 - Municipal Palace (Cabildo) | 17 - Church of Analco |
| 9 - Public Plaza & Slave Market until 1624 | (Santo Angel Custodio) |

Figure 0.1 Map of Puebla de los Ángeles, seventeenth century. Created by Benjamin Gerstner

Sebastiana Paramos went one step further. “If it is necessary to sell him, I will find a master for him in this city,” she stated. On 6 December 1650, the members of Puebla’s cathedral chapter ruled in favor of Paramos and de los Reyes.⁴ A week later, Toribio Hernández, the hospital’s illiterate head nurse, became Baltazar de los Reyes’s nominal owner for 300 pesos. Hernández would travel to Antequera in order to secure his newly purchased slave and return him to Puebla (and to his mother). However, several clauses within the bill of purchase stipulated that de los Reyes could not serve his

4 Archivo del Cabildo Catedralicio de Puebla (ACCP), Actas de Cabildo, Tomo 12, 311r–313v.

new owner and that the latter “could not have the slave within the said hospital.”⁵ If not Hernández, who would de los Reyes serve? Did Paramos somehow provide the head nurse with the funds to recover her son? The historical record goes no further.

Instead, we are left with the remarkable story of a black family and their resilience. We are forced to reconsider what it meant to be enslaved in a Mexican city where the enslaved wove expansive social networks. Paramos would serve as a godmother for an enslaved child in 1655 and for a free child the very next year.⁶ She was clearly a respected person in her urban community and benefited from her connections to the San Pedro Hospital. Certain spaces, such as hospitals, provided greater access to patrons and allies who could help trump, or at least mitigate, slaveholder power. In other city settings, such as the textile workshop, the brutality of slavery was exacerbated by the acceptance of localized violence. How different then was slavery in the convent, the elite household, or the marketplace? Could space define slavery? Or could the enslaved push back on the spatial limitations of their bondage? If so, what can Puebla tell us about the daily negotiation of bondage in colonial Mexico?

During the mid-1990s and early 2000s, sociologists, art historians, anthropologists and historians directed their attention to the history and contemporary experiences of people of African descent in Mexico. Among Mexican historians, the 1994 publication of *Presencia africana en México*, signaled the beginning of a new wave of academic scholarship on Afro-Mexicans.⁷ A decade later, Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn published *Afroméxico*, an important study that took the pulse of this emergent scholarship and situated it in relation to a growing body of scholarship produced in the United States. As a result, today the black communities of the Costa Chica (along the modern states of Guerrero and Oaxaca) and Veracruz are well known through studies that privilege Mexico as an emerging area of study within the African diaspora.⁸

Yet as Christina Sue makes clear in her study of contemporary Veracruz, understanding blackness in Mexico is often an exercise in exposing

5 AGNP, Not. 3, Box 101, 1650 December, 27v. “E tambien se lo bendo con condission q. no a de servir a el dho toribio hernandes ni tener en el dho hospital el dho esclabo . . .”

6 Archivo del Sagrario Metropolitano de Puebla (ASMP), “Bautismos de negros y mulatos,” 26r, 39v. Baltazar de los Reyes also served as godfather in this last baptism.

7 Luz María Montiel, ed. *Presencia Africana en México* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1994).

8 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla: Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989); Bobby Vaughn, “Los negros, los indígenas y la diáspora” in Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, eds., *Afroméxico* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 75–96; Laura Lewis, “Modesty and Modernity: Photography, Race and Representation on Mexico’s Costa Chica (Guerrero),” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 11, no. 4 (Fall 2004), 471–499; Anita González, *Afro-Mexico: Dancing between Myth and Reality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

discourses of *mestizaje*, nonblackness and, ultimately, racism.⁹ Simply put, blackness outside of modern Mexico's coastal regions is often interpreted as a phenotypical marker of foreignness. Until 2014, Mexico's National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) refused to consider Afro-Mexicans as members of a distinct and disadvantaged minority with a history dating back to 1520.¹⁰ This historical neglect has come to an abrupt end. In the spring of 2015, Mexico's National Council Against Discrimination (CONAPRED) launched a groundbreaking campaign, *Soy Afro: Cuento y Me Reconozco*, in order to support federal initiatives in favor of *afrodescendiente* communities.¹¹ The 2015 census, which finally allowed individuals of African descent to recognize themselves as such, compiled information on 1.38 million *afrodescendientes*.¹²

While *afrodescendientes* from Veracruz, Oaxaca and Guerrero increasingly reject the national assimilationist ideology of *mestizaje* (developed by José Vasconcelos in the 1920s),¹³ the same cannot be said for residents of modern Puebla and many other Central Mexican states and urban centers. Modern-day Puebla's population of African descent is minuscule. Accordingly, posters and other images for the CONAPRED *Soy Afro* campaign exclude several states within Central Mexico as spaces inhabited by people of African descent. Projected onto the colonial past, the city of Puebla emerges as a site of mestizness and whiteness. Research on colonial indigeneity in the city has begun to challenge these ideas, but blackness remains a foreign concept.

Indeed, most Poblanos openly express surprise, shock or dismay when learning that a numerous population of African descent called their city home throughout the colonial period.¹⁴ Invoking that population's enslavement and subsequent freedom in Puebla is met with disbelief. The same

9 Christina A. Sue, *The Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

10 This contradictory stance by INEGI has tangible socioeconomic consequences for the inhabitants of the Costa Chica, where indigenous communities often receive federal funding for infrastructural and cultural projects. Recently, Mexico's National Autonomous University, UNAM, has been moderately successful in raising awareness for Costa Chica communities through its *México Nación Multicultural* Program.

11 The CONAPRED campaign is specifically directed at children and young people. Digital posters with images of José María Morelos and Vicente Guerrero are accompanied with the Twitter hashtags #SoyAfro. For more on this initiative, which is backed by the Secretary of State (SEGOB), see the official website for the program: www.conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=5363&id_opcion=108&op=214 (accessed 2015/02/27).

12 INEGI, "Resultados definitivos de la Encuesta Intercensal 2015," www3.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/saladeprensa/noticia.aspx?id=2288 (accessed 2016/01/19).

13 José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (Madrid: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925).

14 In informal, everyday conversations during my research, I was told that slavery certainly took place in Cuba, Brazil, the United States, and maybe even in Veracruz, but the concept of chattel slavery is thoroughly incompatible with the historical narrative of Puebla.

incredulity applies to the experiences of enslaved Asians, although extolling “la china poblana” (literally, “the Chinese woman of Puebla”) has tempered the public’s rejection of a historic Asian presence. Local schoolchildren might know a thing or two about Catarina de San Juan, the enslaved Asian woman who achieved a quasi-saintly following among the city’s working poor during the colonial period. However, *why* she was a slave in Puebla has never been explained to these children, their parents or their grandparents.

Instead, Puebla is profoundly associated with Baroque architecture, ceramic pottery, a rich gastronomy and the Cinco de Mayo battle of 1862. Slavery plays no part in the city’s cultural imagination. Today, the slave market of yesteryear is nothing more than a lively plaza with benches for an easy Sunday stroll or for a political rally. And yet, thousands upon thousands of people, mostly Africans, were sold in Puebla (many on that precise plaza, just below the current municipal palace) during the seventeenth century. In the following chapters, I explain why, when and how colonial Poblanos invested in urban slavery. I also examine the ways in which enslaved people negotiated their bondage, laid roots in the city and eroded the foundations of slaveholder power.

This book is a sociocultural history of slavery in Puebla de los Ángeles, the second-largest city in the viceroyalty of New Spain (colonial Mexico). It traces the importation of Africans to Puebla since the mid-sixteenth century and analyzes early municipal ordinances in relation to the development of urban slavery. It also advances a new understanding of how, when and why transatlantic (and transpacific) slaving networks converged in Central Mexico and, specifically, Puebla throughout the seventeenth century. Based on this research, it is evident that the Mexican demand for slave labor was not satisfied by 1640. Slaveholders turned to American-born slaves, and the slave trade resurged intermittently during the late seventeenth century. As a regional approach to understanding the motivations of the enslavers and the enslaved, the book focuses on the social dynamics of a single city situated between the viceregal capital, Mexico City, and the principal port of entry, Veracruz.

Studying Puebla resolves many questions regarding the slave trade to Mexico. For instance, it is now clear that the densely populated towns and cities of the Central Mexican highlands represented lucrative markets for Portuguese slave traders based out of Cape Verde, São Paulo de Luanda (Angola) and Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). *Encomenderos de negros*, locally based slaving agents with transatlantic contacts, understood Puebla to be an essential node in a transimperial web of slaving interests. Despite their virtual absence from the historiography of slavery, these agents established profound ties with the city’s political and merchant elites by extending credit. Artisans, small business owners and widows also came to depend on

encomenderos de negros and their financing. Thus, addressing the specific motivations of Poblano slave owners is essential to advancing a more complete understanding of slavery and the economy of the region.

Urban Slavery in Colonial Mexico also engages the motivations and social networks of the enslaved by tracing multigenerational family histories across the seventeenth century. I contend that the particularities of Puebla's archives allow the experiences of enslaved families to be reconstructed (albeit imperfectly) through careful quantitative research and qualitative analysis. Thus, this book may at times read as a collection of statistically informed microhistories that illustrate how a family endured or transcended its enslavement or a particular space of bondage. In acknowledging the contributions and limitations of empiricist methodologies and historically imaginative research, I pursue a middle ground that borrows from both social and cultural history. In doing so, this book reflects the experiences of enslaved African and Asian parents, their Mexican-born children and grandchildren and their Spanish, mestizo and indigenous friends, foes and acquaintances in the city of Puebla.

I am especially interested in understanding how the social networks of slaves and masters were enhanced, circumscribed or otherwise affected by specific urban settings. To speak of urban slavery in seventeenth-century Puebla is to describe innumerable modalities of bondage so varied that they often defy effective analysis. The mobility of the urban setting undoubtedly made slavery more tolerable for some than others. However, many of the cases in this book speak to the "violent and spatially confining" versions of urban slavery found throughout the Americas and Caribbean.¹⁵ Puebla's *obrajes*, or textile mills, were notorious as sites of confinement, punishment and coercion. Thus, understanding specific physical settings within the city allows for a more fruitful engagement with the expectations, limitations and possibilities that the enslaved and their captors confronted on an everyday basis. The cloister and the marketplace featured different dangers, respites and gendered dynamics. These spaces of slavery were not static, unchanging entities. Textile barons adapted their infamous mills and workforces to the fluctuations of the slave trade, political demands and slave reproduction. But adaptability was not the exclusive domain of the slaveholder.

This book makes a simple argument: throughout the course of the seventeenth century, enslaved people in Puebla increasingly transcended their bondage because their social networks surpassed specific spaces and relations of slavery. By cultivating strategic alliances and intimate relations in indigenous barrios, local parishes, elite residences and innumerable public

¹⁵ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 8.

settings, the enslaved gradually expanded their ties to free people and the latter's resources. These social bonds were then validated at the local parish, a crucial arena through which to contest slaveholder power. This multigenerational process slowly but surely eroded the foundations of slavery in the colonial city. By 1700, many individuals of African and Asian descent were still owned in Puebla, but most of their kin were not. Slavery would die a slow and unremarkable death over the course of the eighteenth century.

Misrepresentations and Silences

Throughout the colonial period, Puebla emerged as the viceroyalty's second city and site of the richest bishopric. Approximately 100,000 people of all backgrounds, ethnicities and skin colors lived in the city by the 1680s.¹⁶ While contemporary historians have convincingly discredited the myth of Puebla as an exclusively European space ("ciudad de españoles"), local histories simply do not recognize the social, cultural and political importance of the African and Asian populations that toiled as slaves. To date, only one English-language study of slavery exists for Puebla, and that article examined the 1540–1556 period.¹⁷

This considerable dearth of secondary studies has distorted our understanding of Poblano slavery, but also impacted historians' claims with regard to the operation of the transatlantic slave trade to Mexico. Simply put, we do not know enough about the transatlantic slave trade. We do not understand the extent and profitability of the slave trade in African children and American-born individuals. We especially lack an adequate understanding of how enslaved people navigated the routes that led to slave markets, especially outside of Mexico City. The overrepresentation of Mexico City – perhaps the most unrepresentative of all urban spaces in the Western Hemisphere¹⁸ – has come at the expense of secondary cities, namely Puebla, Querétaro, Guadalajara, Morelia (Valladolid) and Oaxaca (Antequera).¹⁹

16 Miguel Ángel Cuenya and Carlos Contreras Cruz, *Puebla de los Ángeles: Una ciudad en la historia* (Puebla: Océano/BUAP, 2012), 80.

17 Peter Boyd-Bowman, "Negro Slaves in Colonial Mexico," *The Americas* 26, No. 2 (Oct. 1969), 134–151.

18 Jorge E. Hardoy and Carmen Aravonich, "Urban Scales and Functions in Spanish America toward the Year 1600: First Conclusions," *Latin American Research Review* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 60. Founded in 1325, Mexico City is unmatched in its concentration of political, economic and religious resources throughout the prehispanic, colonial and modern periods.

19 By contrast, historians of colonial Ecuador and Perú have demonstrated far greater interest in exploring questions of slavery, identity, interracial interactions, and the formation of diasporic communities within smaller settlements. For a sampling of such work see Rachel Sarah O'Toole, *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Sherwin K. Bryant, *Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Jean-Paul Tardieu, *El negro en el Cuzco: los*

Throughout this book, I make the argument that the study of slavery in provincial cities, such as Puebla, allows for more useful comparisons of the African diaspora across space and time. Puebla was neither a capital nor a port, yet its entanglement with transatlantic slaving networks is significant. How does our understanding of the slave trade change when we situate Portuguese ship captains and intermediaries outside of ports? Certainly, we expect to find powerful slave trading agents or factors in Veracruz. But what do we make of their continuous presence inland? Such questions can and should be extended to other colonial cities with smaller Spanish and larger indigenous, African and mixed-raced populations, reduced credit markets and fewer governmental institutions vis-à-vis colonial capitals.

Urban Slavery in Colonial Mexico also challenges us to understand the complex negotiation of urban bondage within spaces typically defined as Spanish, indigenous or both. Africans, like their Iberian contemporaries, never constituted demographic majorities in the highlands of Central Mexico. Cognizant of the centrality of indigenous people to the region, this book urges us to consider the history of Afro-indigenous interactions despite the paucity of materials that specifically describe the encounter between Nahua populations and groups of African and Asian descent. Within the Central Mexican context, it is insufficient to understand urban slavery solely from the perspective of the slaveholder and the enslaved. We must also account for interactions between these groups with diverse, urban indigenous populations clustered around specific parishes and barrios.

As Paul Lokken has noted for rural Guatemala, the foundations of slavery were notably eroded through Afro-indigenous interactions during the seventeenth century.²⁰ This study examines that same dynamic in a city with a diverse indigenous population of displaced native migrants, Chichimec war captives, tribute-paying Nahuas and locked-in textile workers (*encerrados*). Understanding how these loosely defined “indios” interacted with enslaved people and their masters becomes possible within Matthew Restall’s proposed framework of informal interculturalization.²¹ The interplay between slavery and freedom in marketplace interactions, social gatherings and festivities acquires an additional dimension by considering the indigenous experience. By focusing on the enslaved populations that lived, worked,

caminos de la alienación en la segunda mitad del siglo XVII (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1998); Charles Beatty-Medina, “Between the Cross and the Sword: Religious Conquest and Maroon Legitimacy in Colonial Esmeraldas” in *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora*, eds. Sherwin K. Bryant, Rachel Sarah O’Toole and Ben Vinson III (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 95–113.

20 Paul Lokken, “Marriage as Slave Emancipation in Seventeenth-Century Rural Guatemala,” *The Americas* 58, no. 2 (Oct. 2001): 175–200.

21 Matthew Restall, “Black Slaves, Red Paint” in *Beyond Black and Red: African-Native Relations in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 4–10.

married, bartered, fought, played, cleaned, bathed, cooked or otherwise simply called Puebla home, I raise new questions about Afro-indigenous relationships, cultural mixture and coexistence among enslaved and nominally free groups.

Race and Slavery

Although discussions on race necessarily factor into this investigation, the focus of this study is not on *race* per se, but on the spaces where urban slavery predominated and the specific mechanisms used to enhance or mitigate slaveholder power. My intent is not to reify the association between slavery and African and Asian populations, but to present a new understanding of how slavery operated and how it was challenged in urban Mexico. Historians understand that most (but not all) slaveholders were Spaniards and that they benefited enormously from the labor and prestige that owning other human beings signified. What to date has not been properly analyzed are the relationships that emerged between enslaved people of African and indigenous descent and the interactions of enslaved Asians with both of these groups.

Of course, race and slavery are inextricably intertwined, although there is considerable dissent on what exactly the first term signified in the seventeenth century. In the Mexican colonial context, “race” does not refer to the pseudoscientific classifications that came to the fore in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, the term *raza* is virtually absent from the documentation used for this study. What is race, then? James Sweet argues that Iberians’ notions of racial difference stemmed from medieval ideas that sub-Saharan Africans’ “inferior culture implied a biologically inferior people.”²² In turn, skin color served as “an insignia of race . . . an indelible marker of cultural, and thus, racial inferiority.” For Rachel O’Toole, colonial caste categories (such as *negro*, *mulata*, or *indio*) “did the work of race” by articulating difference and power among indigenous people, Africans and Spaniards.²³ Sherwin Bryant contends that race should be studied as a “colonial practice of governance” that “circumscribed black social life and interiority.”²⁴ By contrast, Douglas Cope posits that race was not the driving principle of social organization among plebeians, but “a shorthand summation” of an individual’s social network.²⁵

22 James Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Jan. 1997): 144–145.

23 Rachel Sarah O’Toole, *Bound Lives*, 164–170.

24 Sherwin K. Bryant, *Rivers of Gold*, 47, 162 n. 9.

25 Douglas R. Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 82–83.