

Early Puebla and the Question of Labor, 1531–1570

First, your illustrious grace should know that to date 288 blacks have been registered in this city's caja before us . . . your grace should know that some of the blacks that are registered in this caja have escaped, they are being procured and bounty hunters are needed for this effect . . . we beg your grace to decree and order that the blacks that are brought from Spain, or Guinea or other parts of this New Spain be registered once more in the cajas of the cities where they will reside.¹

– Puebla municipal council to Viceroy don Luis de Velasco, 1553

During Puebla's formative years (1531–1570), several hundred enslaved men and women provided the labor needed to maintain its first European households and workshops. In theory, they should not have been there. From its inception Puebla was supposed to be a space free of slaves, especially indigenous slaves. Religious men and government officials planned the city to combat the excesses of the *encomienda* – a system by which the Spanish Crown extended lifetime grants of native laborers and tribute to successful conquistadors. Instead, the colonizers conceptualized Puebla as a space for self-sustaining Spanish nuclear families. A foundational experiment devised by Franciscan and Dominican missionaries and backed by New Spain's Second Audiencia suggested that such an urban utopia might actually succeed. In April 1531, the act of settling (literally, "la puebla") was carried out on an uninhabited plain along the Atoyac River to great fanfare. By 1536, however, Puebla's first residents had already demonstrated a penchant for slave ownership as municipal authorities expressed concern over interactions between free indigenous women and enslaved black men. The fierce debates surrounding the enslavement of indigenous commoners did not extend to black men, women, or children, even in a city designed and committed to antislavery ideals.

1 Efraín Castro Morales, ed., *Suplemento de el Libro Número Primero de la Fundación y Establecimiento de la Muy Noble y Leal Ciudad de los Ángeles* (Puebla: Ayuntamiento del Municipio de Puebla, 2009), 162–164.

This chapter draws on personal letters, missionary accounts, and municipal documents to outline the appeal of coerced labor during Puebla's early decades. In avoiding *encomienda* labor, the city's first colonizers developed the *indios de servicio* labor arrangement to access indigenous laborers, while simultaneously investing in the early transatlantic slave trade. In turn, the trade in African captives was complemented by an irregular flow of indigenous slaves, captured and enslaved as rebels throughout northern and western Mexico. Thus, a diverse enslaved population lived in Puebla during the city's first decade despite the ideological commitment to the eradication of indigenous slavery. Although the New Laws of 1542 acknowledged the humanity of Central Mexico's indigenous commoners and gradually allowed for the recognition of some rights, they did nothing to prevent the dehumanization of a growing black population. By the early 1550s, the *caja de negros*, an early slave registry and tax (with its accompanying bounty hunters), betrayed the simultaneous demand for and fear of African captives in early Puebla. Indigenous workers could still be coerced to work for specific individuals, but this chapter argues that the creation of the *caja* established Africans' uncontested permanency as non-indigenous servants and status symbols.

The Foundation of Puebla: A Standard Narrative

Colonial chroniclers and modern historians have produced (and are still revising) numerous versions of just how, when, and why the city of Puebla was founded.² The foundational myth remains polemic to this day,³ although there is relative certainty that thirty Spanish settlers ventured from Mexico City in 1531 to establish a new town on the southeastern side of the Popocatepetl-Iztaccihuatl mountain range. The two dominant religious orders, through the Dominican Fray Julian Garcés and the Franciscan Fray Toribio de Benavente (alias Motolinia), played an influential role in the settlement plan. The conception and execution of the city's founding is generally attributed to Dr. Juan de Salmerón, a trusted advisor to Charles V and an influential member of New Spain's

2 The city's colonial chronicles were heavily dependent on municipal documentation, particularly with respect to land and water grants and religious institutions, thus privileging the notion of pious, dual, and all-encompassing Spanish and Indian republics. For republished examples of the genre, see Mariano Joseph Antonio Fernández de Echeverría y Veytia, *Historia de la fundación de la ciudad de la Puebla de los Ángeles en la Nueva España, su descripción y presente estado* (Puebla: Ediciones Altiplano, 1962); Miguel de Alcalá y Mendiola, *Descripción en bosquejo de la imperial cesárea muy noble y muy leal ciudad de Puebla de los Ángeles* (Puebla: BUAP/Fomento Editorial, 1997); Pedro López de Villaseñor, *Cartilla vieja de la nobilísima ciudad de Puebla* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura, 2001).

3 For analysis of the numerous accounts and errors related to the city's foundation, see Leopoldo A. García Lastra and Silvia Castellano Gómez, *Utopía angelopolitana: La verdadera historia de la fundación de Puebla de los Ángeles* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura/Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2008), 73–84.

Second Audiencia. Salmerón provided the official backing and support for a project that threatened the conquistador class and the merchants of Mexico City. He envisioned a neat, efficient city – one that would stand apart from the rest of New Spain in its rejection of the exploitative *encomienda* system.⁴ The enslavement of local indigenous populations would not be tolerated. Puebla was to provide a new, Christian model of urban development based on the self-sufficient labor of Spanish nuclear families.

The city's establishment on an uninhabited plain between the indigenous city-states of Tlaxcala and Cholula had a variety of purposes. Logistically, there was the urgent need to settle a population of former conquistadors, military auxiliaries, and servants in a place other than the viceregal capital, Mexico City–Tenochtitlan. Moreover, transforming that floating island-city into a proper European space presented formidable engineering and hydraulic challenges.⁵ The appeal of constructing a new, grid-lined city on firm land was obvious. In 1530, Fray Julián Garcés, bishop of Tlaxcala, lamented that not a single Spanish village existed in his entire see, despite the agricultural potential of the surrounding valleys.⁶ The plains that separated Tlaxcala, Cholula, and Huexotzingo were soon imagined as an ideal starting place.

The members of New Spain's Second Audiencia advanced the foundation of Puebla along the same humanistic and ideological current that led them to attack the holders of *encomienda* grants. In a 1531 letter to the Crown, the Audiencia characterized Puebla as an ambitious sociopolitical experiment: "For the perpetuity of this land, we have striven to design several models of republics and polities with hopes of correctly choosing one which does not hold Indians in *encomienda*, although everyone, except for the friars, considers this quite difficult to accomplish."⁷ In order to succeed, these new models required the physical separation of European and indigenous populations through the creation of two republics. The latter would theoretically inhabit the *república de indios*, while the former would confine themselves to the more city-dependent *república de españoles*.

In practice, such a system could never come to fruition, given the colonizers' dependence on indigenous laborers and tribute. Nonetheless, in the early 1530s, the Puebla experiment aligned nicely with the dual-republic

4 Julia Hirschberg, "An Alternative to Encomienda: Puebla's *Indios de Servicio*, 1531–1545," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 11, no. 2 (Nov. 1979), 242–244.

5 John F. López, "'In the Art of My Profession': Adrian Boot and Dutch Water Management in Colonial Mexico City," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 11 (Spring 2012), 35–36.

6 François Chevalier, "Signification sociale de la fondation de Puebla de los Angeles" *Revista de Historia de América* 23 (1947 Junio), 109–110.

7 Chevalier, "Signification sociale," 112–113. The members of the Audiencia took on other radical, utopian, and *encomienda*-free enterprises, such as the establishment of the Royal College of Tlatelolco for the education of noble indigenous youths and the hospital-town of Santa Fe during the early 1530s.

model that threatened to curtail conquistador power. As *encomienda* holders, the conquistadors attempted to derail the project.⁸ Yet the Audiencia members were resolute. Only creating a separate urban center for Spaniards would mitigate the exploitation of the indigenous people. Following Bishop Garcés' pleas, the ideal location was chosen: Cuertlaxcoapan, an uninhabited plain between the indigenous city-states of Tlaxcala and Cholula. Each Spanish head of household would receive twenty indigenous workers, whose temporary labor would be limited to a three-month period.⁹ Thereafter, the city's Spaniards would apply themselves to their own destiny, tilling their own crops and building up a new agro-urban model of colonial settlement.

Despite their profound rivalry, the Franciscan and Dominican orders supported the utopian initiative, which granted them greater control over indigenous communities at the expense of the *encomendero* class. On 16 April 1531, the Franciscan Motolinia performed the first mass to celebrate the settlement's foundation on an uninhabited plain along the eastern bank of the San Francisco River. Only thirty-three Spanish men and one widow participated in Puebla's establishment,¹⁰ but an estimated 8,000 natives from Tlaxcala and smaller contingents from Huexotzingo, Calpan, Tepeaca and Cholula also helped erect the city's first houses for a week.¹¹ Their efforts would be in vain. Heavy rains and a flooding Atoyac River wiped out the settlement later that year, forcing the abandonment of the town.¹² In the fall of 1532, the surrounding communities once more provided the Spaniards with the labor needed for Puebla's second foundation.¹³ By this point, the utopian project had been completely written off. Each Spanish household would receive the labor of thirty Indians to build their residences and another twenty to cultivate their fields.¹⁴ Whether this new distribution of labor for construction and agriculture differed in any way from *encomienda* practices is unclear. That a Spanish *vecino* in 1532 could control up to fifty indigenous workers at a time suggests that, in scale at least, there was little to distinguish such a colonizer from a traditional *encomienda* holder.¹⁵

8 Franciso del Paso y Troncoso, ed., *Epistolario de Nueva España* (Mexico City: Antigua Librería Robledo de J. Porrúa, 1939), Vol. 3, Doc. 139, 100–101.

9 Chevalier, "Signification sociale," 113–114. 10 Ibid., 23–25.

11 Fausto Marín Tamayo, *La división racial en Puebla de los Ángeles bajo el régimen colonial* (Puebla: Centro de Estudios Históricos de Puebla, 1960), 8–10; Francis Borgia Steck, *Motolinia's History of the Indians of New Spain* (Richmond: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1951), 92.

12 Carlos Contreras Cruz and Miguel Ángel Cuenya, *Puebla de los Ángeles: Una ciudad en la historia* (Puebla: BUAP/Océano, 2012), 15–25. Cuenya and Contreras offer the most complete synthesis of the diverse foundational stories of Puebla.

13 Hirschberg, "Alternative to Encomienda," 245–246. 14 Marín Tamayo, *La división racial*, 15.

15 José Miranda, *La función económica del encomendero en los orígenes del régimen colonial* (Mexico City: UNAM/Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1965), 34–40. Miranda found that when

As unsuccessful as various aspects of the Puebla experiment proved to be, the new settlement did introduce a number of reforms in relation to the use of native laborers. Between 1533 and 1545, Puebla received a weekly, rotating service of 1,200 to 1,300 indigenous workers from Cholula and Tlaxcala, with smaller contingents arriving from Calpan, Huexotzingo and Totimehuacan.¹⁶ Known as *indios de servicio*, these coerced laborers were delivered to a high-ranking official (*corregidor*) in the city on Mondays and Thursdays before being distributed to Spanish heads of household.¹⁷ The system, originally supposed to run for a four-year period (1533–1537), was innovative in that it did not favor the powerful conquistador class in the allotment of indigenous labor. Instead, *indios de servicio* were strategically and temporarily distributed to married Spanish men, preferably those who did not hold political office and had not participated in the military conquest of the region.¹⁸ The initial round of experimentation with the system was successful, as representatives for the Puebla municipal government were able to secure the program's renewal for two further terms (1537–1541 and 1541–1545).

Native laborers in Puebla were not subjected to outright slavery under the *indios de servicio* system, although working conditions approximated it. In 1539, New Spain's viceroy (acting on instructions from Madrid) ordered Puebla's early colonists to treat their indigenous workers "as men and not as beasts."¹⁹ The order also stipulated that *indios de servicio* were to be properly fed by Spaniards, suggesting that the workers had been required to procure their own meals during the previous six years. By 1541, the city's municipal authorities entered an agreement with those of Cholula. The former agreed not to demand night work from their weekly allotment of indigenous laborers.²⁰ In order to prevent or at least mitigate these abuses, specialized judges (*jueces de indios*) were appointed to oversee labor arrangements in Puebla during the 1540s. In 1545, the Crown officially ended the *indios de servicio* system, perhaps a reflection of a growing commitment to the ideals behind the New Laws of 1542.

establishing commercial partnerships with one another, *encomienda* holders routinely contributed between 50 and 100 slaves as their portion of the investment.

16 Hirschberg, "Alternative to Encomienda," 252–253. 17 *Ibid.*, 247.

18 *Ibid.*, 255–256. Approximately 67 percent of the Spanish men receiving *indios de servicio* were married, another 11.3 percent were widowed. Single men accounted for only 2.6 percent of the total. In many cases this meant establishing formal, Church-sanctioned unions with noble indigenous women, as Spanish brides were particularly scarce at this time. For the inclusion of mestizo children women into Puebla's early "Spanish" population, see Elizabeth Anne Kuznesof, "More Conversation on Race, Class, and Gender," *Colonial Latin American Review* 5, no. 1 (1996), 129–134.

19 AGI, México, 1088, 113v cited in Hirschberg, "Alternative to Encomienda," 253.

20 *Ibid.*, 254.

In theory, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas led the successful fight against the enslavement of Mexico's native populations and the abolition of the *encomienda*, which culminated with the New Laws of 1542. The laws established that the indigenous inhabitants of Spanish America were to be treated as subjected vassals, not slaves. They were to pay tribute to the Crown, but were entitled to legal protections, specialized law courts, and attorneys. Enforcing the humane application of the New Laws proved an entirely different matter. Indigenous resistance to Spanish rule in Western Mexico led to the Mixtón War of 1540–1542, which produced 4,700 native war captives.²¹ Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza personally participated in the suppression and subsequent distribution of these slaves. Several of these captives were sold in Puebla during the early 1540s, many of them labeled as “Jalisco” slaves.²² In this regard, the appointment of Sancho Ordoñez's as Puebla's *corregidor* in 1541 likely facilitated the acquisition of indigenous slaves. Ordoñez had personally assisted Mendoza in “the last pacification of Jalisco.”²³ Although data for these early years is fragmentary, Blanca Lara Tenorio located sales for thirty-nine indigenous slaves in Puebla for the 1545–1552 period.²⁴

The abolishment of indigenous slavery and the application of the New Laws would be difficult to accomplish during the mid-1540s in Puebla and throughout the viceroyalty. The Puebla city council even gathered funds in April 1544 to fund Mexico City's efforts to have the laws repealed.²⁵ In late 1546, Las Casas was forced to reassert the importance of immediately abolishing indigenous slavery before Viceroy Mendoza and Francisco Tello de Sandoval, a powerful inspecting official.²⁶ Actual changes were very slow in coming to the viceroyalty, but by the mid-1550s it became clear that Crown officials would challenge indigenous enslavement. This did not mean that native people were exempt from coerced labor. The Nahuas of central

21 Andres Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 68–71.

22 Blanca Lara Tenorio, *La esclavitud en Puebla y Tepeaca, 1545–1649* (Mexico City: Cuadernos de los Centros INAH, 1976), 46.

23 Salvador Cruz, *Alonso Valiente: Conquistador de Nueva España y poblador de la Ciudad de Puebla de los Ángeles* (Mexico City: H. Ayuntamiento del Municipio de Puebla, 1992), 114.

24 Lara Tenorio, *La esclavitud en Puebla*, 46–47.

25 Efraín Castro Morales, ed., *Suplemento de el Libro Número dos de el Mismo Establecimiento y Dilatación de la Ciudad* (Puebla: H. Ayuntamiento del Municipio de Puebla, 2010), 205–207.

26 Reséndez, *The Other Slavery*, 68–70; Isacio Pérez Fernández, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, O.P. De defensor de los indios a defensor de los negros* (Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1995), 36–37, 42–43, 73, 92–93, 130–131. Even as he agitated for the end of indigenous slavery, Las Casas requested and received the rights to transport 24 black slaves to his newly appointed bishopric in Chiapas (southern New Spain) in 1543. Yet, by 1555, the Dominican had retracted his call for substituting indigenous slaves with Africans as he found the latter's captivity equally unjust. Five years later, Las Casas laid out a stern critique of the early transatlantic trade in his *Historia de las Indias*.

Mexico would still be subjected to the weekly rotation of *repartimiento* work and outright captivity and enslavement if considered to be in rebellion. However, according to Rik Hoekstra, the *repartimiento* was used sparingly in Puebla. “Only religious constructions – especially the cathedral – in Puebla and the farms in the valley of Atlixco were regularly supplied with [repartimiento] labourers” during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.²⁷

Over the course of the 1540s and 1550s, thousands of Tlaxcalans and Cholulans established themselves in makeshift ethnic neighborhoods surrounding the Puebla’s central neighborhood, or *traza*. Drawn by the possibility of earning wages and evading tribute obligations, native people gradually consolidated these areas into formal neighborhoods (*barrios de indios*) with their respective ethnic affiliations and churches. The Tlaxcalans settled the eastern side of the city near the Franciscan convent and other residential areas, while migrants from Cholula and Huexotzingo settled the San Agustín neighborhood. The indigenous constituted the bulk of a permanent urban workforce by the late 1550s, but would not satisfy the demands of absolute and permanent servitude so desired by the colonizers. As nominally free people with rights, wages, and political representation, the indigenous residents of Puebla began to distinguish their experiences from those of enslaved Africans.²⁸

Slavery, Power and “Vecindad”

Despite innovating with the *indios de servicio* system, Puebla’s early settlers were also consumers and distributors of slave labor. A close reading of Puebla’s early municipal ordinances suggests that the city founders sought to define the gendered and racialized contours of slavery as early as 1536. In other words, enslaved black men were present in Puebla no less than four to five years after its foundation. The earliest evidence of an enslaved population in Puebla also serves as the first direct reference to a population of African descent. These municipal minutes, or *Actas de Cabildo*, document an elite Spanish perspective on colonial urban life, race relations, and social hierarchies and, as such, should be treated with caution. Local councilmen would have been especially concerned with portraying the city’s treatment of indigenous people in a favorable light in order to renew the *indios de servicio* system. It is at this intersection that council members offered their first portrayal of black men in Puebla:

27 Rik Hoekstra, *Two Worlds Merging: The Transformation of Society in the Valley of Puebla, 1570–1640* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1993), 130–131.

28 Marín Tamayo, *La división racial*, 34–37; Lidia Gómez García, “Las fiscalías en la ciudad de los Ángeles, siglo XVII,” in *Los indios y las ciudades* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2010), 177–181.

In the City of Angels of this New Spain on the twenty-eighth day of February 1536, the members of the city council ordered that as far as the city's tianguiz [marketplace] is concerned, it is noted that ~~spaniards~~ and black men go to it and cause great harm and rifts, and that the market's indian women are harmed, therefore it is to be proclaimed that no ~~spaniard~~ nor black man may go to the tianguiz. A fine of one gold peso from the mines will be charged [to the infractor], a third of which will be given to the accuser, one third to the city's [public] works, and the other third to the sentencing judge. This is understood [to apply] ~~to the neighbors~~ and residents of this city. The lieutenant shall see to it that if a ~~spaniard~~ harm the indian women in the tianguiz he shall pay the said fine and that if the owner of the black man does not desire to pay the fine, then he [the black man] will be given fifty lashes in the plaza.²⁹

This initial reference to an African presence in Puebla is significant for a number of reasons. First, the ordinance, one that protected indigenous women in the marketplace, targeted both black and white men. Over an unspecified period, the general condemnation of male behavior became a racially specific law with differing penalties and consequences. Within the document, the term Spaniard was crossed out in every instance (see transcription above).³⁰ We do not know when the document was altered or by whom. Nor can we confirm that the alteration affected the towncrier's proclamation of the 1536 ordinance in front of the municipal palace. What is uncontested, however, is that this first legal reference to black men in Puebla assumed that *negros* were slaves. Only a slave owner could pay the fine to liberate a black man. The ability to pay or not pay for a perceived marketplace aggression was not conceptualized as a possibility for black men.³¹

Second, the 1536 ordinance envisions the male black body as subject to corporal punishment in contrast to the monetary fines imposed on Spanish men for the same crime. The public nature of these "fifty lashes" fall within the theatrical displays of violence that characterized conquest society. Just

29 Archivo General Municipal de Puebla (AGMP), Actas de Cabildo, Vol. 4, f. 137/135r, 1536/02/28. "En este día los dichos señores ordenaron y mandaron que por quanto en el tianguiz de la ciudad los ~~españoles~~ y negros que a el van hacen mucho daño e bellaquas y las yndias del tianguiz reciben daño, por tanto mandaron que se pregone publicamente que ningun ~~español~~ de la çudad ~~ni~~ negro en ninguna manera vaya a el dicho tianguiz, so pena de un peso de oro de minas, la tercera parte para el acusador, y la tercera parte para obras de la dicha ciudad, y la otra tercera parte para el juez que lo sentenciare. Y esto se entiende a ~~los vecinos~~ y estantes en la dicha ciudad y veráel tenientes desde el día que sea pregone y si algun ~~español~~ hiciere daño a las yndias en el dho tianguiz que pague la dicha pena y que si su amo del negro no quisiere pagar la pena le den cincuenta azotes en la plaza."

30 Ibid. The term *vecino* only appeared once in the document, but it was also crossed out. The fact that "*residente*" was left intact hints at the possibility of outsiders disrupting the market's operations.

31 How this ordinance would have affected free black, mulatto, mestizo, or indigenous men is uncertain.

as the burning and dogging of indigenous priests in nearby Cholula was intended to instill dread and obedience in Nahua populations,³² the whipping of black men served as a cautionary tale for other males of African descent who frequented the marketplace. Comparable municipal laws from Quito, Ecuador, suggest that similar punishments were enforced on black men frequenting indigenous villages and marketplaces outside of Mexico during the mid-1530s.³³ In 1555, another Puebla municipal ordinance stipulated that indigenous, black and mestizo men caught purchasing or selling adulterated *grana cochinilla* (cochineal) would receive 100 lashes in public, in addition to paying a 200-peso fine. Spanish men prosecuted for the same offense would only pay the monetary fine. In this sense, the absence of corporal punishment for Spanish males suggests that the white body would not be subjected to such public debasement (at least within the framework of municipal justice) during the mid-sixteenth century.³⁴ The misbehavior of Spanish men merely carried a fine, one that would theoretically benefit the city, accuser, local judge, and victimized indigenous women. No such benefit could be expected from the lashes inflicted on an enslaved black man. Evidently, most slaveholders would go to significant lengths to prevent such crippling punishment upon their human property. What is significant here is the early institutionalization of corporal punishment for black men.

The gendered overtones of the 1536 ordinance also foreshadow the authorities' concern over Afro-indigenous interactions at the local level. The ordinance identified blacks as male (*negros*) and natives as female (*indias*). This characterization of Puebla's African and indigenous populations may have in fact been accurate within the boundaries of the marketplace (*tianguiz*). However, the absence of indigenous men in the 1536 ordinance poses a vexing problem. Are we to assume the early colonial *tianguiz* was devoid of indigenous men? Were native women not harassed by native men in the marketplace? Or is it possible that native men were simply expressing their grievances to a compliant municipal council? This last scenario is plausible when taking into consideration Puebla's 1537 lobbying for a renewed grant of the *indios de servicio* system. Moreover, in that same year, the municipal council appointed an indigenous official (*alguacil de tianguis*) to oversee the marketplace and mitigate abuses.³⁵ In order to retain the weekly allotment of laborers, Puebla municipal authorities had to

32 Lori Boornazian Diel, "Manuscrito del aperreamiento (Manuscript of the Dogging): A 'Dogging' and Its Implications for Early Colonial Cholula," *Ethnohistory* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 585–611.

33 Sherwin K. Bryant, *Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 29. The Quito town council decreed 100 lashes for any "Blacks found in the indigenous marketplace."

34 Echeverría y Veyta, *Historia de la fundación*, I, 298.

35 AGMP, Actas de Cabildo, Vol. 3, f. 240 cited in Marín Tamayo, *La división racial*, 35.

prove to the Crown and governing elites of Cholula and Tlaxcala that native people were being treated well within city limits. The symbolic extension of an ordinance protecting native women from black interlopers would have shored up support for Puebla's original mission and signaled a commitment to indigenous rights at a crucial moment in the city's development.

During the mid-sixteenth century, elite Spaniards struggled to govern Afro-indigenous dynamics. New Spain's viceroys would even attempt to curtail harmonious interactions between both groups.³⁶ The growing presence of black men (and women) in the viceroyalty complicated an illusory dual-republic model that was never adapted to accommodate a third, black republic. Given the lack of an official stance by the Crown or the viceroy on such matters, municipal governments had free rein to craft their own racially defined ordinances and punishments. More often than not, the results were lamentable. Suffice it to say that the earliest legislation on Puebla's African-descent population defined black men as criminal slaves subject to corporal punishment.

If the 1536 ordinance identified black men as enslaved people, it failed to account for free Afro-Poblano individuals who would have bristled at the decree's connotations. On the other hand, there is the very real possibility that free people of African descent simply could not be found in Puebla when the ordinance was proclaimed.³⁷ The first municipal reference to a free black man dates from 1539, when the municipal council acknowledged "Juan de Ordáz, negro" as a *vecino*, a title of municipal residency with accompanying civic rights.³⁸ Acquiring *vecindad*, the status and privileges of formally acknowledged residency, carried great significance during Puebla's foundational years. In a struggling settlement that desperately needed permanent residents, *vecinos* could petition the council for plots of land on which to erect their residences or cultivate orchards. This is precisely what Juan de Ordáz did. He emerges at least twice in the historical record, on both occasions selling the urban plots that he had been granted by the municipal council. In 1546, Francisco Díaz, a black freedman, was also included on the city's list of registered residents.³⁹ Two other black men, Juan de Montalvo and Diego Monte, had their *vecindad* formally acknowledged in 1550 and 1571, respectively.

The experiences of Puebla's first black *vecinos* suggests that despite a growing association between blackness and slavery, a minority of African descent was able to claim the benefits of urban citizenship during the mid-sixteenth century. Although their cases cannot be considered representative of the early Afro-Poblano experience, their status as

36 David Davidson, "Negro Slave Control and Resistance," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no. 3 (Aug. 1966): 239–240.

37 My thanks to one of the book's anonymous reviewers for this insight.

38 López de Villaseñor, *Cartilla vieja*, 286. 39 *Ibid.*, 290, 295.

officially recognized residents and landowners tempers the overwhelmingly negative connotations found in the 1536 municipal ordinance. What exactly allowed these men to earn *vecino* status? Judging from the limited cases at hand: freedom and a wife. Ordáz received a 200-peso dowry from his wife, Catalina Díaz. Montalvo, who worked as Puebla's towncrier, was married to a woman in Guatemala.⁴⁰ By 1555, he had secured enough money to send one Pedro de Padilla all the way to Guatemala in order to bring his wife back to Puebla. Although his own position in colonial society was modest at best, Montalvo's standing as a free black *vecino* with connections to elite Poblano distinguished him in a city where the overwhelming majority of people of African descent were enslaved.

Other notable black men undoubtedly spent time in Puebla during its formative decades, but Pedro López de Villaseñor's listing suggests that very few were able to claim *vecindad*. For instance, the black conquistador Juan Valiente was unsuccessful in navigating the growing ethnocentrism that characterized life in Mexico's colonial urban centers. Born on the African mainland around 1505, Valiente was purchased by Hernan Cortés's cousin and fellow conquistador, Alonso Valiente.⁴¹ The latter took Juan Valiente to Puebla shortly after its second foundation in 1532. None of the original settler accounts mention the African man, although he lived in Puebla by 1533. In an emerging settlement defined for its anti-conquistador stance, it is not altogether clear that he benefited from his owner's social standing. Rather than remain in the struggling town, Juan Valiente asked his owner to grant him four years "to seek opportunity" as a conquistador in Pedro de Alvarado's expedition to Guatemala. Remarkably, his owner agreed. By 1534, the black conquistador had made his way to Guatemala and Northern Peru. He would fight for Diego de Almagro in Chile the following year. Over the next two decades, Juan Valiente received an estate near Santiago de Chile, married Juana de Valdivia, and even received an *encomienda* for his military feats.⁴² However, at the time of his death in 1553 Alonso's family in Puebla still technically owned Juan.

Local Conquistadors, Local Slave Traders

During the 1540s and 1550s, the simultaneous expansion of the transatlantic slave trade and New Spain's northern frontier resulted in an accessible pool of Upper Guinean and Chichimec captives for Poblano

40 James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560: A Social History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 217–218. Many free blacks also became towncriers in early colonial Perú.

41 Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53–54.

42 Matthew Restall, "Black Conquistadors: Armed Africans in Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 57, no. 2 (Oct. 2000), 187.

masters. Indigenous war captives from the Mixtón War were sold in Puebla precisely at the same moment that Upper Guineans began to appear in larger numbers.⁴³ This is an important point – one that is often lost in acrimonious debates on the *encomienda* system. For the purposes of this study, understanding the actions of conquistadors-turned-colonizers is particularly important because these men bridge the supposed divide between indigenous and African slavery in New Spain's history. Despite the anti-*encomienda* ideology of Puebla's foundation, thirty-five conquistadors had settled in the city by 1534.⁴⁴ Alonso Valiente, the previously mentioned conquistador and slaveholder, was also recognized as a *vecino*. As a relative and vital ally of Hernán Cortés, Valiente took part in the military expeditions against the indigenous inhabitants of Michoacán, Pánuco, and Honduras.⁴⁵

The prestige associated with his early participation in the conquest allowed Alonso Valiente to settle in Puebla and subsequently claim political office between 1536 and 1555. For these services to the Crown and for preventing the enslavement of the natives of Guanaja, Valiente received a coat of arms in November 1547. However, only two years later Puebla's municipal magistrates investigated his ownership of an indigenous slave, Elvira, alias "La Campeche," whom he had purchased twenty years before.⁴⁶ Elvira's testimony was damning. The conquistador's wife, Doña Juana de Mancilla, had ordered Elvira's face to be branded in order to establish her servitude to Valiente and her family.⁴⁷ The former conquistador's ownership of indigenous slaves should not surprise us. In 1528, Fray Juan de Zúmarra accused the same conquistador of loading a ship full of slaves in Pánuco (along the northern Gulf coast), in exactly the same manner as Nuño de Guzmán and his cronies.⁴⁸ Valiente's ennoblement, perhaps a measure of the influence Hernán Cortés wielded at the time, conveniently effaced his previous exploitation of the native Huastecans of Pánuco.

If ownership of indigenous slaves became a contentious issue after the New Laws of 1542, investing in enslaved Africans was not. Successful conquistadors, starting with Cortés himself, understood the value of

43 Lara Tenorio, *La esclavitud en Puebla*, 46–47. Van Deusen, *Global Indios*, 192–199.

44 Del Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario de Nueva España*, III, 138–140.

45 Antonio Paz y Meliá, *Nobiliario de conquistadores de Indias* (Madrid: Imprenta de M. Tell, 1892), 124–126. Also see, Echeverría y Veytia, *Historia de la fundación*, 139–142.

46 Daniel García Ponce, "Indian Slavery in Sixteenth-Century New Spain: The Politics and Power of Bondage," M.A. thesis (University of Texas at Austin, 2013), 34–35.

47 For the significance of "proper" branding as legitimation of indigenous slavery, see van Deusen, *Global Indios*, 107, 133–136.

48 Juan Manuel Pérez Zevallos, *La visita de Gómez Nieto a la Huasteca, 1532–1533* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2001), 28–29.

litigation-free laborers.⁴⁹ The conqueror of Mexico-Tenochtitlan owned no fewer than 123 African slaves on his sugar plantation in 1549 and had “contracted for the delivery of 500 slaves to work on his sugar plantations” seven years before.⁵⁰ His cousin soon followed suit. In 1551, Alonso Valiente sold thirty-one black slaves, twenty load-bearing horses, and various mining instruments to Toribio de Bolaños, a resident of Guadalajara, for the stunning sum of 7,000 gold pesos.⁵¹ Valiente’s actions illustrate the demand for skilled and unskilled slaves and Puebla’s early role as a distribution center for black captives. Only a few of the twenty-one men were identified with specific occupations at the time of their sale: a tailor, a cowboy, a goat herder, two muleteers, and “Juan, a blacksmith, with his forge and its instruments.”⁵² The ten women included in the bill of sale likely labored as cooks and domestic servants. They were not singled out for specialized tasks of any sort.

What can we infer from Alonso Valiente’s participation in the New Spain’s early slave trade? First, it is clear that conquistadors resorted to the enslavement of an alternate population, Africans, once local government rendered indigenous slavery impractical. In other words, the individuals who imposed Iberian forms of slavery on indigenous people were the very same people who then facilitated the introduction of African captives. Brígida von Mentz suggests this process crystallized in Central Mexico during the 1550s and 1560s.⁵³ Second, Puebla’s proximity to the viceregal capital and the principal port of entry incentivized the ownership of black slaves. In more remote places where royal control was weak and indigenous enslavement rampant, investing in black slaves could be delayed until Crown officials found sufficient allies to challenge the powerful *encomendero* class.

La Caja de Negros: Property, Rebellion and Racialization

If by the mid-1530s the early Afro-Poblano presence was already associated with slavery, in the two following decades such connotations would grow

49 Brígida von Mentz, *Trabajo, sujeción y libertad en el centro de la Nueva España: Esclavos, aprendices, campesinos y operarios manufactureros, siglos XVI a XVIII* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1999), 184.

50 Colin Palmer, *Slaves*, 67. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 98.

51 Von Mentz, *Trabajo*, 184. The ethnonyms of four male captives can be used to establish possible provenance zones: Francisco Biafra, Francisco Mandinga, Juan Manicongo, and Francisco Manicongo. The remaining captives were identified by profession, relation (widow, husband, or similar), or a Hispanicized first name.

52 *Ibid.* The remaining 15 men would probably perform arduous manual labor in the silver refineries that dotted New Spain’s western and northern regions.

53 *Ibid.*, 71–72.

stronger with the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade. In turn, municipal councils throughout New Spain established slave registries known as *cajas de negros*.⁵⁴ The following discussion is based on the survival of Puebla's 1553 *caja*, although this administrative body had been in existence since 1540.⁵⁵ In practice, the *caja* was nothing more than a municipal list and tax that financed the retrieval of escaped slaves. These operations were managed by two judges, a scribe, and two bounty hunters (*cuadrilleros*) with the specific purpose of chasing down escaped slaves (*esclavos huidos*).⁵⁶

In many ways the *caja de negros* was simply the local manifestation of a Spanish anxiety that reached regional, viceregal and, at times, continental dimensions. In a land bereft of external military enemies, Spaniards projected their fears onto the very society they had created. Nowhere is this more evident than in the colonizers' paranoia toward black slaves (thought to be) in rebellion. In what is still a poorly understood event, large numbers of insurgent black men allegedly launched two coordinated rebellions in late September 1537 in Mexico City and the Amatepec silver mines (125 miles to the southwest of the viceregal capital). According to Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, the rebels had elected a king and concerted to kill all Spaniards and take over the land.⁵⁷ The 1537 rebellion exacerbated the racial tensions already manifest in Mexico City and catalyzed the need to count, regulate and establish ownership of black slaves throughout the viceroyalty. In Puebla, this policing mechanism was fulfilled through the *caja*.

The officials responsible for the *caja* were charged with producing a register of all "negro, mulato, and morisco" slaves over the age of 15.⁵⁸ *Morisco* or Moorish slaves were rare in seventeenth-century Puebla, though they may have been more commonplace during the early conquest period. However, the Crown strove to prevent practitioners of Islam (and Judaism) from arriving there. No native slaves were to be registered in Puebla,

54 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México: Estudio etnohistórico* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 206. In his pioneering study on Mexico's black population, Beltrán lamented the loss of these municipal registers, which would have preserved the memory of an early African settlement in New Spain (and modern Mexico). Historians have been unable to locate other *cajas* outside of Mexico City and Puebla, although Perú's viceroy established one in 1549.

55 Rodríguez Ortíz, "El lado afro," 190.

56 Efraín Castro Morales, ed., *Suplemento de el Libro Número Primero de la Fundación y Establecimiento de la Muy Noble y Muy Leal Ciudad de los Ángeles* (Puebla: Ayuntamiento del Municipio de Puebla, 2009), 162–164. Each bounty hunter would receive 50 gold pesos annually for his services.

57 Graham W. Irwin, ed., *Africans Abroad: A Documentary History of the Black Diaspora in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean during the Age of Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 324–326.

58 Castro Morales, ed., *Suplemento de el Libro Número Primero*, 162–164. Also see Karoline P. Cook, *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 69–70.

evidence of an ideological commitment to eradicating indigenous slavery.⁵⁹ The fact that Chichimec war captives were not considered within the *caja*'s registry speaks to the racialization of slavery in Puebla and Central Mexico. The political battles waged in favor of indigenous freedom would have prevented Spaniards in Central Mexico from listing indigenous individuals as slaves in an official municipal register.⁶⁰ By contrast, Africans and their descendants were increasingly understood to be enslavable at mid-century.

Puebla's *caja* was active and well funded during the 1550s. Though the actual registers are lost, a copy of the register for 1553 or 1554 survives in the city's first municipal volumes.⁶¹ Officials reported that the *caja* contained 576 pesos derived from 288 slaves that year. This number only referred to those enslaved men and women over the age of fifteen whose owners had actually gone through the trouble (and cost) of having them registered. The children of slave unions, in addition to an undetermined number of enslaved children born of black women with Spanish, mestizo, or indigenous men were not included in the listing. Although producing an exact calculation of just how many children of full or partial African ancestry lived in Puebla is impossible, by mid century the Afro-Poblano population 1550 would have actually consisted of well over 300 individuals.⁶²

Most references to enslaved Chichimecs in Puebla date from the 1540s and 1550s, precisely when the *caja* was operational and, presumably, most efficient. Their absence from the municipal register is, therefore, notable. In Puebla, sales of indigenous people from the viceroyalty's western and northern frontier fluctuated depending on the success (or lack thereof) in

59 In the neighboring city of Tlaxcala, indigenous slaves were still present in 1552. That year the native municipal council manumitted two "*yn omen tlacobtin indio*me." See Arthur J. O. Anderson, Frances Berdan and James Lockhart, *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545–1627* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986), 77; Camilla Townsend, "Don Juan Buenaventura Zapata y Mendoza and the Notion of Nahua Identity" in *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 163–164.

60 During the early 1530s, Cuba's governors had established similar registries with squadrons of bounty hunters to capture "wrongdoers and escaped slaves or indians." The Cuban institution functioned on the premise that black and indigenous people would, at all times, carry a document certifying that they were not runaways or else face imprisonment. See Jose Luis Cortés López, *Esclavo y colono. Introducción y sociología de los negroafricanos en la América española del siglo XVI* (Salamanca: University of Salamanca, 2004), 306–307.

61 Castro Morales, ed., *Suplemento de el Libro Número Primero*, doc. 135, 245r–245v. The copy of the register is undated, but is located between municipal minutes for 1553 and 1554 and features regents and aldermen active in the early 1550s.

62 By comparison, the city of Antequera held 150 slaves in 1569 despite its establishment a few years before Puebla's. See John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 53.

pacifying these communities. For instance, in 1552, thirty-one *Jalisco* Indians were sold for 3,752 gold pesos in a single transaction.⁶³ In 1570, Rodrigo, a 15-year-old Chichimec slave, was sold on condition that he “remain handcuffed.”⁶⁴ Sales for Chichimec captives continued into the 1590s, as in the case of Diego, an indigenous man of unstated age, to a Poblano for 125 silver pesos.⁶⁵ It was expected that Diego would be “taught the things of our Holy Catholic faith.” This religious language was absent in bills of sale for enslaved blacks and mulattos. Chichimecs were further distinguished by virtue of their temporary enslavement.⁶⁶ Because they were framed as rebels, not naturally born slaves, Chichimecs received ten- or twenty-year sentences for their criminal behavior. Their “service” was redeemable and transferable only during this set amount of time. While individuals of African descent were born and sold into slavery, Chichimecs were captured and temporarily transferred. In practice both groups may have been treated, whipped, and overworked equally, but the ideological implications of Chichimec captivity are significant at a time when slaveholding was being racialized in relation to the black body.

Puebla’s *caja* allows us to situate the racially driven fears of local slave owners, bounty hunters and municipal officials within a broader viceregal context. In 1548, Viceroy Mendoza issued the “Ordenanza de Esclavos,” which forbade selling weapons to free or enslaved people of African descent and Indians. In addition, *negros* and *moriscos* were forbidden from socializing in groups of three or more, or even from walking through the street a half hour after evening prayer.⁶⁷ By 1555, the Spanish fear of black rebellion had reached such a degree that Motolinía urged the king to allow the construction of a fortress in Puebla, there being “no better situated place in new Spain.”⁶⁸ In the Franciscan’s words, “defense is needed though it were only because we are here in an alien land, and there are many blacks, who have at times conspired to rebel and kill the Spaniards.”

63 Lara Tenorio, *La esclavitud en Puebla*, 46–47.

64 Archivo Histórico Judicial de Puebla (AHJP), Exp. 16.

65 Archivo General de Notarías de Puebla (AGNP), Not. 4, Box 36, 1590 December, ff. 513v. Chichimecs could still be found in Puebla’s Augustinian convent at start of the seventeenth century. See Mariano E. Torres Bautista, “Fulgur y final del Convento de San Agustín de Puebla,” in *Estampas de la vida angelopolitana: Ensayos de historia social del siglo XVI al siglo XX* (Tlaxcala: El Colegio de Tlaxcala/BUAP, 2009), 67.

66 Diego, for example, would only serve Alonso de la Torre “the time remaining on his title.”

67 David Davidson, “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519–1650” *HAHR* 46, no. 3 (August 1966), 243–244; Luis González Obregón, *Don Guillén de Lampart: La Inquisición y la Independencia en el siglo XVII* (Tours: E. Arrault & Cie., 1907), 243–245. Mendoza’s successor, Don Luis de Velasco, expanded these limitations with new ordinances in 1551 and 1558.

68 James Lockhart and Enrique Otte, *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 234.

Despite the perceived need to control the viceroyalty's black population, a number of structural factors rendered Puebla's *caja* unviable by the last two decades of the sixteenth century. The black and mulatto population of the surrounding region was simply expanding at a much greater rate than could be controlled by such a small administrative body. If a minimum of 300 slaves of African descent lived in Puebla in the early 1550s, the cosmographer Juan López de Velasco estimated a black population of 500 (most of them enslaved) by 1574 in addition to an unspecified population of "*muchos mulatos*."⁶⁹ Many of these mulattos would have been born of Afro-indigenous unions.⁷⁰ According to the cosmographer, 3,000 indigenous people lived in the city along with 500 Spanish *vecinos*.⁷¹ The growth of Puebla's population of African descent would only accelerate during the early seventeenth century, when a massive influx of African-born slaves overwhelmed the *caja*'s capabilities. By that point, Afro-Poblanos would have composed the bulk of a slave population numbering in the thousands. Furthermore, it was not a passive population. The *caja* hired bounty hunters who continually brought in runaway slaves from Mexico City. By the 1550s, enslaved people navigated the Puebla-Mexico City corridor, which afforded them anonymity among the ever-larger African-descent population.

The officials responsible for Puebla's *caja* were also aware that a significant number of slave owners were eluding their efforts and asked the authorities to resolve this problem. In their 1553 report, they alluded to the fact that it was very difficult for them to maintain a reliable registry with the increasing number of slaves brought in daily from "Spain, Guinea or other parts of New Spain."⁷² Even the natural growth of Puebla's black population appeared problematic, as Spanish masters were supposed to register slave children with the authorities as soon as they reached fifteen years of age. Clearly, there were a number of financial and social incentives not to do so. Slave owners could easily prove ownership of a child born to one of their enslaved women by presenting a baptismal certificate. Why incur the additional expense of registering that child before the municipal

69 Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y descripción universal de la Indias* (Madrid: Establecimiento Tipográfico de Fortanet, 1894), 208–209. It is not clear if López de Velasco was referring to "mulatos" as Afro-indigenous children, commonly known as *zambaigos* in Perú, or the offspring of Spanish men and black (likely, enslaved) women. López de Velasco also refrained from using the term "mestizo" in his assessment of Puebla.

70 Robert Schwaller, *Géneros de Gente in Early Colonial Mexico: Defining Racial Difference* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 175–177. Schwaller's observations on Afro-indigenous *mulatos* have enormous implications for a term that has traditionally been used to describe the children of Spanish-African relationships.

71 The estimate of the Spanish population by *vecino* would place the city's white population somewhere between 2,400 and 3,000 people for the early 1570s.

72 Castro Morales, ed., *Suplemento de el Libro Número Primero*, doc. 135, 245r–245v.

authorities? Finally, Puebla officials also suggested extending the *caja's* jurisdiction to Orizaba and Tehuacán, thereby indicating a significant and potentially menacing, African population to the south and east as early as the mid-sixteenth century.⁷³

Despite its obvious flaws and early downfall, the *caja de negros* established an important number of paradigms for the study of race relations in Puebla. First of all, it defined slavery as an institution that could legally bind people categorized as *negro*, *mulato*, or *morisco*. Catholic anxieties over *moriscos* and their Muslim ancestry faded over time in New Spain, while African ancestry became the most important signifier in this characterization. Asian slaves were still not considered within the jurisdiction of Mexican slavery at this point, although they would be included by the end of the sixteenth century. Second, the *caja* institutionalized masters' rights and obligations over enslaved adults and youths fifteen years of age or older. In other words, children born to enslaved mothers in Puebla were not immediately subjected to a municipal register that defined them as slaves and taxable property. The age limitations of the *caja* found a ready parallel to the tribute payments expected of indigenous adolescents "from fourteen years and upward" in Puebla circa 1568.⁷⁴ Black and indigenous youths (fourteen and younger) inhabited ambiguous legal and fiscal territories. Spanish masters may have easily enacted restrictions on them regardless, but the nature of urban servitude suggests a certain malleability in their relationships. Most importantly, the *caja* registers allow us to definitively state that hundreds of black men and women lived within the city of Puebla during the mid-sixteenth century.

Enslaved Africans in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Puebla

Africans would become increasingly visible as human property in the notarial archives of Puebla during the mid-sixteenth century. Peter Boyd-Bowman's pioneering study of these sources confirms that the institutionalization of African slavery was well underway in Puebla by the 1540s. In his influential article on early Poblano slavery, Boyd-Bowman located bills of slave purchases for approximately 240 men and women of African descent

73 Ibid. "Es necesario que los negros que hay por manifestar en la comarca desta ciudad, así en el ingenio de Oliczaba [Orizaba], y en Teguacan [Tehuacan] y en las otras partes que son más cercanas a esta ciudad que a la de México, Guaxaca [Oaxaca], a la de Veracruz, se manifesten en la caja desta ciudad conforme a las ordenanças de vuestra señoría ilustrísima."

74 C. Raymond Beazley, ed., *An English Garner: Voyages and Travels mainly during the 16th and 17th Centuries* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co.), I, 266. According to John Chilton, who traveled to New Spain in 1568, "Indians [at Puebla de los Angeles], from fourteen years old and upwards, pay unto the King for their yearly tribute one ounce of silver . . . and a hannaega . . . of maize, which is valued among them commonly at 12 Rials of Plate."

for the years 1540 through 1555.⁷⁵ Of these enslaved people, only thirty-three were considered *ladino*, or conversant in Castilian language (and culture). By contrast, forty-six slaves were classified as *bozales*, the term used to identify African slaves who had recently arrived from their homelands and had little understanding of Spanish society.⁷⁶ Another five were labeled “between bozal and ladino” as if to recognize their increasing, but still limited, familiarity with the colonial scenario. No further information was available for the remainder of the slaves sold in the city, but considering the timeframe, it is safe to say that a majority of them would have been recent African arrivals.

During the mid-sixteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade to Puebla primarily operated through Lisbon and Seville by way of Cape Verde. In fact, “residents in New Spain [had] contracted directly to obtain slaves in Cabo Verde” since the mid-1520s.⁷⁷ During the first sixty or seventy years of the sixteenth century, Portuguese merchants traded for Upper Guinean slaves that they would later resell throughout the Iberian Peninsula. Most of these captives hailed from territories comprising modern-day Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.⁷⁸ The ethnonyms of those sold in Puebla (*Bran*, *Biafara*, *Zape* and so on) confirm distinctly Upper Guinean origins.⁷⁹ A smaller group of captives was identified as hailing from the island of São Tomé, although in all likelihood they had merely been transshipped there from the African mainland.⁸⁰ No “Angola” slaves and only ten “Kongo” individuals from West Central Africa surface in Boyd-Bowman’s research – an indication of the funneling of this early slave trade through Cape Verde. By contrast, during the period 1595–1639, when the Spanish Crown sold Portuguese merchants the required licenses to the Spanish American slave trade, most slaves sent to Mexico hailed from West Central Africa (see Chapter 4).

Slave prices fluctuated considerably during the mid-sixteenth century in Puebla. The average price for both male and female slaves at this time was around 105 pesos, a fraction of what they would cost fifty years later. Considering the scarcity of Spanish artisans and craftsmen at the time, skilled slaves of African descent would have been placed at an especially high premium. In Mexico, prices for African-born slaves would rise artificially

75 Boyd-Bowman, “Negro Slaves in Early Colonial Mexico,” *The Americas* 26, no. 2 (Oct. 1969), 136.
76 *Ibid.*, 137.

77 Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in Western Africa, 1300–1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 192.

78 Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 158–159.

79 Lara Tenorio, *La esclavitud en Puebla*, 16. The first four extant slave purchases in Lara’s study include three West African slaves (2 Biafra and 1 Bran) and a couple from Puerto Rico.

80 Boyd Bowman, “Nego Slaves,” 140; Lara Tenorio, *La esclavitud en Puebla*, 59.

after a 1556 law associated “a slave’s origins” and price to a specific West African region.⁸¹ In response, Mexican slaveholders soon began to receive enslaved Africans by way of the contraband Caribbean trade (one that would continue throughout the seventeenth century). During the 1560s, the port of Ocoa, along Hispaniola’s southern coast, received unlicensed slave ships that would often continue toward Mexican ports.⁸² Considering Cuba’s close commercial relationship with both Veracruz and Campeche,⁸³ it is likely that the contraband slave trade also gained strength through those maritime routes as well.

Within a context of severe indigenous depopulation and aggressive anti-*encomendero* policies, Spaniards soon came to value enslaved blacks as unalienable property. The former imagined the latter as epidemic-resistant workers, a priceless attribute as the Central Mexican indigenous population was decimated by several smallpox and typhus epidemics.⁸⁴ In certain native communities, the combination of disease, overexhaustion, and military deaths led to 90 percent depopulation rates.⁸⁵ Within this diseased context, questions of just enslavement became largely superfluous to the colonist invested in the permanency of an African captive. But not all were convinced. From a religious perspective, the transatlantic slave trade raised troubling moral questions that required answers.

In 1560, the archbishop of Mexico, Fray Alonso de Montúfar, attempted to expose the ideological contradictions of allowing Africans to be enslaved and sold in the viceroyalty. In an audacious letter to Philip II, Montúfar argued that there existed no cause “for blacks to be any more captive than indians,” nor had any scholars detected any legitimate reasons for their enslavement.⁸⁶ This posture reversed an Iberian logic of justification already well in place when the first African slaves made their way to the Caribbean first, and then into the central highlands of Mexico.⁸⁷ The archbishop argued that Africans did not “wage war on Christians,” perhaps an

81 Green, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*, 274. 82 *Ibid.*, 213–214.

83 Alejandro de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 44–45.

84 The alleged African resistance to the epidemics that struck Mexico during the colonial period is a topic that remains severely understudied. Between 1579 and 1581 “many Negroes” died a result of the great *cocoliztli* epidemic that began in 1576; see Peter Gerhard, *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 23.

85 Woodrow Borah and Sherburne Cook, “Conquest and Population: A Demographic Approach to Mexican History,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 113, no. 2 (April 1969): 180–182.

86 Manuel Lucena Salmoral, *Regulación de la esclavitud negra en las colonias de América Española (1503–1886): Documentos para su estudio* (Alcalá: University of Alcalá de Henares, 2005), 52–54, “Carta del obispo de México, Fray Alonso de Montúfar, al rey sobre los escrúpulos existentes por esclavizar a los negros después de haberse liberado a los indios.”

87 James Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 54 (Jan. 1997): 155–164.

offhand reference to the continued struggles with the Chichimec populations of the northern frontier. Moreover, enslaved Africans had consistently demonstrated their “good will in receiving the Holy Gospel.”⁸⁸ The significance of such criticism cannot be understated. Iberians had historically linked Africans with Islam, thereby equating skin color with a politico-religious adversary. Montúfar argued that such generalizations lacked validity as Africans in New Spain had constantly proven to be worthy neophytes and thus deserved just as much freedom as their indigenous counterparts.⁸⁹

The Mexican archbishop proposed shutting down the slave trade altogether. In an unprecedented critique, Montúfar noted that despite the “causes that the holy and Catholic doctors use to explain [African] captivity, it does not appear that these excuse the wars that some blacks now wage on others.”⁹⁰ Moreover, he continued, by “ceasing this captivity and business as it has been led up until now by ransoming their bodies, there will be greater care in taking them the preaching of the Holy Gospel, that in their lands they may be free in their bodies, but more so, in their souls by bringing them to the true knowledge of Jesus Christ.” The archbishop’s letter attacked a lucrative transatlantic slave trade that was becoming increasingly profitable with the Crown’s endorsement. Between 1544 and 1550, Portuguese traders entered agreements to purchase 14,000 slaves on the West African coast and deliver them to the Spanish Indies.⁹¹ By 1550, even the incoming viceroy of New Spain, Don Luis de Velasco, had arranged the delivery of 100 slaves (exempt from the requisite taxes) to Mexico by way of Cape Verde.⁹²

Montúfar adopted a scathing tone against Portuguese slave traders, “their conquests” on the African coast, and the profits made in Mexico. According to the archbishop, the slave trade was “no mean business” (*no es la menor granjería*) in New Spain. Moreover, he argued that the “spiritual

88 Lucena Salmoral, *Regulación*, 52–54.

89 The Jesuit Francisco Calderón followed a similar line of reasoning in referring to blacks as “indios orientales” and Catholic neophytes. See Úrsula Camba Ludlow, *Imaginarios ambiguos, realidades contradictorias: Conductas y representaciones de los negros y mulatos novohispanos, Siglos XVI y XVII* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2008), 49.

90 Lucena Salmoral, *Regulación*, 52–54.

91 Maria de Graça Mateus Ventura, *Negreiros portugueses na rota das Índias de Castela (1541–1556)* (Lisbon: Edições Colibri, 1999), 68.

92 María Justina Sarabia Viejo, *Don Luis de Velasco, virrey de Nueva España, 1550–1564* (Mexico City: Editorial CSIC, 1978), 132–133, 281–282. Considering the traditional rivalry between viceroys and archbishops in New Spain, it is possible that Montúfar condemned investing in the slave trade as a public slight against Velasco. This scenario is all the more likely when considering that the archbishop’s own brother, Martín de Montúfar, had trafficked twenty enslaved black men from Spain and sold them for a handsome profit in Mexico. See Ethelia Ruíz Medrano, “Los negocios de un arzobispo: El caso de Fray Alonso de Montúfar,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 12, no. 19 (1992), 70–71.

and corporal benefits” that Africans received once in Christian captivity were negligible, as in most cases the enslaved were forced to relinquish their families and wives in Africa for lives of bigamy and concubinage in New Spain. Unsurprisingly, Montúfar’s pleas fell on deaf ears. The archbishop’s rationale clearly deserved consideration and, in fact, followed many of the lines espoused in the fight against indigenous slavery.

From the colonizers’ perspective, the extreme demographic decline of Mexico’s native populations (coupled with the discovery of the Zacatecas silver mines in the late 1540s) required the introduction of a new workforce. Based on Caribbean precedents, the Spanish Crown viewed black slave labor as a historically viable alternative to labor shortages. No efforts were made to remedy the religious perils that slavery imposed on the African men and women sent to New Spain after 1560, and as a result “shiploads from every part of Guinea” would continue to arrive in greater and greater numbers.⁹³

The Demands of Domesticity

With the military phase of the conquest complete in Central Mexico, colonizers also turned to the transatlantic trade for enslaved female workers. In fact, elite Poblanos had exerted considerable demand for African women since the mid-sixteenth century. As cooks, laundresses, itinerant vendors, and sexual partners, but especially as status markers, enslaved domestics became a permanent fixture of the colonial city. Their roles were largely defined by the 1550s and 1560s, precisely the decades in which Spanish women began to arrive in the viceroyalty in greater numbers, bringing with them new cultural, familial, and social expectations. Unfortunately, studies on colonial servitude have rarely addressed the question of how, why, or when enslaved black domestics became rooted in Mexican society. In Puebla, it is not altogether clear what or who triggered the call for imported domestic laborers. Were established Spanish men living in Puebla calling for black domestic slaves or were these the demands of incoming Spanish women?

Judging from the corpus of extant personal letters written between Spaniards on opposite sides of the Atlantic, established men in Puebla often asked their relatives to bring along black domestic slaves. In 1559, Antonio Pérez wrote to his brother, Francisco Gutiérrez in Albuquerque, Castile, giving him precise instructions on how to properly prepare for his upcoming move to Puebla.⁹⁴ Pérez stressed that Gutiérrez should bring

93 Lucena Salmoral, *Regulación*, 52–54.

94 Enrique Otte and Guadalupe Albi Romero, eds., *Cartas privadas de emigrantes a Indias* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 146–147.

along his wife and children, along with his marriage certificate, as this document was required by the Sevillian authorities. In the meantime, Pérez had made arrangements to send his brother money “and a black woman who would serve him on the sea.” Once in Puebla, the Gutiérrez family would reunite with Pérez, his wife, and their other (unnamed) sibling and their four children.

In April 1563, the Puebla municipal council addressed the issue of black and indigenous domesticity in passing, and only because one Juan Ruíz presented a complaint. According to Ruíz, black and indigenous women habitually washed clothes in the water conduit (*alcantarilla*) on the street corner that faced the house of a resident named Diego Cortés.⁹⁵ Ruíz argued that these practices were “detrimental,” but the municipal scribe did not detail what specific aspect (location, use of water, involved parties) was so inconvenient to the affected party. Still, the city regents ordered the towncrier proclaim that “no black woman or indian woman wash in said *alcantarilla*, under penalty of fifty lashes.” The motion clearly targeted black and indigenous laundresses, who apparently were not joined by Spanish women in these activities. Municipal ordinances such as these reinforced the idea that black and indigenous bodies, both male and female, were subject to corporal punishment. However, unlike the 1536 ordinance that defined black men as criminal slaves and aggressors of indigenous women, the 1563 decree suggests that black female domestics were not necessarily enslaved and that indigenous and black women performed overlapping domestic roles in common urban spaces. For the laundresses of early colonial Puebla, the water conduit represented a working space, but also an arena of conviviality that was apparently off-limits to their Spanish mistresses.

By the second half of the sixteenth century, wealthy Poblanos had invested in and produced a slave-owning culture that combined the ostentatious demands of elite urban society with the practical needs of a region suffering from indigenous depopulation. In 1560, Catalina Rodríguez and her future husband received twelve black slaves – eight men and four women – as part of her dowry.⁹⁶ With the establishment of a mature, urban colonial society and the ensuing arrival of Spanish women from the Peninsula, female slave labor in Puebla became highly valued. Consider the following 1566 letter from Luis de Córdoba, a resident of Puebla, writing to his wife in Seville and persuading her to make the trip across the Atlantic.

95 AGMP, Actas de Cabildo, Vol. 9, 5r.

96 Blanca Lara Tenorio and Carlos Paredes Martínez, “La población negra en los valles centrales de Puebla: Orígenes y desarrollo hasta 1681,” in *Presencia africana en México*, ed. Luz María Martínez Montiel (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1994), 31.

Therefore, sell what you own over there . . . and buy the service of two slave women and a [male] black slave that they may serve you on the sea [voyage], make sure these three pieces be of very good quality, as they are what is most needed here.⁹⁷

The notion of buying enslaved women for company and security along the voyage across the Atlantic appears frequently in the letters written by Spanish emigrants to their relatives back on the Peninsula. Yet Luis de Córdoba's letter represents a shift in the reasoning behind the demand for African slaves, both male and female. During the 1530s, enslaved blacks served as military auxiliaries and in the following two decades as replacements for indigenous laborers. By the 1560s, however, there was nothing more needed or valuable than an enslaved African in the city of Puebla.

Conclusion

For all of the continuities between the phases of African and indigenous slavery in colonial Mexico, key differences emerged during the 1530s and 1560s. The majority of involuntary laborers entering the viceroyalty now hailed from the Upper Guinea via the ports of Iberia and Cape Verde. Whereas conquistadors and *encomienda* holders previously sold the indigenous captives they had captured themselves, the acquisition of black slaves depended on the actions of the sailors, ship captains, creditors, and merchants who controlled Atlantic commerce. Despite the ongoing struggle against the Chichimec communities of the northern and western frontier, Spaniards turned away from indigenous slavery. Chichimec captives continued to be sold in the city throughout the century, but Puebla's municipal ordinances and *caja de negros* signaled an ideological commitment to African slavery. Even the religious plea for the humanity of African souls and spouses fell on deaf ears as the transatlantic slave trade intensified throughout the mid and late sixteenth century.

97 Otte and Albi Romero, eds., *Cartas privadas*, 147–149. “Así que, por tanto, señora, vendes lo que allí tenéis, y cobrad lo que debe el rey, pues que decís que no lo habéis cobrado, y comprad servicio que os sirva por la mar de un par de esclavas y un esclavo negro, tres piezas que sean muy buenas, que es lo que más acá es menester.”