

The African Experience in Early Spanish America. [Introduction]

Author(s): Matthew Restall and Jane Landers

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THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN EARLY SPANISH AMERICA*

Of the five great African diasporas of historical record, as recently described by Colin Palmer,¹ the fourth includes the story of Blacks in Spanish America.² It remains the best studied of the “five major African diasporic streams,” thanks to pioneering work by scholars such as Palmer, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Frederick Bowser, Herbert Klein, Rolando Mellafe, and others, as well as a flurry of recent and forthcoming publications by a new generation studying this diaspora—among them the contributors to this special issue of *The Americas*, and the late Kimberly Hanger, to whom the issue is hereby dedicated.³

Yet there remains so much about the story that is unstudied, or poorly understood, or well-known but inadequately substantiated. This issue seeks both to make that point and to make a modest contribution toward the gradual and ongoing rectification of the situation. It does so by offering one thematic piece (by Restall), followed by four regional studies (by Brockington, Lane, Herrera, and Vinson). All five articles represent more extensive in-progress studies of black society in regions of Spanish America; placed together in this issue they also represent a small step taken towards further identifying and articulating patterns of contrast and patterns common to the diaspora.

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¹ Colin Palmer, “Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora,” *Perspectives* 36:6 (September 1998), 1, 22-25. Also cited by Lolita Brockington in her article below. Palmer broadly defines a diaspora as a “movement of specific peoples,” and it is in this sense that scholars of the African diaspora in Latin America have come to use the term.

² The diversity of people of African descent in the Spanish colonies—as illustrated by the articles below—means that no single term adequately describes them all, so it is for obvious reasons of expediency that “black” and “African” are used in this special issue as blanket terms to refer to people of African descent; wherever possible, the authors use more specific, defined terms, such as “Afro-Mexican,” and “*pardo*,” with “African” sometimes defined as a reference to someone certainly or probably born in Africa.

³ See the articles below for specific citations.

The articles below suggest many topics and directions, but two broad themes that run through them all seem particularly worth noting here. One is the ubiquity of the African presence in Spanish America. The other is the diversity of the black experience in those colonies.

That experience can be traced chronologically through the articles in this issue. It is largely expressed as African involvement in Spanish colonial development. The omnipresence of people of African descent among Spaniards in their colonies is (not surprisingly) linked to labor demands in the articles, which collectively suggest that Spaniards used African labor in every conceivable form everywhere they endeavored to settle. Demands for armed labor, for example, began with the Conquest and continued as the Spanish colonies fell under threat from European rivals (Restall, pp. 175-99; Herrera, p. 251).

Then, as Spaniards and Africans developed complex settlements and colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, labor demands grew more extensive and diverse, as did the black experience. Wherever Spaniards developed mines, for example, they sought to use black labor, including in Ecuador (Lane, pp. 238-45) and in Guatemala (Herrera, pp. 247-48, 260-61). Brockington shows that, despite the (temporarily) fortifying effect of coca, personnel requirements at Potosí could not be met by a demographically devastated and “increasingly unreliable Indian labor pool” (p. 210). African slaves, therefore, were used to supplement and often oversee native workers, not only in the mines but also on cattle and agricultural enterprises in the Mizque region that is Brockington’s focus.

Spanish households in the Mizque region also kept black slaves as domestic servants (Brockington, p. 214), a phenomenon well-known for most of Spanish America but worth emphasizing as a part of colonial life even at the level of modest households in so-called fringe regions (Lane, p. 227; Herrera, p. 259). Whether domestic slaves or of a different status and category, people of African descent tended to develop trades or skills either at their own initiative or under Spanish supervision; as the articles below suggest, there were probably more skilled black workers in Spanish America than unskilled (Restall, pp. 190-92; Lane, pp. 231-32, 237-38; Herrera, pp. 258-63; Vinson, p. 272-74).

Finally, in the eighteenth century, many of these patterns seen developing in the early period had become fully fledged and deeply rooted. In Mexico’s Costa Chica, for example, the importation of black slaves and subsequent migration of free black workers onto agricultural estates gradually turned the region’s *estancias* into “free-mulatto townships” (Vinson, p. 282).

A further dimension of the ubiquity of Blacks in Spanish America was the control dynamic inherent to the Spanish introduction and use of African labor in the colonies. As “pieces” of property brought to a new world (e.g., Lane, p. 232), part of the utility of Africans was their intended status as dependent upon—and thus controlled by—Spaniards. However, as the phenomenon of “black counter-conquistadors” illustrates (Restall, pp. 199-204), Spanish control over Africans was tenuous almost from the moment the first African foot touched American soil. The control dynamic thus consisted of repeated Spanish attempts to legislate the treatment and use of black workers and to crush or co-opt maroon communities, while Africans continued to violate and resist these controls in ways that remain revealing in their prevalence and variety (Brockington, pp. 214-24, Lane, pp. 233-35; Herrera, pp. 254-56); as Brockington remarks, “slavery was synonymous with resistance” (p. 217).

The treatments of the topic of black labor not only illustrate the first theme mentioned above—the African omnipresence in Spanish America—but also the second. By no means were all Blacks in the Spanish colonies African-born slaves. To again take examples in the chronological-geographical sequence of the articles below: free Blacks and mulattos participated at various levels in the Conquest and in acts of opposition to the Spanish colonial agenda (Restall, pp. 175-96, 199-204); they worked Andean ranches or *chácaras* and some were even considered by Spaniards to be *yanaconas*, “dependents,” typically a native category (Brockington, p. 211); they ran their own mule-skinning businesses in Ecuador (Lane, p. 230); they ran cacao plantations and worked in food preparation in Spanish cities such as Santiago de Guatemala (Herrera, pp. 258-60); and they worked as farmers and cowboys on Mexico’s Pacific coast (Vinson, p. 271-72).

The diversity of the black experience took people of African descent into the native world too. As involuntary colonists Africans were participants alongside Spaniards in imperial endeavors, but as non-Spaniards it was also possible for them to build working and social lives among native peoples in ways that Spaniards could not or would not. The topic of black-native relations remains something of an historiographical frontier between the sub-fields of ethnohistory and black diaspora studies, and the articles in this issue offer hints as to the complexity and rich potential of the topic.

An enslaved African named Manuel, for example, was not unique in the early-seventeenth century eastern Andes as a shepherd raising a family with his native Andean wife (Brockington, p. 213; also see Lane, pp. 231, 239). On the other hand, even in late-colonial times, there was on Mexico’s Costa Chica an apparent “reluctance on both the part of free-coloreds and Indians

to wed each other” (Vinson, p. 282). Nevertheless, the dynamics of black families, be they slave families in cities such as Santiago (Herrera, pp. 263-65), or families of mixed racial ancestry on rural estates, running from the sixteenth-century Andes (Brockington; Lane) to the eighteenth-century Mexican coasts (Vinson), is a persistent theme in this issue and a topic ripe for future study. Quite rightfully, Brockington takes a 1586 royal edict banning black-native “mingling” as indicative of Spanish concerns rather than applied policies and actual social patterns (p. 215).

What remains for historians is a thorough examination of that “mingling” in all its diversity. Indeed, what remains in a more general sense is the continued pursuit of the African experience in Spanish America, the historiographical “redemption” (to borrow a term from Lane’s article) of these omnipresent but too-often invisible men and women.

MATTHEW RESTALL AND JANE LANDERS