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Africans in Colonial Mexico

Absolutism,
Christianity, and
Afro-Creole
Consciousness,
1570–1640
For my loved ones

Mutti, Pops, Jenna, Carlinho, & Emmazinha
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Africans in Colonial Mexico
In 1640, the year the Portuguese slave trade to Spanish America ended, the Kingdom of New Spain (colonial Mexico) contained the second-largest population of enslaved Africans and the greatest number of free blacks in the Americas. In little more than a century following the successful expedition of Hernando Cortés against the Mexica (1519–1521), the Spaniards brought hundreds of African-descended servants and slaves into the colony. Over the course of a century, Portuguese slave-traders augmented this initial core with more than 110,000 enslaved Africans. A 1646 census enumerated 35,089 Africans and 116,529 persons of African descent in New Spain. With cessation of the slave trade, the enslaved population of New Spain steadily declined. The free black population, however, experienced continual growth and by 1810 numbered approximately 624,000, or 10 percent of the total population. New Spain’s seventeenth-century demographic distinctiveness—home to the second-largest slave and the largest free black populations—may come as a revelation to those unaccustomed to thinking of Mexico as a prominent site of the African presence. Even now, travelers familiar with the Afro-Mexican presence in the coastal states of Veracruz and Guerrero seem surprised to learn that a greater number of Africans and their descendants once resided in New Spain’s interior.

In search of wealth, the Spaniards migrated from Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Mexicas which acquired the name Mexico City, establishing a trail of towns and cities in their wake. In chartering villages, towns, and cities, the Spaniards underscored more than their physical presence and propensity for urban living. The act of constituting an urban center heralded the arrival of royal authority, cloaked in laws and the ability to enforce them with violence if necessary. By establishing cities and towns—though the countryside contained the tribute, commodities, and land that they desired—the conquerors and first settlers unwittingly pitted their feudal ambitions against the centralizing Spanish monarchy intent on reining in its subjects. Cities thus became the locus of competing claims, and this contest, as we shall see, had important implications for the African presence.

As servants and slaves, persons of African descent accompanied their masters into New Spain’s nascent urban world. From the beginning, Africans and
their descendants had deep roots in the urban landscape. By the end of the sixteenth century, they outnumbered Spaniards in many of New Spain’s principal cities. The growth of the urban African presence was linked to the restrictions that the Spanish Crown imposed on the use of native labor in Spanish households. As the available pool of indigenous labor declined, Spaniards employed ever-increasing numbers of Africans in their households and workshops. Urban slaves also plied the streets as carriers of people and goods, becoming indispensable to colonial city life. Spanish reliance on Africans in cities and towns throughout New Spain represents a peculiar and yet largely unexamined feature of New World slavery.

As Africans labored in the urban milieu, they acquired the cultural insight necessary to navigate the colonial labyrinth. With a Christian-inflected cultural and legal consciousness, urban slaves and servants pressed for autonomy—time and mobility to interact with friends and familiaris. Savvy in their quest for autonomy, urban Africans and their descendants acquired a legal consciousness composed of an awareness of rights and obligations, familiarity with the legal system, and the ability to initiate litigation that rallied the courts and its personnel in the pursuit of justice.

With this legal consciousness, both enslaved and free persons established family and friendship networks predicated on an imagined identity. But in contracting Christian marriages—the centerpiece of family formation in New Spain—slaves and free persons, both of whom were defined as legal dependents, confronted opposition from patricians who interpreted certain marital alliances as a challenge to their authority. In the ensuing struggles between paterfamilias and dependents, the latter, as we shall see, often prevailed with the assistance of royal or ecclesiastical authorities. This contest underscores how persons of African descent—both slave and free—appropriated strategies manifest among other dependents (wives, minors, and servants) in New Spain’s urban milieu. In doing so, Africans and their descendants shared and reproduced the legal consciousness that circulated between patricians and plebeians.

This legal consciousness was also instrumental in the decline of slavery and the growth of the free black population. Though scholars have long associated the slave population’s precipitous decline with the cessation of the Portuguese slave trade and the negative growth rate among slaves, this formulation overshadows the contribution that the legal consciousness of urban slaves played in the ascendance of the free colored population. Indeed, in Mexico City, a legal consciousness was part of the creolization process that Africans and their descendants experienced. In making this argument, I am staking out new claims for the cultural process identified as creolization.

Creolization’s genesis in sixteenth-century urban New Spain resides in an immersion in the cultural practices of power. Becoming a creole literally in-
volved navigating the judicial maze with the intent of exploiting the possibilities offered by legal obligations and rights. This definition reminds us that persons of African descent, the first people identified as creoles (criollos) before 1560, did not configure their culture through the physical environment, diet, language, beliefs, kinship practices, and community structures alone. Creole culture included the customs, laws, and institutions that upheld the larger social structure and came to include an ability to navigate the various institutions of absolutism. Cognizant that their competing juridical identities created an exploitable tool, Africans and their descendants seized the opportunity. Though patricians posed a serious physical threat, individuals drew on their creole consciousness for specific tactics. In this process, their command of Spanish—which shaped the ability of Africans and their descendants to represent themselves before scribes, royal officials, and ecclesiastics as royal subjects and devout Christians—played an important role. Even recent arrivals from Africa, bozales, immersed themselves in a new linguistic environment soon after landing in New Spain, acquiring fluency in the Castilian lexicon and morphology of power. Eventually, bozales learned to enlist the protection of crown and clergy, who, as representatives of the Spanish sovereign, often stood at odds with individual patricians.

This strategic awareness—the defining feature of creole consciousness—enabled the plebeian population, which included persons of African descent, to employ the law in their defense. As litigants, persons of African descent modified their life circumstances, yet they rarely, if ever, threatened to undermine Spanish rule. But in enabling a semblance of cultural autonomy, the litigious nature of Africans and their descendants also insinuated both slave and free even further into workings of Spanish absolutism.

In Spanish America—where absolutism gained its fullest expression—the sovereign’s authority reigned ascendant over all domains until the seventeenth-century culmination of the Baroque era. As an absolutist, the Castilian monarch assumed a prominent role in governing Spanish America, which stood in stark contrast to the English colonies, where the Crown assumed a more limited role and an individual’s authority over private property reigned supreme. In this respect, early modern Spanish expansion extended the traditions of the centralizing monarchies in medieval Christendom. Castile’s sovereigns subjected trade, discovery, and settlement to their authority in hopes of extending royal dominion. Even as merchant capitalism’s extant pockets sustained the expansion of Christianity and colonization, it also required sanction from absolutist rulers in the form of charters. In return for real and symbolic obeisance, royal subjects requested and received approval to contract trade, discover new

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territories, and extend the Christian presence. In the absolutist era, such endeavors almost always necessitated royal authorization.

In paying scant attention to the imperial presence in the lives of Africans and their descendants, scholars have neglected the consequences of a slavery and freedom that flourished under absolutism. Spanish expansion fueled the emergence of New World slavery, while imperial absolutism constituted slaves as subjects; both profoundly shaped the African experience. Slaves, of course, represented both property and people.

But in early modern Spanish America, masters were not the only ones who defined the nature of slavery or even the most powerful authorities to manifest dominion over the enslaved. As Spain's absolutist rulers extended their dominion throughout the unfolding Atlantic world, they continually encroached on the domain of private property, which still occupied a tenuous place in the mercantile economy. Intent on consolidating imperial rule, Castile's sovereigns often transgressed the masters' domain even though Roman law accorded masters complete authority over slaves. The Catholic kings did not intrude on the sanctity of the master-slave relationship in an arbitrary manner, however. Instead, they relied on competing laws, especially canon law, which constituted converted Africans as Christian subjects despite their slave status. Jurisdictional conflicts surfaced with their attendant consequences for empire and slavery. In the process, the enslaved gained an acute awareness of competing obligations and rights, a form of ambiguity they willingly exploited by deploying regulatory devices in a manner that the Spanish monarchs never intended.

The competing and conflicting legal status of Africans in colonial Spanish America raises the questions of why, when, and how the enslaved emerged as beings other than as slaves. Under what circumstances did Africans acquire discrete subject positions? For instance, by applying canon law to a population that had entered the Americas largely as chattel, Spanish authorities assigned converted slaves Christian identities with defined obligations and rights formulated long before the European encounter with Guinea (the early modern Christian European referent for West Africa). On what grounds—theological or legal—did Spaniards rationalize this decision?

Similarly, why did the Spanish monarchy grant the tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition authority over Africans and their descendants but exempt Amerindians? By demanding that converted Africans adhere to canon law and subjecting the sinners among them to the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical court and the tribunal of the Holy Office, Spaniards perceived certain individuals of African descent as Old World persons. Yet studies of race and slavery in the Americas have posited Africans as the quintessential others. If not the "other," what position did peoples of African descent occupy in the encounter between the Old and New Worlds?
By implicitly addressing these and similar questions, this book demonstrates that slave status—a legal category describing property in persons—merely represented one of several identities that enslaved Africans acquired in their forced migration from Guinea to the Indies (the Spanish name for the Americas). The circumstances under which these competing and conflicting identities emerged are central to the book’s narrative structure. The genesis of the early modern African diaspora resides in imperial expansion, which included an unfolding political theory that informed the Christian European encounter with Guinea and its diverse inhabitants, and the process of transplanting some of those inhabitants to the Indies as slaves where they were also rendered vassals and Christians.

Simply put, the African diaspora—a lived experience—also constituted a field of identities made possible by the complexity of Spanish imperial ideology and Christian political thought, which assigned Africans discrete juridical identities as slaves, royal subjects, and persons with souls. For these reasons, the African diaspora as it emerges here represents both an experience and the product of regulation. African lives, as recorded by Spanish clerks, in Spanish records, for Spanish purposes, must be recovered from an archive that persons of African descent did little to construct in the first instance. Efforts to recover the “experiences” elicited by the diverse juridical identities that Africans acquired demands a careful delineation of the regulatory proceedings of absolutism.  

For students of the African diaspora, recovery of history remains a central preoccupation. But recovering histories of slaves and freedpersons also poses a formidable feat. “Africans”—an invention of the West—became “slaves” and “blacks” after they were rendered into commodities and removed from the land of their origins. They subsequently entered the absolutist archive as objects largely divorced from the material and ideological world of any past but that to which their owners ascribed. Can the recovery of history avert the impact of colonial rule on the formation of an archive? Can historians produce an unmediated past capable of restoring subjects, agency, and narratives when absolutism constructed these very categories? I argue that it is impossible to recover an authentic and unmediated past since the fragments on which historians must rely emanated in regulation. The genealogy whereby “Africans” became “slaves” and “blacks” serves as a powerful reminder that the history of the enslaved and their descendants—free and enslaved—cannot be disengaged from the dominant historical process. As Franz Fanon, the theorist of black existentialism, observed, “the black soul is a white man’s artifact.” Though commenting on the late modern experience, Fanon understood that discerning a pure “experience” represented a quixotic quest akin to the act of authentic recovery—arguably social history’s defining mission. 

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At best, we can hope to contextualize the African past by delineating how, when, and why specific categories emerged. Given, as we shall see, the contingent nature of defining “black” (negro), “black creole” (negro criollo), and “mulatto” (mulato), among other terms, social labels never acquired fixed meanings. The instability informing the classification process serves to question the existence of distinct African, slave, and black identities. Efforts to harness the surviving fragments in order to produce a history of the African diaspora requires careful attention to the overlapping ensemble of texts, traditions, and regulatory practices that constitute a discursive domain, that field of meaning through which specific terms, symbols, and behavior take on and impose significance.

From the beginning of their initial encounters along the African littoral, Portugal’s rulers and then the Spanish Crown monitored the experiences of Africans and their descendants. As the initial chattel raids gave way to mercantile relations, the Iberian monarchies imposed their preferred juridical terminology and through such language structured their relations with the Guinea’s inhabitants.

We know that in Guinea of the fifteenth through sixteenth centuries, there was no such thing as an overarching African or black identity formulated in response to the European presence. Individuals largely identified themselves on the basis of lineages and occasionally on state structures, both of which were tenuous. The names of the port cities that were points of embarkation for groups of people from many disparate regions of Africa became the “ethnic” labels assigned to enslaved individuals. Thus, a person’s “ethnicity” was assigned by Europeans through his or her encounter with slavery. The answer to the most basic of questions about identity—Who are you?—was defined by European categories of classifications from the moment of enslavement.

From the moment of enslavement the Portuguese and Spaniards categorized Africans as “ethnics,” thereby ensuring both the legitimacy of the enslaving process and demonstrating their mastery over the enslaved. This distinction was important to the Europeans, since some Africans could not be legally enslaved. For example, the Portuguese until the middle of the seventeenth century recognized the vassal status of the subjects of the king of Kongo and prohibited their enslavement. There were, of course, exceptions, but in general the Portuguese respected the subject status of the Bakongo, which helps explain the dearth of “Congos” in the Americas prior to the middle of the seventeenth century. The identity of the African shaped who could legitimately be enslaved and, in turn, structured the slave trade. Consequently, the Portuguese and the Spanish focused on minuta of “identity,” giving Africans labels that became the administrative categories in the New World and subsequently entered the colonial archives. When Africans in New Spain interacted with colo-
nial authorities, they identified themselves as “from Angola” or “from Biafra land” or “from Terra Nova.” These were not concepts that carried cachet with Africans in Africa; they represented European ways of categorizing.

It is evidence of the emerging legal consciousness of bozales that they adopted European nomenclature in their encounters with and uses of the European juridical systems. To accept that slavery is overarching is to lose opportunities to understand how individuals fashioned identities that were meaningful to them outside the system of slavery. Many bozales and persons of African descent whose stories entered the archives demonstrated great skill as they worked their way through the intricacies of European legal systems. As they did so, they used language that those in power could understand.

To ensure that crown favorites and their king’s coffer benefited from the mercantile intercourse, officials carefully regulated the demand side through royal charters. During the second half of the fifteenth century, as Castilians challenged Portugal’s purported hegemony over Guinea, the terms informing the charters and the language of the factors assumed even greater precision. By the sixteenth century, their trading monopoly with Guinea sanctioned by the pope, the Portuguese regulated the slave trade through European-derived concepts such as asiento (contract), pieza de India (a unit of measure representing an ideal male slave), and bozal (a slave directly from Africa). This regulatory language proliferated and subsequently mediated the trade in humans that extended to Iberia, the Atlantic Islands, and, finally, the Americas. But as this book illustrates, the terminology used to describe persons of African descent expanded over the course of the middle passage and beyond. By the time a slave ship landed in the Indies, the Africans on board already constituted slaves, royal subjects, and, in some cases, Christians. Through their prescribed juridical status, Africans and their descendants formulated New World identities that had valence during their encounters with absolutism. For this reason, identity was not a preordained essence for persons of African descent in the New World; it was carefully constructed.

Focusing on New Spain’s slave trade and the formation of the African presence, Chapter 1 tracks the cultural shifts informing descriptions of the slave and free colored populations. Spaniards used a number of terms to refer to persons of African descent which reflected purported and actual differences among members of a constantly expanding population. In ascribing meaning to specific terms, royal officials, ecclesiastical authorities, and slave-owners underscored the regulatory intent of classification. Naming people and places signified mastery. Despite the power of dominant representations, the African-born and their descendants reconstituted their identities via diverse regulatory structures. But identities changed in accordance with the demographic, cul-
tural, and social shifts among the population of African descent. Aside from describing these sociocultural shifts among persons of African descent, this chapter argues that New Spain, and in particular Mexico City, constituted a slave society—a society that Spain’s sovereigns were intent on regulating.

Spain’s rulers deployed various mechanisms to contain the threat of heresy presented by a population who was not Christian by birth. In an effort to discipline the African presence, the Spanish monarchy relied on the Catholic Church. An ally of, if not subservient to, royal absolutism, Catholic authorities complied, due largely to a fifteenth-century papal decree, with the Patronato Real, which granted Spain’s rulers the authority to make all ecclesiastical appointments.

In regulating the African presence, ecclesiastical officials subjected converted black peoples to Christian norms. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the focus of Chapter 2, the ecclesiastical courts began policing the Christian commonwealth and disciplining the laity, who also represented the king’s vassals. The ecclesiastical court insisted that the laity adhere to Christian orthodoxy and through conjugal laws determined the various cultural identities individuals could assume. The extant proceedings, recorded in the bienes nacionales, reveal how Mexico’s ecclesiastical court regulated the behavior of Africans and their descendants in accordance with Christian mores. Spain’s regulatory practices represented a novelty in the Americas because of their focus on the body, in particular sexual behavior, and the extent of their reach. This chapter demonstrates that the timing of absolutism’s ascendancy prompted the Crown to extend greater authority over Africans as both property and vassals. Control over slavery, slaves, and the free colored population constituted an essential part of state-building. Christian courts and ecclesiastical sources aside; the formation of Spain’s imperial state was demonstrated in its control of slavery, slaves, and free people of color.

Over the course of the sixteenth century, the limits of absolutism became readily apparent. Despite ecclesiastical vigilance, heresy proliferated in New Spain. While clerics saw verbal expressions that contravened the sacraments and canon law as heretical, following the Protestant Reformation, the term “heresy” expanded to include views and practices that challenged Catholic sovereignty. In 1569, Philip II was sufficiently alarmed to call upon the services of the Holy Office of the Inquisition—an institution regularly staffed by clerics but which in Spain and the Americas was under royal control. Indeed, it is critical to underscore that the Inquisition and the Catholic Church embodied two distinct institutions. Chapter 3 examines the effect of the Inquisition’s powerful presence from its spectacular entry, bearing all the trappings of a reconquista (reconquest), to the spectacle of the initial auto-de-fé, a procession in which the guilty were paraded before the community in penitential clothing.
denoting their shame. Sometimes the guilty were publicly whipped, and on occasion individuals were executed. Despite its concerns with the Protestant heresy and the purported growth of the Jewish population, the Inquisition focused primarily on the Catholic laity, which was largely African. From the beginning, royal officials perceived Africans and their descendants as people of reason (gente de razón), according them a juridical status in the Spanish commonwealth (República de los Españoles) and thereby subjecting them to the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. In the eyes of the tribunal members, persons of African descent occupied a status distinct from that of the original natives of the Indies, who, as a result, were exempted from the jurisdiction of the Inquisition.

The intrusive nature of absolutism emerges fully in the inquisition proceedings mounted against persons of African descent. The tribunal never identified persons of African descent as a specific target, but nearly 50 percent of the inquisition proceedings involved Africans and their creole descendants. These proceedings, which figure prominently in this project, underscore both the extent of the African presence in New Spain and the Christian norms to which secular and ecclesiastical officials subjected Africans and their descendants. As the Inquisition sought to exorcise heresy from the realm and shore up the authority of the sovereign, Mexico’s preponderance of Africans and their descendants witnessed the grim and gory spectacles of the auto-de-fé, orchestrated for a commonwealth and city composed principally of castas, a term referring to biologically mixed people.

After New Spain’s initial auto-de-fé, Catholic reform assumed a less spectacular expression. Pedro Moya de Contreras’s transformation from the initial inquisitor general to Mexico’s archbishop symbolized the manner in which royal officials insinuated reform throughout the viceroyalty. Though the Inquisition remained an institutional fixture well into the nineteenth century, its modus operandi confined the tribunal’s presence to those extraordinary moments when truly egregious acts surfaced among the laity.

The Episcopal Court, over which the ecclesiastical judge presided, held a more ubiquitous position with regard to the Christian flock. As archbishop, Pedro Moya occupied a role from which he could reform the Church and discipline the laity. A decade after his investiture, Pedro Moya had instilled royal authority throughout New Spain’s clergy and Catholic reform stood ascendant. The Church’s regulatory features presided over the cultural sphere that it had helped to create—baptism, confirmation, yearly confession, marriage, and the last rites.

An examination in Chapter 4 of over 4,000 marriage petitions from 1584 to 1640 highlights ethnic and cultural self-fashioning in an official context while illustrating the complexity of community formation, a process rarely
discernible in histories of the African diaspora. Even though the clergy carefully regulated cultural forms in accordance with Christian norms, in selecting their witnesses (testigos), New Spain’s African-descended population simultaneously manifested identities and expressed agency in a manner that Church officials never intended.

Chapter 5 examines how persons of African descent, free and enslaved, actively navigated the cultural terrain of their rights and obligations as Christian subjects. Like the previous chapters, it delineates the regulatory sites in which persons of African descent emerged as subjects and the manner in which subject status elicited specific depictions of their experience. This ethnography underscores how, in the prescriptive context which absolutism, Christianity, and Catholic reform imposed, the strategic performances of persons of African descent in New Spain—manifest in the use of language, cultural norms, and the law—reflected a cultural immersion rarely associated with Africans and their descendants. Christianity’s regulatory impulse, in short, made possible a creolization process among persons of African descent that included the acquisition of a legal consciousness alongside Spanish and indigenous cultural practices.

Chapter 6 offers an extended look at this creole consciousness among persons of African descent by examining some of the initial sixteenth-century inquisition proceedings involving the Hispanic population. The unequal dialogue informing these trials again highlights the extent to which inquisition officials defined persons of African descent as Christian subjects with an obligation to adhere to Catholic mores. Catholic morality embraced more than a few discrete norms and practices. It constituted an elaborate belief and cultural system that defined gender conventions, sexual behavior, and kinship relations with great precision.

By embracing these mores—freely or out of fear—Africans and their creole descendants effected a profound transformation of their sense of self. The inquisition proceedings, which delineate acceptable practices, enable us to see the speed of and the extent to which Christianity was insinuated into the lives of Africans and their descendants. In fashioning themselves and their narratives for the inquisitors, the innumerable witnesses both genuflected and performed, but in either case revealed a cultural sensibility that permitted them to navigate the judicial maze. By means of this awareness, persons of African descent also magnified the contours of the cultural arena that they inhabited. Although this arena thrived in a symbiotic relationship with Church and state, the trial proceedings record the ways in which community boundaries differed from social status and the structures of social stratification.

Several studies have examined the experiences of the enslaved, offering important assessments of slave life in New Spain. Mostly social historical works,
these studies chartered new ground in the histories of the slave trade, the distribution of the enslaved, slave labor, the nature of slave treatment, social control, manumission, and race relations. In analyzing the social experiences of slavery, the pioneering studies often left basic issues and common assumptions about the African presence in need of attention. For instance, why was New Spain home at one time to the largest free black population in the Americas? In what ways was the growth of the free black population related to a natural rate of increase among the enslaved population? Unfortunately, Latin Americans have largely moved on, believing that the early African experience remains irrelevant to the grand narrative of colonial Spanish America. Invariably, efforts aimed at recovering and redefining the African experience—including this one—start from a defensive posture designed to validate the study's significance and relationship to the history of power. In an effort to discern the workings of power, for instance, modern studies of slavery tend to focus on property and the authority that masters wielded over their chattel. This perspective rightly insists that the reality of power—most notably work—shaped the slave experience. Yet as a study of the urban experience of Africans and their descendants, this book does not privilege the laboring process. In devoting little attention to work, I do not deny that the laboring process shaped culture. It did, as Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan have reminded us. Culture, in fact, emerged from the conflict between masters and slaves concerning the control of time. Still, I suggest that in the context of New Spain and particularly in Mexico City the laboring process was but one factor pressing on persons of African descent and their cultural formation. Labor simply did not have a monopoly over social relations.

My elision of labor is in part also a result of the sources I selected. Inquisition and church records offer invaluable depth into the lives and consciousness of New Spain's residents, providing a glimpse that cannot be reproduced for any other part of the early modern Atlantic world. Yet work and master-slave relations have a limited presence in inquisition and ecclesiastical records. Although the archives contain records of how individuals identified their legal status, their masters, and the households in which they resided, they say very little about the culture of work. But at the same time, inquisition and ecclesiastical proceedings underscore New Spain's culture of power—absolutism's concern with the moral behavior of ordinary peoples. By attending to baptism, confirmation, marriage, death, and deviations from New Spain's sixteenth-century Christian norm, the ecclesiastical records and inquisition sources attend to critical episodes in peoples' lives and thereby in their Christian life cycle. I insist that in the period (1570–1640) and place (Mexico City) covered by this study, Christianity was just as—if not more—invasive than the patricians' authority over their African slaves and servants. Scholars have long known of

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these records, but only a few—Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Colin Palmer, Solange Alberro, and Richard Boyer—have explored their potential for writing histories of Africans and their creole descendants.32

Despite their richness and countless testimonies, I treat inquisition and ecclesiastical sources with caution.33 My central concern is who has the power in these stories and who does not. These sources were created because of the power of absolutism, and I do not feel that they can be viewed outside the context of the influence of that ideology. Concerns about power explain my insistence on determining the social logic behind the production of historical sources.34 I initially wanted to know why Spaniards subjected persons of African descent to Christian norms and brought some of the purported sinners before the tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

I view this book as a social history of absolutism that simultaneously constitutes a culturally inflected intellectual history. As such, this book does not purport to represent an exhaustive examination of urban Africans and their descendants in sixteenth-century Mexico—that history, if possible, needs to be written. I do, however, insist that the source material generated by Spanish absolutism at its epicenter—Mexico City—offers an unrivaled glimpse into the ways that Christianity and slavery produced specific gendered identities—or at least the strategic performance thereof—among Africans and their descendants. As the ecclesiastical authorities and the inquisitors subjected peoples of African descent to scrutiny, alien cultural practices did not represent the principal threat to the dominion of the sovereign of Spain in New Spain. For the clerics and members of the Holy Office, the gendered and sexual behavior of Africans was at issue. Absolutism, predicated on Christian patriarchal and conjugal norms, perceived an implicit threat in practices that did not conform to Christian orthodoxy. For this reason, Spain’s absolutists expressed an interest in having the Catholic Church and the Inquisition regulate—by both recording and disciplining—the lives of Africans and their descendants. In examining this regulatory process, this project uncovers an exceedingly rich but neglected gendered, sexual, and conjugal history among Africans and their descendants.

Before us, then, is a history of the African presence under absolutism. Predicated on naming Africans and their descendants and identifying their lovers, kin, and enemies, this history—comprised of fictions, tales, and stories—reminds us that absolutism focused on controlling people. We should never forget that many of the persons whose experiences fill these pages were slaves—the property of others—or their immediate descendants. As a legal category, as a propriety relationship, as a labor-extracting mechanism, and as a form of domination, slavery shaped but did not determine African experience in urban New Spain. The emphasis on “lives,” as opposed to “experience,” seems appropriate for several reasons. For Church and state, the slave experience—as

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property, as a labor category, or as the subject of domination—and the African presence—alien and seditious by official definition—was not the issue. The concern resided with their gendered identities and sexuality, matters intimately associated with lives but not synonymous with the slave or African experience.

By exploiting the breach on the basis of their gendered identities, the African-born and their creole descendants used their lives to question the very meaning of the slave and colonial experience. Initially, slaves transformed Christian obligations into rights. As males and females, slaves were entitled to a Christian marriage, and as a couple they had a right to a conjugal existence. Conjugality resulted in visitation rights and restrictions on selling a slave husband or wife away from their spouse. By insisting on their rights as Christians, slaves circumscribed the masters’ authority to treat them in any manner they saw fit. The ability to invoke these rights and mobilize the Church, state, and specific masters in their defense was the hallmark of a creole consciousness. In glimpsing this consciousness, however, we must remind ourselves that it emerged through regulatory proceedings, which invariably must temper our romance with the recovery of this knowledge. Still, the countless episodes underscore a cultural resourcefulness rarely if ever associated with African experience in the New World—a resourcefulness that the regulatory process highlights even if it only shows us strategic performances of Christian identities.

In recognizing the Church’s involvement with converted Africans, I should emphasize that Christian discipline, not amelioration, informed this intervention. As the largest institutional owners of slaves in the Americas, the various Catholic corporations were not troubled by the enslavement of Africans. Yet the truly insidious part was the Church’s commitment to transforming Africans into Christians, thereby distancing them from earlier selves. Can there be a question about the violence involved in remaking personhood? Even though persons of African descent used their rights as Christians to effect marriage—a process that brought their identities as individuals with souls into conflict with their status as chattel—the toll created by the negation of the past was enormous. Even if enslaved Africans willingly embraced Christianity and its social practices—baptism, gender norms, and matrimony—conversion to Christianity resulted in new ways of recognizing ontological distancing, a phenomenon that defined the African experience in the New World.35

Introduction 13
1 Soiled Gods and the Formation of a Slave Society

Continental Spanish slavery did not create a slave society—that is, a society dominated by slaveholders and marked principally by the pervasive influence of the master-slave relationship—but it did make possible enough concentrations of plantations and mines using black labor to create substantial pockets of masters and slaves within the wider society.¹

New World slavery was ostensibly, but not exclusively, rooted in agricultural production. Slaves spent their lives toiling on estates—haciendas, engenhos, and plantations—cultivating cash crops.² In most regions of the Americas, slave labor also contributed substantial foodstuffs (cereal, grains, fruits, vegetables, and livestock) to subsistence, household, regional, and domestic economies, thereby reinforcing the perception that New World slavery constituted an agricultural institution.³ The dominance of the plantation complex has obscured the diverse African experiences that flourished within New World slavery.⁴ Though recent scholarship has done much to revise this perspective, studies on the African experience largely remain focused on grand estates.⁵ For this reason, scholars still identify slave societies with the plantation complex while associating cities as societies with slaves.⁶ But in Spanish America, slave societies and the African presence initially emerged in the urban crucibles of colonial power—Lima and Mexico City—before extending into the rural periphery. To define bondage in Spanish America, on the basis of its urban location, as mere “pockets” of a slave society ignores Spanish colonial development. In contrast to other European colonies, Spanish urban centers featured closer ties to the countryside that have quite discernible implications for slavery and the early African experience.⁷

Historical scholarship about slavery has also focused on labor instead of on the multiple roles ascribed to slaves, which has drawn the attention of scholars away from comparing Peru and New Spain with Jamaica, Carolina, Saint Domingue, Cuba, and Brazil. Similarly, scholars eschew positioning Mexico City and Lima alongside Charleston, Havana, Rio, or Salvador.⁸ One of the most prescient scholars of slavery recently noted that “what distinguished societies with slaves was the fact that slaves were marginal to the central productive processes; slavery was just one form of labor among many.”⁹ Slavery on the Spanish mainland, though far from insignificant, comprised one of several
ways in which the Spaniards organized labor, including that of Africans. In such societies, as Ira Berlin has noted, “no one presumed the master-slave relationship to be the social exemplar.” For similar reasons, Eugene Genovese has determined that “continental Spanish slavery did not create a slave society.”

But as this and subsequent chapters illustrate, New Spain constituted a vibrant slave society in which the institution and its resulting mores informed patterns in the society at large. The ethos of slavery did, however, shape servant and dependent relations in general. As a result, the African presence had a profound, though little-understood, impact on social formation in mainland Spanish America. Frank Tannenbaum concluded as much when he noted that “without the Negro the texture of American life would have been different—different in lore, family, social organization, and politics and, equally important, different in economy.” The impact of slavery was pervasive, constituting the “social exemplar” for race, gender, and dependent relations. But in Spanish America and throughout the New World, “slave” and “African” were eventually synonyms. Consequently, the slaves’ impact was decidedly African in nature. To acknowledge this perspective offers the possibility of viewing New Spain as a slave society without demanding a complete reexamination of the historiographical tradition associated with Tannenbaum that argued for a benign interpretation of Latin American slavery when compared to bondage in Anglo-America.

The emergence of New Spain’s slave society coincided with the destruction of Tenochtitlán and the founding of the viceregal capital, Mexico City. Even prior to the siege of Tenochtitlán (1519–1521), the Nahua-speaking emissaries sent by Moctezuma to discern the intentions of the new arrivals from the east observed the obvious, that the strangers included persons of varying phenotype. As they assessed the strangers’ presence, their strength, and the nature of their mission, the Nahuaas saw all the new arrivals as deities, referring to the black strangers as “soiled gods.” Once they learned that the Spaniards did not represent gods, the Nahuaas ascribed to blacks a less epic status as slaves. Though the Nahuaas corrected their misperception, the initial observation underscores the presence of Africans in the earliest phase of the Spanish conquest, highlighting a reality that in the hands of Spanish chroniclers, as well as those of subsequent writers, still remains largely ignored. In victory and in history, the Spaniards posited the conquest as a binary encounter with Indians, thus flattening the triangulation that the ethnography of the Nahuaas revealed. For Spanish chroniclers, Africans, even as members of the conquering party, merited no reference despite their numbers and the Nahuaas’ recognition of their presence.

Several years after the Spanish conquest (1521), enslaved Africans directly
from Guinea, *bozales*, joined the initial African slaves and black servants who, because they had spent time among Spaniards, were identified as ladinos. These Africans sometimes allied themselves with Spaniards. Ladinos made informed decisions based on long-standing familiarity with individual Spaniards. The emotional intimacy that developed during years, if not a lifetime, of service in Iberian households enabled ladinos to acquire command of Portuguese or Spanish and thus navigate with ease in an Hispanic milieu.\(^{15}\)

Like many ladinos, Juan Garrido was born on the African continent and was purchased by Portuguese slave-traders who carried him to Lisbon, where they sold him to an unknown merchant. The merchant shipped Juan to “Castile,” where he became Pedro Garrido’s possession.\(^{16}\) Seven years later, when rumors circulated about the fantastic wealth in the Indies, thousands of Spaniards boarded ships bound for Hispaniola, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Many of these fortune-seekers, including Pedro Garrido, arrived in the Americas with family members and servants in tow.\(^{17}\) For many ladinos, their relationships to individual Spaniards were nonnegotiable even in the midst of the chaos that characterized the early encounters between Africans, indigenous peoples, and Iberians.

In the 1540s, Juan Garrido, by then an aging African conquistador, humbly informed Charles V of his exploits in the Indies:

> I became a Christian in Lisbon, of my own will, spent seven years in Castile, and landed in Santo Domingo . . . where I was for some time; From there I ventured to San Juan de Puerto Rico . . . where I spent considerable time . . . afterwards landing in New Spain; I was present at the taking of Mexico City and in other conquests, and later [went] with the Marquis to the island; I was the first to plant and harvest wheat in this land, from which has come all that there now is; and brought to New Spain many vegetable seeds; I am married . . . with three children . . . very poor and have nothing with which to sustaint myself.\(^{18}\)

Nearly twenty years after the defeat of the Triple Alliance, Juan Garrido still basked in his glorious feats on behalf of Christendom. Like many of his Iberian comrades, Juan Garrido never succeeded in parlaying his conquistador status into financial prosperity. Unable to enrich himself, this weary soldier laid claim to a greater mission—the conquest of Tenochtitlán. As he recalled the circuitous route that led to his participation in that momentous event, Juan Garrido also revealed much about the formative experiences of Africans and their descendants—experiences characterized by movement (both of persons and cultures) social fluidity, and experimentation, which collectively produced the cultural hybridity that defined New Spain from its violent inception.\(^{19}\)

Prior to joining the alliance between Spaniards and indigenous people that
laid siege to Tenochtitlán, Juan Garrido spent nearly a decade in the Caribbean. In 1510, he evidently landed in Hispaniola, where he spent seven years in Santo Domingo and subsequently settled in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Soon thereafter, Juan enlisted with Hernan Cortés's *entrada* (expedition) that left Cuba for the mainland on February 18, 1519. Next to nothing is known about Juan’s role in the expedition and subsequent conquest of Tenochtitlán. Vague and unsubstantiated assertions identify Juan as a survivor of la Noche Triste, when Cortés’s army barely survived its retreat from the Mexica capital. Juan Garrido allegedly built a chapel in Tenochtitlán in memory of his fallen comrades after the reinvigorated multilateral alliance defeated the Mexica military.

In 1523, Juan joined another conquistador, Antonio de Carvajal, on his exploration of the territory of the Tarascan people in the northwest. By August 1524, Juan had returned to the Mexicas' former capital, which the Spaniards had renamed Tenochtitlan-Mexico City, and settled on the outskirts of the *traza* (the Spanish urban center). Six months later, the Spaniards declared Juan a *vecino* (resident), alloting him a *solar* (urban plot) in the *traza*, on which he erected a house. During the second phase of the internecine Spanish power struggle (1526–1527), Juan evidently lost his coveted position as *portero* (doorman) of Mexico’s *cabildo* (town council). He subsequently departed for the Zacataula province, which he had explored during the Carvajal *entrada*. By 1528, he possessed mining equipment and a gang of slaves who were panning for gold in the alluvial mines of the northwest. Years later, a fortune in gold remained an elusive quest and Juan returned to Mexico City. In the 1530s, Juan reunited with Cortés as the famed conqueror led an expedition into lower California. By 1536, with his thirst for adventure satiated, Juan returned to the vice-regal capital, where he died in the late 1540s.

Despite the extraordinary events that shaped Juan Garrido’s life, a number of Africans shared similar experiences. Although Iberians ascribed a subordinate status to peoples of African descent, the threat of annihilation tempered the social hierarchy considerably and motivated hundreds of Africans to actively participate in the New World conquests. After major battles, Spaniards rewarded individual Africans who had served as retainers, soldiers, and auxiliaries with booty, freedom, and occasionally even an *encomienda*. In turn, the newly freed African beneficiaries often enlisted with the subsequent expedition in pursuit of fortune, if not fame. Juan Garrido’s decision to join the Carvajal *entrada* and Cortés’s mission in lower California typifies the shrewd behavior of many Africans during the conquest period. Yet this willingness to exploit existing opportunities came with a price.

The familiarity informing ladino-Spanish social interaction during the tumultuous formative years waned in the postconquest period (1528–). The rigid and feudal nature of Iberian social relations gradually replaced the fluid social

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mores of the conquest period. The arrival of thousands of Spaniards fueled commercial competition, including the African slave trade, and exacerbated the gulf between erstwhile allies. One symptom of the mounting tension between Africans and Spaniards manifested itself in 1537, when bozales planned a conspiracy that the Spanish authorities discovered and quickly quelled.30

In Juan’s waning years, the ethos that equated slaves with Africans was ascendant in New Spain. Although this ideological construct was in place by the mid-sixteenth century, during the conquest period, the concepts underlying the marriage of “African” with “slave” remained fluid. As Juan Garrido recounted his exploits, he neglected to inform Charles V of his social legacy. The most notable yet elusive legacy Juan and others like him left behind involved the social ambiguity and cultural dexterity that characterized the experiences of Africans and their descendants throughout the colonial period. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the growing presence of bozales momentarily overshadowed Juan’s legacy. But the constantly expanding population of freedpersons, most notably mulattos, contradicts our too-simplistic understanding of New Spain’s African past. In a slave society, the presence and expansion of the free mulatto population was an essential index of the ambiguous nature of social relations and cultural forms. Juan Garrido and members of the conquest generation forged this legacy, which then defined the experiences of subsequent generations of Afro-, Euro-, and Indo-Mestizos.

By the mid-sixteenth century, people of African descent outnumbered Spaniards in New Spain and comprised the second-largest slave population in the Americas. The increase in the number of slaves from Africa occurred despite the existence of an abundant, though declining, supply of indigenous labor. Since Spanish colonial policy rested on ethnic segmentation, Africans filled a distinctive labor niche in New Spain’s economy. Most Africans staffed Spanish households as domestics or toiled in an urban economy dedicated to the consumer behavior of Spaniards, an arena from which the Spanish Crown repeatedly sought to exclude indigenous peoples.

African slaves in the urban centers of New Spain fulfilled multiple roles for their owners. In Mexico City, they represented both labor and symbols of the status of their owners. In the colony’s highly honorific culture, Spaniards used male domestic slaves to double as armed retainers, stewards, and pages, thereby demonstrating to their peers their economic status.31 Thomas Gage, an Englishman and Dominican friar who in 1625 visited Mexico City, observed how

the gallants of this city shew themselves, some on horseback, and most in coaches, daily about four of the clock in the afternoon in a pleasant shady field called la Alameda ... where do meet as constantly as the merchants
upon our exchange about two thousand coaches, full of gallants, ladies, and
citizens, to see and to be seen, to court and to be courted. The gentlemen
have their train of blackamoors, some a dozen, some half a dozen, wait-
ing on them, in brave and gallant liveries, heavy wit gold and silver lace,
with silk stockings on their black legs and roses on their feet, and swords by
their sides. The ladies also carry their train by their coach’s side of such jet-
glass damsels . . . who with their bravery and white mantels over them seem
to be, as the Spaniards saith, “mosca en leche,” a fly in milk.\textsuperscript{32}

According to Gage, in this routine yet ritualized occurrence, Spaniards em-
ployed slaves as labor and, through conspicuous displays, as objects that con-
ferred honor. Slaves offered real and embodied symbolic services to Spaniards
intent on expressing their superiority.

Since urban slaveholding patterns geared toward domestic consumption and
the symbolic importance of slaves in an honorific culture defy quantification,
scholars have had difficulty assessing slavery’s economic significance. For most
scholars of colonial Latin America, silver mining constituted the centerpieces
of the postconquest economies. From this perspective, the ensuing social rela-
tions between Spaniards and Indians over the access to labor represented the
foundations of the colonial social structure. While mining and the control of
indigenous mine laborers occupied an important place in the social fabric, this
narrow focus on silver production and the process of labor extraction over-
shadows the African presence. The 29,000 Indians who toiled in the mines of
Peru and New Spain during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries
were, of course, central to silver production.\textsuperscript{33} But this total did not consti-
tute the majority of the colonial labor force. The sizeable African-descended
population—which in New Spain in 1646 alone totaled 151,618—questions the
long-standing perception that the Indian miner was synonymous with the early
colonial economy.\textsuperscript{34}

The growth and size of the African and especially free black populations
requires a reconsideration of the slave trade and the role of slavery in New
Spain’s economy. Persons of African descent filled an important economic
niche that only increased with the growth of the free black population. In re-
examining the role of Africans and their descendants, scholars need to move
beyond the chattel principle (a perspective whereby analysis of persons of Af-
ricans descent is restricted to slavery and to slaves as laborers) and its effects
on New Spain’s economy. An urban free black labor force started to outnumber
the slave population in the early seventeenth century. In 1646, the free colored
population throughout New Spain numbered 116,529.\textsuperscript{35} Free black labor surely
surpassed slave and possibly Indian labor in terms of importance in the ur-
ban and certain regional economies. Much needs to be known about the New

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World’s first slave society, but we must also acknowledge that this society, from its inception, coexisted with the earliest and largest free black cultures in the Americas. From the beginning, New Spain’s slave society was porous, as Juan Garrido’s story and the following overview reveal. Though New Spain constituted a slave society, the experience of Africans, like all dependent relations within the colony, remained, within limitations, remarkably fluid.

The Structure of Slavery

Soon after the siege and destruction of Tenochtitlán, Spaniards realized that the wealth they could extract from the Nahuas consisted of tributary payments, in kind and in labor. Initially, Spaniards appropriated tribute payments earmarked for the Nahua elite while distributing tributary labor, in the form of encomiendas, among themselves. At the same time, the Spaniards initiated commercial ventures that tapped existing resources. A notable example is the Cuban sugar cane that Hernan Cortés planted in Santiago Tuxtla along the banks of the Tepengo River, where he also built New Spain’s first sugar mill. A year later, he initiated the construction of a shipyard in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In 1532, Cortés erected another sugar mill, this time near the town of Cuernavaca. Afterward, he began assembling a water-powered sugar mill at Tlatlaltenango in the same vicinity.

Cortés’s compatriots engaged in similarly ambitious commercial schemes. Between 1524 and 1538, for instance, Antonio Serrano de Cardona, Bernardino del Castillo, Rodrigo de Albornoz, and Pedro de Estrada erected three water-powered mills and one animal-powered mill in Chiapas, Morelos, and Veracruz. Many more encomenderos established estates on which they raised livestock, cultivated grain for urban settlements, or produced goods for local and distant markets. By the end of the 1530s, the Spaniards had largely channeled the resources derived from the indigenous population, including tributary labor, into the commercial economy that, in the postconquest countryside, provided the venue in which Africans, Amerindians, and Spaniards interacted with the greatest frequency.

Despite their penchant for urban living, the Spanish elite gradually migrated into the countryside in order to tap provincial resources and indigenous labor. After establishing their rural enterprises, the most affluent encomenderos retreated to Mexico City or some provincial city, leaving distant relatives, illegitimate offspring, and impoverished Spaniards to preside over their interests. From the beginning, free and enslaved Africans joined this motley crew of Spaniards who together formed the nascent core of Spanish colonialism.

Persons of African descent, both slave and free, initially resided in urban centers, where they worked as domestics, personal servants, artisans, and day
laborers. This brought them into daily contact with Spaniards and, to a lesser extent, the indigenous peoples. Throughout the Americas, the descendants of Africans also cultivated the Spanish-owned gardens, orchards, and vineyards adjacent to urban settlements. At dusk, they abandoned the fruit and vegetable plantations for nearby villages, towns, or cities; the initial persons of African descent in New Spain cannot be categorized as rural residents. As the encomenderos devised new ways to profit from their tributaries, they relied on acculturated Africans and the miniscule but growing mulatto nucleus to serve as intermediaries and supervisors over indigenous laborers. Hispanicized after spending years either on the Iberian Peninsula, Spain’s Atlantic possessions, or the Caribbean islands, acculturated Africans had few qualms about representing the encomenderos’ interest. Throughout the 1530s, a constant stream of bozales—recent arrivals from Africa unfamiliar with Portuguese or Spanish and ignorant about Iberian customs—joined acculturated Africans (ladinos) and mulattos already present in the countryside. One scholar has estimated that during the first half of the sixteenth century, nearly 500 Africans annually entered New Spain.

In the 1540s and 1550s, Spanish commercial activities rapidly expanded throughout New Spain. The availability of land, which Spaniards rented or purchased from the indigenous peoples, acquired as land grants, or simply appropriated through force and guile, facilitated mid-century commercial expansion. As the Spaniards accrued more land, they maintained a tenuous grasp over their tributaries. Yet they never exclusively depended on indigenous tributaries for labor. From the colony’s inception, the Spaniards employed various labor strategies, including draft labor (whereby a native community was obligated to provide uncompensated labor for a designated period of time), work for wages, and slavery, often relying on all three simultaneously. By 1549, for instance, the resident labor force on Cortés’s sugar mill in Tlatelolco included 186 indigenous workers and 80 enslaved Africans. During the 1550s, the Spaniards steadily increased their dependence on wage and slave laborers of various hues.

By midcentury, commercial agriculture, livestock estates, and the mining industry essentially relied on a multiracial workforce composed of draft labor, enslaved Africans, and salaried workers. This variegated labor force profoundly shaped the composition of the community, the experiences of its members, and the formation of culture in New Spain. At midcentury, Africans were so numerous in New Spain that it alarmed the viceroy, Luis de Velasco. In 1553, he wrote Prince Philip requesting “an order limiting the license for bringing blacks since in New Spain there are more than twenty thousand who are increasing and will eventually spread confusion in the land.”

Despite Velasco’s warning, Spaniards annually imported over 500 Africans into New Spain. By 1570, the colony had received an estimated 36,500 Afri-
cans, of which 20,000 had survived.\textsuperscript{49} Among the approximately 36,500 Africans who entered New Spain by 1570, 80 percent came from the "Guinea of Cape Verde" and especially the "rivers of Guinea." A census taker in 1570 reported finding 8,000 black slaves and 1,000 mulattos in Mexico City alongside only 8,000 Spanish males.\textsuperscript{50} The nearly 60,000 Nahuas residing in Mexico City's Indian neighborhoods, however, easily outnumbered both groups.\textsuperscript{51} Though a disproportionate number of Africans and their descendants lived in Mexico City, by the end of the sixteenth century, they collectively rivaled, if not outnumbered, Spaniards throughout New Spain. In Puebla, for instance, the population of African descent constituted 40 percent of the nonindigenous population. In Veracruz, persons of African descent constituted 63 percent of the nonindigenous population. In Guanajuato, the 800 African slaves represented 66 percent of the Hispanic population. Even in remote Antequera, the descendants of Africans accounted for 31 percent of the nonindigenous population. These figures illustrate the preponderance of Africans in sixteenth-century New Spain and also highlight their presence in urban centers.\textsuperscript{52}

Africans also flourished in the countryside.\textsuperscript{53} In 1570, the archdiocese of Mexico included approximately 150 livestock estates on which 200 Spaniards, 300 slaves, and 50 mulattos resided. In Michoácan's diocese, which had 300 livestock estates and two water-powered mills, there was a population of 400 Spaniards, 200 mulattos, and "more than seven hundred slaves." The Tlaxcala diocese, in contrast, had 200 estates, 300 Spaniards, and 400 slaves of African descent. Oaxaca's diocese had 100 estates, on which 150 Spaniards and 200 slaves resided. Although imprecise, this census underscores the growth of the African and creole labor force in the mills of Morelos, Veracruz, and Michoácan; the livestock estates in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Michoácan; and the large cocoa plantations along the Pacific coast.\textsuperscript{54}

After 1570, the presence of Africans and their descendants continued to expand throughout New Spain. The commercial economy fueled much of this expansion and transformed the social landscape.\textsuperscript{55} By the closing decades of the sixteenth century, events in Africa, Europe, and the Americas affected the cultural composition of the transatlantic slave trade's cargo. Because of political events and economic changes along the Atlantic periphery, the seventeenth-century slave trade, which began in 1595, brought Africans to Spanish America who identified and were identified as Angolans. Although Portuguese slavers primarily transported Angolans to the Americas, they continued to ship Biafaras, Brans, Gelofos, Mandingas, and Terra Novas to Castile's various Atlantic provinces.\textsuperscript{56} The lingering West African presence among the bozales underscores Portugal's trading legacy in the "Guinea of Cape Verde."\textsuperscript{57}

By 1640, the Spaniards had imported over 110,000 ethnic Africans.\textsuperscript{58} For the period 1521–1639, this amounted to a little more than 900 per year. This
longitudinal perspective, however, obscures the vicissitudes of the slave trade. Spaniards received more enslaved Africans during the first four decades of the seventeenth century than they had throughout the entire sixteenth century. Ebbs and flows also characterized the seventeenth-century slave trade (1595–1639), which roughly corresponded to the union of the Portuguese and Spanish Crowns. In 1609 and again in 1619, the Spaniards imported over 6,000 slaves, but between 1611 and 1615 they legally managed to acquire a total of only 476 Africans. Despite these fluctuations, the seventeenth-century slave trade in New Spain averaged 1,871 persons annually; it reinforced the African presence while simultaneously augmenting the creole population. By 1646, an estimated 151,618 persons of African descent inhabited New Spain, of which 62,814 resided in the Archdiocese of Mexico. In the dioceses of Michoacan and Tlaxcala, Africans and their descendants of various legal categories respectively numbered 23,480 and 22,915. The remaining 42,409 were dispersed throughout the dioceses of Oaxaca, Nueva Galicia, Yucatan, and Chiapas.

Creoles clearly experienced phenomenal growth during the second half of the sixteenth century and the initial decades of the seventeenth century. In a 76-year period (1570–1646), the creole population grew fifty fold, from 2,437 to 116,529. Mostly free mulattos, they constituted the largest freed and free population in the Western Hemisphere—a position that creoles maintained well into the nineteenth century. The 35,089 residents of New Spain who were born in Africa represented only 30 percent of the “black” population; the 116,529 creoles accounted for the remainder.

Creoles, as Africans born in New Spain were known, emerged as a significant presence soon after the conquest. Throughout the sixteenth century, the growth of the creole population proceeded slowly but unabated. By the mid-sixteenth century, the creole population had proliferated to such an extent that the colonial authorities finally took notice. Despite the impressive growth of this population, initially it could not compensate for the high mortality rates among the descendants of Africans. Yet toward the end of the sixteenth century, steady growth among surviving persons of African descent augmented the expanding nucleus of creoles. By 1650, this nucleus had produced a nearly balanced sex ratio in many regions throughout New Spain, which in turn sustained the reproduction of the creole population.

Ironically, as creoles began to outnumber the African-born population, the institution of slavery became more tenuous. In fact, seventeenth-century estate inventories underscore the existence of two population trajectories among persons of African descent. While the Spaniards imported significant numbers of Africans during the first half of the seventeenth century, the demographic balance gradually shifted in favor of creoles and free mulattos. By 1589, the heirs of Cortés on the Marquesado del Valle’s livestock estates in the Tehuantepec

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region had had over fifty years of experience with African, indigenous, and Spanish laborers. In 1589, the full- and part-time resident work force included forty-one slaves, fifteen free mulattos, and nineteen indigenous wage laborers. Among the enslaved, there were twenty-one bozales and twenty creoles. Ten years later, only twenty-five slaves remained; the population of free mulattos and indigenous peoples had also diminished. By 1616, the presence of thirty-two slaves and nine free mulattos signaled the revitalization of Tehuantepec’s African and creole labor force. Six years later, however, enslaved mulattos ascended into the majority among the slave population while free mulattos rivaled and gradually eclipsed enslaved Africans as laborers.

Despite new African arrivals, natural reproduction ensured that mulattos retained their primacy among Tehuantepec’s slave labor force. Between 1588 and 1629, for instance, mulattos constituted 58.3 percent of the slave children born on the Tehuantepec estates. Despite these indices of growth, the decline of the slave population was irreversible. By the third decade of the seventeenth century, a permanent free mulatto majority had emerged on the Tehuantepec estates that, together with the indigenous laborers, comprised the bulk of the workforce.

The sugar industry in Morelos, which by 1570 had one of the largest slave populations in the Americas, experienced a similar pattern whereby creoles gradually replaced African-born individuals as laborers. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the Spaniards steadily acquired more land, on which they extended the cultivation of sugar cane and constructed additional water-powered mills. The expansion of the sugar industry created a demand for more labor, and Spaniards promptly imported a mass of enslaved Africans. Consequently, the African and creole population of Morelos soared to new heights. While older estates continually clamored for labor, the greatest demand came from owners of newly established sugar estates well positioned at the beginning of the seventeenth century to compete in New Spain’s labor market. Juan Fernández de la Concha, for instance, rapidly accumulated slave labor for his growing estate. In 1616, Juan Fernandez purchased the Guajoyuca estate, which had no laborers at the time. Fourteen years later, his labor force included eighty enslaved Africans, making him one of the largest slave-owners in Spanish America. Andrés Mendes’s Atlihuayan estate, founded in 1627, grew even faster. A mere five years after its construction, his estate also included a labor force of eighty enslaved persons.

Although persons defined as Angolans predominated among the African-born in seventeenth-century ethnic New Spain, the slave labor force in Morelos was not exclusively African. Black and mulatto slaves had a significant presence on the estates of Morelos, and during the first half of the seventeenth century, they began to outnumber Africans. Estate inventories reveal that the marca-
sado's mill, Tlaltenango, represented the only seventeenth-century sugar plantation on which Africans constituted at least 30 percent of the slave population. Even on the newest estates, such as Atlahuayan and Guajoyuca, creole and mulatto slaves easily outnumbered enslaved Africans. In 1680, sixty-four years after its construction, the Guajoyuca estate had only two African-born slaves, thirty-two blacks, and thirty mulattos.

Around the same time, the Atlahuayan estate included ten bozales, sixty-two blacks, and forty-four mulattos in its slave labor force. Surviving estate inventories from Morelos reveal that on average blacks and mulattos accounted for 81 percent of the slave population during the seventeenth century. The growth of the black and mulatto population did more than offset the waning African presence; it also contributed to the expansion of free mulattos who, along with indigenous peoples, constituted the core of eighteenth-century labor force at Morelos.

The African and creole population of Michoacán experienced the same demographic pattern manifest throughout seventeenth-century New Spain. By the seventeenth century, African slavery was flourishing at Michoacán. In 1624, the provincial capital, Valladolid, included 1,116 servants and 229 enslaved persons distributed among 220 households. The majority of enslaved Africans and creoles, however, lived on estates that grew livestock, cotton, tobacco, and, of course, sugar. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the sugar planters—the largest owners of slaves—enslaved 525 Africans and creoles distributed among fourteen estates. The largest concentration of slaves resided on an unnamed estate in Tacámbaro, the Parandian plantation near Pintzán-daro, and the Jorulla hacienda located in the Alima valley, which all claimed eighty persons. Since Michoacán's sugar planters produced exclusively for a regional market, most slave-owners owned fewer than eighty slaves.

Existing sources make it difficult to be precise about the ethnic composition of Michoacán's slave population. As active participants in New Spain's domestic slave trade, Michoacán's planters probably acquired a number of enslaved Africans during the first half of the seventeenth century. In 1635, for instance, when José de Figueroa y Camporio authorized his brothers-in-law to purchase twenty slaves on his behalf, they were likely to find persons defined as Angolans and Congos overrepresented among the available pool of slaves. Doña Isabel Guillen's seventeenth-century estate inventory reveals the proliferation of Africans among the enslaved labor force at Michoacán. This same inventory also underscores a significant black and mulatto presence among the labor force. Based on Doña Isabel's inventory, it seems that blacks and mulattos rapidly proliferated in seventeenth-century Michoacán.

Baptismal records from Michoacán support the contention that the black and mulatto populations steadily expanded during the first half of the seven-

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teenth century. The creole population’s fecundity precipitated a phenomenal growth rate during the second half of the seventeenth century among persons defined by themselves and others as blacks and mulattos. In due course, free creoles, especially free mulattos, eclipsed the African and enslaved population.

With the exception of the Cordóba region, the evolution of the African and Afromestizo population preceded along similar lines in seventeenth-century Veracruz. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a substantial African labor force resided in Jalapa. During the period between 1597 and 1610, planters at Jalapa acquired 330 Africans, or 70 percent of the total African population they would purchase overall. This expansion of African-born slaves was unprecedented in Jalapa; prior to 1597 and after 1610, the number of Africans that entered that region rarely exceeded two or three per year. Most of the 478 Africans sold to Jalapa’s nascent plantocracy toiled on the sugar estates. After 1610, Jalapa’s planters were not aggressive buyers of enslaved Africans. Jalapa’s withdrawal from the international slave trade effected a social and demographic transformation among its resident labor force. By midcentury, Africans had lost their numerical ascendency among the enslaved and resident laborers, and free persons outnumbered slaves.

The demographic patterns on the Santísima Trinidad sugar plantation vividly illustrate the precipitous decline of African slavery in New Spain. In 1608, the slave labor force on the estate numbered 200; thirty years later, only fifty-four remained. By 1670, the number of slaves had increased but now represented a smaller percentage of the estate labor force. Meanwhile, the number of free mulattos and persons of African-Indian heritage (pardos) had increased to such an extent that they, along with the indigenous peoples, filled the ranks of the wage labor force. Although the size of Santísima Trinidad’s labor force was exceptional, the ethnic patterns and social changes apparent in its labor force manifested themselves throughout Jalapa. At the end of the seventeenth century, the importance of African slaves as a source of labor had waned in Jalapa. Ironically, as slavery contracted in Jalapa, the institution expanded in Cordóba, thus making the region an exception in eighteenth-century New Spain.

As in other areas of New Spain, the waning number of African immigrants precipitated the decline of the slave population. The decline of slavery in New Spain, however, was not synonymous with a decrease in the population of creoles there. From 1575 to 1675, the percentage of Afro-Veracruzanos, or creoles, in the slave labor force fluctuated from 33 percent in 1575 to 14 percent in 1615 to 51 percent in 1675. Despite the marked decrease in relative terms between 1575 and 1615, the creole population continued to grow in absolute terms. The diminishing gap between males and females of African descent sustained this growth. By the end of the seventeenth century, the ratio of male to female
slaves had nearly reached parity. This represented a dramatic shift from the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the balance favored males over females three to one. Among the free descendants of Africans, who by the end of the seventeenth century largely constituted female creoles, such patterns seemed even more pronounced.

**Demography as Culture**

The estate inventories from New Spain reveal two demographic trends among people of African descent beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century—the rapid increase of individuals born in Africa and the spectacular growth of the creole population. By 1646, the creole population, largely free and comprised of mulattos, numbered 116,529, whereas the predominantly African slave population totaled 35,089. The dramatic growth in the number of creoles underscores a dazzling rate of natural increase among that population and signals that not all persons of African descent were slaves. By the second half of the sixteenth century, most enslaved persons were Africans and their children were invariably defined as “black creoles.” But the census materials and estate patterns also highlight that at the same time most persons of African descent were free or had been freed. With the abatement of the international slave trade in 1640, people of African descent entered communities in New Spain in three ways: they were born there, they voluntarily moved there from other regions, or they were brought there as laborers. While the periodic influx of Africans via smugglers and the occasional sanctioned trader affected the growth and cultural patterns of creoles, local factors had a greater impact on the growth of the creole population.

Local slaveholding patterns and indigenous communities shaped the idiosyncratic nature of the transformation process in fundamental ways. In those areas with a small African population liberally dispersed, the descendants of Africans tended to blend physically and culturally, eventually acquiring identities as Indians or Spaniards but most likely as mestizos, the offspring of Spaniards and Indians. Manifest throughout New Spain, this pattern of absorption or “disappearance” occurred in both urban and rural areas. In contrast, in those areas with a significant enslaved population congregated on large estates—Veracruz, Guerrero, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Morelos, and Michoacan—the African population retained its distinctive physical presence for a longer period. Yet even in these areas, Africans and especially their descendants gradually blended into the local population. The pace of this process varied according to locality.

In describing this process as mestizaje, most scholars have characterized it as the “whitening” of the African population, the assumption being that Africans
and their descendants largely interacted with Spaniards. Such views, though reflective of an imperial policy that repeatedly encouraged Spaniards to restrict the black and mulatto presence from indigenous towns and peoples, were far from ever being realized. During the earliest contact between members of both commonwealths—the crown-sanctioned república that separated Spaniards from Indians—persons of African descent, as Spanish agents in the countryside, interacted with indigenous peoples. It stands to reason that individuals of African descent facilitated the Hispanicization process among Amerindians.

In fact, the initial cultural exposure that many indigenous peoples experienced during the sixteenth century rarely emanated directly from those individuals defined as Spaniards. With the exception of the itinerant pig farmer and the occasional priest, most contact—physical and cultural—took place between Spanish-speaking Africans and Amerindians. Moreover, this interaction between Africans and Amerindians increased after midcentury when recent arrivals from Africa arrived on the rural estates, where they worked alongside indigenous persons. Though the crown restricted the labor demands of the encomenderos on the indigenous population, this did not result in diminished contact between Africans and Amerindians. Throughout the colonial period, indigenous persons toiled on Spanish estates as salaried employees, often alongside the free black and mulatto employees. Furthermore, Spanish estates were often adjacent to Amerindian communities. This proximity meant that enslaved Africans and free mulattos interacted continuously with the surviving Amerindians, and from this process Afromestizos emerged.

While scholars have acknowledged the growth of Afromestizos in the sixteenth century, their focus has been confined to urban centers. Yet rural areas, including the indigenous corporate communities, represented important centers where Africans and blacks interacted with Indians. The estates situated among or in proximity to indigenous communities represented the dominant spheres of interaction in which persons of African descent encountered native peoples. Even during the greatest decline of the indigenous population, Indians still constituted a significant minority, if not the majority, of laborers on or adjacent to local haciendas, plantations, and ranchos. As their numbers increased in the second half of the seventeenth century, a large number of men and women migrated to local estates in search of a livelihood. Thus, Africans and Amerindians eventually produced the third-largest population group in seventeenth-century New Spain, a position Afromestizos retained throughout the colonial period. Taking all this into account explains the phenomenal growth that all mestizo categories experienced in the seventeenth century.

While the Afromestizo population's seventeenth-century growth was linked to the demographic recovery of the indigenous population and sexual interaction between those of African descent and Amerindians, the term “mestizo,”
like all racial and cultural terms, owed less to biological pedigree than it did to social appearance and behavioral patterns. The term should not obscure the interaction between individuals of European and African descent that was responsible for the emergence of mulattos, who also represented an important feature of rural society. Colonial records rarely contain evidence of rural mestizaje, since the clergy recorded interracial marriages only sporadically before the eighteenth century and in many instances defined those indigenous persons who tried to marry individuals of African descent as mestizos. However, it must be noted that most sexual contact did not lead to marriage. The limited documentary evidence, especially marriage records, strongly supports the scholarly contention that indigenous peoples were restrictive in terms of spouse selection. Even at the end of the colonial period, endogamy represented the norm among most indigenous persons in the central south and northwest. Such regions, in fact, recorded endogamy rates of 90 percent or more. Yet the ease with which indigenous persons could pass as mestizos and the proclivities of the clergy make marriage records a problematic though impressionistic source with regard to definitional precision. Most persons of indigenous descent who formed liaisons or petitioned for a marriage license with non-Indians defined themselves for pecuniary, if not other, reasons as mestizos or were characterized as such. Also, one cannot ignore the static views that governed Spanish perceptions of who constituted an Indian. Despite the fluidity between the categories of Indian and mestizo, Spaniards continued to imbue these terms with rigid, idyllic, anachronistic, and mutually exclusive meanings. Patterns of interaction were clearly not uniform throughout New Spain. Variations did occur, and in some regions of the central south and the northwest, where indigenous communities retained their corporate identities along with their corresponding social taboos, mestizaje with persons of African descent happened with less frequency. In this respect, endogamy among the indigenous population coincided, unintentionally, with Spain’s imperial design to keep the purported races separated.90

This demographic overview underscores several neglected dimensions of New Spain’s African presence. From New Spain’s inception, Africans had a discernible presence. As this population increased in the postconquest period, New Spain became the largest slave society in the Americas. But in the second half of the seventeenth century, two related population trends emerged among the slave population that affected the trajectory of slavery and the formation of culture in New Spain. Among the enslaved, creoles emerged as the most populous. As the creole population increased, the free black population also reached new heights, becoming the largest such community in the Americas. Though mulattos constituted an important component of this community, in the countryside, Afrormestizos comprised the majority of freedmen and freed-
women. Afromestizo ascendancy suggests that the African presence ultimately shifted toward the countryside. Yet until the middle of the seventeenth century, and the sizeable rural estates notwithstanding, slavery and the African presence was decidedly urban.

Slavery in the Capital

Scholarly portrayals of slavery in New Spain have thus far emphasized the institution’s rural nature. From the sixteenth century, Africans labored on the rural estates of Morelos, Michoacan, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Their variously defined descendants—both slave and free—would inherit these roles, but with the decline of slavery, they increasingly contributed to the growth of the rural peasantry. In New Spain, however, the African presence was not strictly rural. Africans, both slaves and servants, occupied an important niche in urban centers. While African labor was essential for the workings of the Spanish domestic economies, blacks also doubled as symbolic capital for a Spanish community perpetually anxious about status. In urban New Spain, Spaniards valued persons of African descent both as laborers and for the cultural capital that they conferred. This duality is essential to an understanding of urban slavery during this time period. Analysis of urban slavery cannot be restricted to chattel slavery with its emphasis on labor. Slaves worked, of course, but they and their descendants also bestowed honor on their owners. Those Spaniards with the greatest pretense to honor owned several slaves, while even modest members of the Spanish community strove to possess at least one slave. In essence, the perceived need to own a slave underscores slavery’s centrality in Spanish America’s urban cultural arena. Consequently, in defining a slave society, greater weight should be ascribed to a culturally determined need that led to the pervasive ownership of slaves. This perceived need explains why Mexico City constituted a slave society alongside Morelos, Michoacan, Oaxaca, and Veracruz.

As the Spanish capital, Mexico City represented New Spain’s most important cultural center. Within this urban crucible, a new cultural synthesis emerged which was both peculiar to Mexico and representative of New Spain’s ever-shifting cultural moorings. In Mexico, the community of colonizers manifested their vision of enduring dominance over the land and its once-sovereign occupants. Nowhere else in New Spain were the competing expressions of colonial power—imperial absolutism, Christian colonialism, and Spanish patrician authority—as deeply rooted or as explicitly manifest. To invoke New Spain was to speak of Mexico City.

While Mexico’s architects reconfigured the social landscape into two distinct repúblicas, one for the Indian majority and the other for the Spanish mi-
nority, they neglected to allot distinctive social space to Africans who lived there. But this omission was not simply an oversight. The African presence—mediated by the experiences of slavery and servitude—represented an extension of Spanish expansion; as such, it did not warrant a distinctive república. Mastery over Africans and their descendants, in other words, accompanied the Spanish conquest. In the confrontation between Old and New Worlds, the African presence embodied Spanish cultural continuity.94

By establishing their cultural dominance, the conquerors imposed long-standing Spanish cultural norms and practices, including a recently acquired mastery over African slaves and servants, as their legacy. From this perspective, Africans and their descendants stood for more than labor; they constituted symbolic capital doubling as a cultural legacy. Like writing, walled cities, wheat, olives, and wine, Spaniards relied on the servile African population to signify their cultural identity as the civilized. By the time of the conquest, mastery over Africans was tantamount to being a Spaniard.95 Spanish mastery, however, resided not in the Africans’ race but in the authority and honor conferred in displays of conspicuous consumption.96

Travelers routinely commented on the symbolic importance of New Spain’s African presence. These comments often followed standard refrains about Spanish sloth, ostentation, and arrogance. For several observers, including Thomas Gage, these qualities, along with the African presence, contributed to the rampant vice, sin, and moral degeneracy that they saw enveloping Mexico City.97

In 1625, Thomas Gage spent five months in Mexico. Like many other observers, Gage was awed by the “noblest city in all India.” The city’s grandeur, the size of its streets and promenades, and its structures impressed him, as they did other contemporary visitors. More than once, Gage remarked that “buildings are with stone and brick very strong. . . . The streets are very broad; in the narrowest of them three coaches may go.” On the basis of the structural splendor, Gage identified Mexico as “one of the greatest cities in the world.”98 Wealth accompanied grandeur. Dazzled by the display of wealth, Gage described in detail the liveries. He remarked upon “the beauty of some of the coaches of the gentry, which do exceed in coast the best of the Court of Madrid and other parts of Christendom, for they spare no silver, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor cloth of gold, nor the best silks from China to enrich them.”99 After this assessment, Gage pointed out that “men and women are excessive in their apparel, using more silks than stuffs and cloth.” The excess of the Spaniards was evidently quite contagious, since “nay, a blackamoor or tawny young maid and slave will make hard shift, but she will be in fashion with her neck-chain and bracelets of pearls, and her ear-bobs of some considerable jewels. The attire of this baser sort of blackamoors and mulattoes . . . is so light, and their carriage

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so enticing, that many Spaniards even of the better sort (who are too too [sic] prone to venery) disdain their wives for them.\textsuperscript{100} In Mexico, a culture of excess had emerged, in which even slaves and their descendants participated. This explains Gage's insistence that he found little but "sin and wickedness."\textsuperscript{101}

Sensitive to the ways that Africans figured in the ostentatious displays of honor and status, Gage nonetheless did not refer to Mexico City as a slave society.\textsuperscript{102} Through his observations, however, Mexico's slave society comes into relief—a society in which "the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations."\textsuperscript{103} Present in significant numbers, both African slaves and Afro-Mexican servants occupied prominent roles in an economy structured by circulation, production, and consumption. But rather than describe Mexico City as a slave society on the basis of the slaves' role as labor in the economy, Gage captured something much more elusive. He glimpsed the Africans' prominence in spectacles of ostentation that, in turn, mirrored social relations at large.\textsuperscript{104}

In lieu of sources capable of delineating with any precision sixteenth- and seventeenth-century urban slaveholding patterns, we must rely on other sources related to the slave experience in order to understand urban slavery. Such records, as we shall see, suggest that most urban slaves labored as domestics, artisans, and vendors, occupations that placed them in daily contact with persons similarly defined and with a host of plebeians of various hues. They, of course, interacted with a diverse range of Spaniards. In doing so, the enslaved learned to navigate in and between the households and various institutions comprising Spanish society. Though life in cities offered the enslaved a specific challenge—constant supervision—it also afforded them opportunities to circumvent their masters' authority. As urban masters imposed their authority over the enslaved, they confronted royal and ecclesiastical officials who respectively defined slaves as vassals and persons with souls. Africans and their descendants learned that conflicting obligations and rights accompanied the disparate identities ascribed to baptized slaves. Many, as the subsequent chapters reveal, became adept at manipulating their conflicting status as chattel, as vassals, and as Christians.

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