

“They Are Blacks of the Caste of Black Christians”: Old Christian Black Blood in the Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century Iberian Atlantic

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Abstract Hundreds of Castilian free black men and women obtained royal travel licenses to cross the Atlantic in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as black Old Christians. They settled across the Spanish Indies and developed trades as artisans, traders, sailors, healers, and small business owners, often becoming prominent and wealthy *vecinos* (residents). Exploring these often obscure and long-invisible biographies of individuals, the article revisits key historiographical debates about race, purity of blood, and vassalage in the early Spanish empire.

In a life marked by Atlantic travels, Francisco González labored on fleets that crisscrossed the Atlantic from Seville to the Indies as a wage-earning seaman

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and a renowned diver for most of his working life.¹ During the two decades that he worked at sea and in various ports of the Hispanic Atlantic between 1557 and 1577, González periodically returned to Seville to see his wife. In 1569, he requested a royal travel license at the House of Trade in Seville so that he and his free black wife, Juana Rodriguez, could move from Seville to the port city of Veracruz (in New Spain), where he wished to ply his trade as a diver and where he had property (*hacienda*).² In his application, González argued that he and his wife were both free black Old Christians (descended from Christian antecedents) as opposed to New Christians (converts to Christianity) and that they were *vecinos* (loosely, residents) of Seville. Sailors who had labored with González on ships in the Hispanic Atlantic acted as witnesses in his application and drew on the couple's black skin color and their parents' African heritage (Guinea) to position González and his wife as free black Old Christians and good *vecinos* in Seville. One witness explained that "they are blacks of the caste of black Christians, and not Moriscos because they are *atezados* [dark black complexion]," while another posited that the couple were "blacks and of the caste of those of Guinea and not Moriscos."³ The witnesses reasoned that the couple's blackness attested that they were not of the newly converted peoples that the crown had prohibited from traveling to the Indies but instead were Old Christians.⁴ In spite of increasingly stringent royal prohibitions throughout the sixteenth century that aimed to thwart undesirables and New Christians from establishing residency in the New World for fear that such groups would corrupt indigenous and Spanish communities, hundreds of free black men and women like González and his wife, some of them first-generation Africans (manumitted slaves), obtained royal permits at Seville's House of Trade to cross the ocean as vassals of the crown—that is, as Old Christians—between 1500 and 1640.⁵

Rising to the challenge posed by Herman L. Bennett in *Colonial Blackness* to "question why the analytical category of slavery is the defining lens through

1. Francisco Gonzales, 1569, Archivo General de Indias, Seville (hereafter cited as AGI), Indiferente 2052, no. 14; Francisco González, 1577, AGI, Indiferente 1968, libro 21, fol. 131v.

2. Francisco Gonzales, 1569, AGI, Indiferente 2052, no. 14.

3. *Ibid.*, fols. 3r–3v.

4. Francisco González, 1577, AGI, Indiferente 1968, libro 21, fol. 131v.

5. A compilation of such royal edicts are cited in Cook, *Forbidden Passages*, 53–79. For between 1500 and 1640, I have found evidence of 350 free black men and women obtaining royal licenses to travel to the New World, in three key caches of documents held at the AGI: Asientos de Pasajeros (passenger lists), Licencias (royal travel licenses), and Bienes de Difuntos (assets of the deceased records). I also draw on royal petitions and travel licenses recorded in the Indiferente section of the AGI.

which scholars examine the experiences and lives of free coloreds," this article traces the transoceanic lives of free black men and women who obtained royal travel licenses to cross the Atlantic in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as black Old Christians.⁶ They settled across the Spanish Indies and integrated into Atlantic economies as actors, alms collectors, artisans, colonists, healers, legal representatives, merchants, musicians, sailors, and soldiers, and sometimes they became prominent and wealthy vecinos. The article traces how such individuals employed language of vassalage, purity of blood, religious lineage, and *vecindad* (loosely, subjecthood or citizenship)—rooted in black skin color and African origins—in their encounters with imperial authorities in the early Hispanic empire. This investigation dialogues with rich historiographical debates regarding whether Iberians in the early Hispanic empire unequivocally interpreted black skin color as indicating irredeemably stained or impure blood, and whether, as a result, free black individuals were on the whole ineligible to claim *vecindad* and royal vassalage. I piece together free black men and women's transoceanic lives, which often spanned vast distances in the early Hispanic empire, by drawing on archival fragments from different institutions of colonial governance including royal decrees, royal travel license applications and records pertaining to the *bienes de difuntos* (assets of the deceased) in Seville's House of Trade, notarial records from Seville, Mexico City, and Xalapa, and inquisitorial cases primarily from New Spain. These geographically itinerant free black individuals circulated between the commercial and political nodes that connected the early Hispanic Atlantic world, which included Seville, Cartagena de Indias, Panama, Portobelo, Nombre de Dios, Havana, Santo Domingo, Veracruz, Xalapa, and Mexico City. The biographies under study highlight that while different regions of the empire may have developed local views on skin color, individuals' lives often traversed diverse spaces. These transoceanic biographies should be studied as they appear in the records—interconnected to a variety of places often separated by large distances—while paying attention to local contingencies.

The essay develops three analytical threads. First, I provide an overview of recent interpretations of the relationship between skin color and purity of blood, followed by a discussion of how—as a result of historiographical conclusions about the interrelations between purity of blood and blackness—other branches of scholarship have explored how imperial authorities excluded black individuals from *vecindad* and royal vassalage. Thereafter I outline how a decentered, multisited archival research methodology, paired with analysis of

6. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness*, 5–6.

particular transoceanic imperial administrative processes such as *bienes de difuntos*, allow for an examination of free black individuals' transoceanic lives and interactions with institutions of colonial governance. The core of the article offers an analysis of how *vecindad* operated in the lives of free black men and women who hailed from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and lived across different sites of the Hispanic Atlantic. Finally, in a concluding case study, I explore House of Trade officials' interpretations of purity of blood and blackness and highlight the centrality of black skin color to successfully claiming an Old Christian lineage in that institution.

Francisco González's affirmations that he and his wife were "of the caste of black Christians" stand in stark contrast to a branch of historiography that posits that blackness became a marker of irredeemably stained blood in the early Hispanic world.⁷ Such scholars argue that Iberians permanently labeled black individuals as converts or New Christians, thereby barring black men and women from becoming true Old Christians. Nikolaus Böttcher, Bernd Hausberger, and Max Hering Torres, for example, have argued that in the Spanish Americas the question of purity of blood shifted away from peninsular concerns regarding Jewish and Muslim impurities—which in Iberia were only "palpable through memory and genealogical categories"—to differentiations based on skin color.⁸ They posited that from the first half of the seventeenth century onward, Castilians and creoles in the Spanish Americas began to emphasize the impurity of black individuals' blood. Such concerns diminished the position of *negros*, *mulatos*, and *zambos* within the purity of blood value system and led to their exclusion and subordination.⁹ In a later essay, Hering Torres proposed that "the concept of purity of blood which originally arose in Spain as an anti-converso measure, became a strategy of colonial racialization in the Americas, because it codified social relations in a hierarchical way through the use of corporal and cultural symbols."¹⁰ As an example, Hering Torres noted how the Benedictine priest and bishop of Pamplona Prudencio de Sandoval (1553–1620) "traced a resemblance between impurity of blood, the race of New Christians, and the black skin of the Africans"; Hering Torres argued that for the bishop, "the color 'black' acted not only as a metaphor for servitude but also as a signifier of immorality which enabled contagion, impurity, and the vice of

7. Böttcher, Hausberger, and Hering Torres, *El peso de la sangre*; Gómez, "El estigma africano"; Herzog, *Defining Nations*; Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*; Sweet, "Iberian Roots"; Hering Torres, Martínez, and Nirenberg, *Race and Blood*.

8. Böttcher, Hausberger, and Hering Torres, "Introducción," 13.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Hering Torres, "Purity of Blood," 30.

lineage to be grouped as hereditary factors."¹¹ Hering Torres concluded that, in general, "purity of blood was linked to skin color" in the Spanish Americas "and had an impact on the majority of the population which was 'non-white' and lacked privileges."¹² The late María Elena Martínez, who explored ideas about purity of blood in New Spain from the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, suggested that ideas associating black skin color with irredeemably stained blood solidified from the mid-sixteenth century onward, which "seldom allowed blacks the possibility of full 'redemption' and their full incorporation into the 'Spanish nation.'"¹³ Laura A. Lewis echoed this point when arguing that black individuals could never integrate into the colonial system "*as Spaniards per se*."¹⁴ Further, Martínez and Lewis have suggested that ideas about stained black blood stood in contrast to conceptualizations of Native American indigenous blood, which Iberians perceived to be redeemable over the course of several generations of reproduction with Old Christians.¹⁵ Finally, focusing on the categories of *mulatos* in sixteenth-century New Spain, Robert Schwaller highlighted the porousness of a society of castes, or *géneros de gente*, while arguing that categories of difference "had begun to undergo a process of racialization," so that by the late seventeenth century such distinctions "would more closely model modern notions of race as Iberian thought began to view the differences inherent in such categories as natural qualities."¹⁶

While acknowledging the dominance of contemporaneous views on the irredeemability of black blood, other scholars have suggested that such ideas did not necessarily reflect the lived experiences of the African diaspora. Instead, possibilities existed for negotiating categories of identification. This reading attributes the emergence of black Catholics—such as those explored in this article—to the possibility of identifying as and sometimes purchasing a different category of skin color. Ann Twinam, for example, explained the presence of black Catholics at the turn of the seventeenth century in the Spanish Americas as part of a *longue durée* trajectory—and practice—of whitening that saw its apex in the eighteenth century and that entailed black individuals identifying as whiter in order to obtain greater privileges and freedoms within colonial society: "As the generations passed, these free populations identified themselves as Catholics and were so identified by imperial officials. . . . Blacks,

11. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

12. *Ibid.*, 24.

13. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 155.

14. Lewis, "Between 'Casta' and 'Raza,'" 113–14.

15. *Ibid.*; Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 154–58.

16. Schwaller, *Géneros de Gente*, 6.

pardos, and mulattos gradually began to belong to the larger Spanish Catholic ‘us.’”¹⁷ Such a reading helpfully highlights the wider opportunities for social mobility in the early Castilian empire while echoing the aforementioned conclusion that pervasive ideas about irredeemably stained blood sparked the crown’s discrimination against black individuals in the early Castilian empire. For example, Twinam notes that the Spanish crown perceived that “blacks, pardos, and mulattos lack[ed] clean blood” and that as the black population grew, monarchs introduced increasingly restrictive legislation “confirming its inferior place” and barred black individuals from royal or public offices and specific professions.¹⁸

Other scholars have cast doubt on the existence of widespread discrimination and societal divisions based on pervasive racialized views of blood purity. With a focus on New Spain, Solange Alberro and Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru have questioned the existence of a clearly delineated “society of castes.”¹⁹ Energized by the question of whether an authentic system of difference existed in the Spanish Americas that decisively influenced people’s destinies, Gonzalbo Aizpuru in particular questioned the theory that bad blood or impurity solidified from its religious origins into racial criteria over three centuries of colonial rule and criticized scholars for homogenizing 300 years of history.²⁰ This author also noted a tendency in scholarship to exaggerate the significance of concerns about purity of blood, which energized limited segments of Spanish society, such as specific ecclesiastical circles concerned with administering appointments to high office. Gonzalbo Aizpuru warned that scholars often extrapolate from such narrow contexts the existence of a system of castes in colonial society in which ideas about “bad blood and bad race” legislated everyday life with such strength that “defeated Indians and enslaved blacks themselves undertook and docilely submitted to” such ideas.²¹ In contrast, Gonzalbo Aizpuru proposed that the day-to-day lives of most colonial subjects remained unaffected by purity of blood concerns. Refuting notions that ideas about blood were racialized in earlier periods, Gonzalbo Aizpuru proposed that such racialization only began to emerge in the eighteenth century, once *mestizaje* became normative across all families and a preoccupation to distinguish the diverse mixes and *calidades* captured society at large. Gonzalbo Aizpuru argued that those

17. Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 106.

18. *Ibid.*, 101–2.

19. Alberro and Gonzalbo Aizpuru, “Prólogo.”

20. Gonzalbo Aizpuru, “La trampa,” 39.

21. *Ibid.*, 38.

eighteenth-century distinctions were not responses to a centuries-long racist ideology that justified the superiority of the Spanish, and that—as many other scholars have noted—frequent transgression rendered the attempts to implement strict societal divisions in the late colonial era rather futile.²²

A separate branch of scholarship has also questioned the appropriateness of interrogating ideas about race that rely on discriminatory practices based on stable hereditary or physical features—such as blood purity—given that contemporaneous Iberians regarded the body as highly malleable and permeable, not as a fixed, unchangeable entity. This is why, as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has argued, early modern Europeans believed that external forces such as demons could alter physical features in humans, enter bodies, and affect individuals' behavior.²³ More recently, Rebecca Earle noted that because sixteenth-century historical actors did not regard the body as "fixed" and saw heredity as a "porous process," historians should employ caution when concluding that "early modern Spaniards regarded characteristics such as skin colour or overall appearance as 'genetically fixed qualities.'"²⁴

Contributing to these rich discourses, this article explores the relationship between black skin color and purity of blood through the lives of free black men and women who traversed the Atlantic world. Most scholars on race and blood generally agree—in spite of disagreements about the extent or lack of a stratified system of racialized differentiation—that African origins became a determining factor in the generalization of prejudices, even though there is a growing body of scholarship on the lives of the African diaspora, discussed below, that suggests otherwise. On the one hand, I coincide with Gonzalbo Aizpuru in underscoring the plurality of and ambivalence regarding ideas about blood and race in everyday life in the early colonial period. On the other hand, the sources explored here also tell a story of black men and women successfully claiming pure Old Christian lineages rooted in African origins that permitted them to access privileges typically reserved for Catholic Castilians. Royal officials at the House of Trade in Seville, for instance, expected and accepted that free black men and women would claim an Old Christian lineage rooted in a black African heritage. And these black men and women did so in the face of the fierce control that the House of Trade exerted in permitting individuals to travel to the Indies, which resulted in an active trade in forged royal travel licenses in Seville akin to the illicit market in *linages* (religious lineages) that

22. *Ibid.*, 36–38.

23. Cañizares-Esguerra, "Demons."

24. Earle, *Body*, 204.

arose in the same period.²⁵ Free black men and women noted in their travel license applications that the royal exclusions did not pertain to them, as they were black Old Christians. For example, in 1601 a free black woman named Clara Martín argued that her parents were Old Christians from Guinea and that she was an honorable person in her place of birth, Palos (in Huelva, Spain). Her witnesses, who also hailed from Palos, affirmed that Martín was a black Old Christian and explained that the numerous royal decrees prohibiting New Christians, heretics, criminals, and those who had been pursued by the Inquisition from traveling to the Indies did not apply to her.²⁶ Similarly, in 1612 a free black man named Juan de Castañeda Bustamante successfully applied to travel as the servant of Fadrique Cancer by claiming an African Old Christian heritage. Born a free man in Seville to married free black parents, Bustamante argued that he and his family were Old Christians from Guinea and clean of “all bad race.”²⁷ Travel records demonstrate that black individuals who had previously endured lives in captivity also obtained permission to embark on Atlantic voyages by highlighting their Old Christian African heritage.²⁸ For instance, 13 years after obtaining her freedom in her owner’s testament, Lucía de Mendoza applied for a royal license to travel to Peru employed as a *criada* (servant) in 1592. Her witnesses assured that they had known Mendoza since she was a very young child in Seville and that her parents, Anton and Paula, were “*negros atezados, bozales* from Guinea.”²⁹ Mendoza and other former captives appended to their travel license applications their freedom certificates from towns dotted across the Hispanic empire. These cases highlight how manumitted Africans sometimes obtained *naturaleza* (community of belonging) and *vecindad* in various sites in the Castilian empire and how they identified themselves—and were seen by others—as Old Christians.

25. Pike, *Linajudos and Conversos*. For royal responses to forgeries of travel licenses, see “El fiscal con Laberto de Cuenca,” 1550, AGI, Justicia 1177, no. 1; “Autos del fiscal contra Lorenzo Núñez,” 1555, AGI, Contratación 5218, no. 88; *real cédula*, 1557, AGI, Indiferente 1965, libro 13, fol. 432v; *expediente de información*, 1605, AGI, Contratación 5283, no. 82bis; “Autos del fiscal contra Andrés de Mendoza,” 1605, AGI, Contratación 5289, no. 36; *autos de prisión*, 1605, AGI, Contratación 5280, no. 11.

26. Clara Martín, 1601, AGI, Contratación 5264, no. 2, ramo 78.

27. Juan de Castañeda Bustamante, 1612, AGI, Contratación 5327, no. 22. For a similar case, see Luis de Lara, 1595, AGI, Contratación 5250, no. 1, ramo 30.

28. Examples of former slaves obtaining royal travel licenses include Inés Pérez, 1593, AGI, Contratación 5241, no. 2, ramo 33; Juana Mejía, 1598, AGI, Contratación 5255, no. 2, ramo 63; Juan de Buenaño, 1600, AGI, Contratación 5261, no. 1, ramo 59.

29. Lucía de Mendoza, 1592, AGI, Contratación 5240, no. 1, ramo 31, fols. 4r–5v.

Were these black men and women engaged in a process of whitening when claiming an Old Christian heritage? Certainly, Twinam's research on whitening provides the analytical space for more fluid interpretive lenses regarding the relationship between skin color and purity of blood. However, when comparing the language that petitioners employed across the centuries, stark differences emerge. Twinam highlighted how, "whenever possible," eighteenth-century pardos, *mulatos*, and blacks "emphasized their white ancestry" in petitions.³⁰ In contrast, sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century free black petitioners at the House of Trade located their pure and legitimate religious lineage in a black African past rather than by emphasizing whiteness. Martín argued that her parents were black Old Christians from Guinea. Bustamante stated that his parents were free blacks from Guinea and Old Christians clean of "all bad race," while Mendoza described herself (albeit mediated through a scribe) as the legitimate daughter of "negros atezados, bozales from Guinea." Finally, Francisco González affirmed that he and his black wife were "blacks of the caste of black Christians." Theirs was not a story of whitening through the adoption of Catholicism. Their statements perhaps more aptly fit Larissa Brewer-García's pioneering work in art history on seventeenth-century visual representations of blackness in the Caribbean, in which she demonstrates that "blackness served as a signifier of Christian beauty in seventeenth-century visual and written texts from evangelical settings where black men and women's own perceptions were prioritized in order to ensure their efficacious conversion to Christianity."³¹

I focus in this article on how the process of identifying—and being accepted—as a black Old Christian of clean blood affected black historical actors' experiences in the Spanish empire and, in particular, their ability to claim *vecindad* and royal vassalage. In so doing, I acknowledge that I am failing to address important scholarship on Christianity in Africa that highlights how Africans shaped Christianity in specific sites.³² For example, John Thornton has written extensively on West African Catholicism, primarily in the Kingdom of Kongo. He demonstrated that while scholars generally depict the conversion of the Kingdom of Kongo to Christianity as "superficial, diplomatically oriented, impure, dangerous to national sovereignty or rejected by the mass of the population," in fact Christianity in Kongo "took a distinctly African form" that "was widely accepted both in Kongo and in Europe as being the religion of the country." European priests, he argued, were "much more tolerant of syncretism

30. Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 53.

31. Brewer-García, "Imagined Transformations," 111–12.

32. Fromont, *Art of Conversion*; Thornton, "Development"; Thornton, *Kongolese*; Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*.

in Kongo than in regions like Mexico, where colonial occupation accompanied the propagation of Christianity.” Thornton observed that because Kongo had been a “voluntary convert” to Catholicism, the region “had considerable leeway to contribute to its particular form of Christianity.”³³ In turn, as Kongoese rulers maintained control over the theological content, the religion gained mass acceptance. Further, Thornton and others have persuasively demonstrated that many enslaved black individuals who were forcibly and violently displaced from their homelands through the Atlantic slave trade transplanted specific Afro-Christian identities and beliefs to the New World.³⁴ Because in the present article I explore the relationship between ideas about purity of blood and blackness in the early Castilian empire, I do not analyze the possible origins, moments of conversion, or interpretive layers of black Catholicism for the individuals under study.³⁵

I situate Francisco González and other black individuals discussed here within a flourishing field of research that explores the diverse ways that colonial subjects interacted with the intellectual milieus in which they lived in order to claim lineages that would provide access to specific privileges within the colonial order. While definitions of pure lineage or clean, untainted blood differed across geographical contexts in the early Castilian empire, in general the category meant having three to four generations of Old Christian antecedents. Theoretically, the grandchild of a New Christian and an Old Christian could be considered an Old Christian. In practice, though, such an individual’s purity of blood might cause concern. The performance of Old Christian black lineages mirrors how colonial subjects in the Portuguese and Spanish empires sought to identify with origins and religious heritages that would position them as Old Christians and as thereby equal—and sometimes superior—to many of their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts. Two examples demonstrate parallel intellectual projects in the Iberian empires. After the Portuguese conquest of Goa, early seventeenth-century Goan writers such as Brahman bishop dom Mateus de Castro (ca. 1594–1679) argued that the Brahman nation descended from King Gaspar, one of the magi who recognized Christianity in its earliest years. In doing so, Castro claimed that the Brahmans possessed one of the purest blood lineages, hailing directly from biblical times, and were “equivalent, if not superior, to Old Christian Portuguese nobility.”³⁶ A second

33. Thornton, “Development,” 167.

34. Fromont, *Art of Conversion*; Sweet, *Recreating Africa*; Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*.

35. I explore these questions in a separate article in progress titled “Restoring Africans’ Souls: Imagining Ethiopia in the Early Hispanic Atlantic.”

36. Barreto Xavier, “Purity of Blood,” 135–36.

example hails from late sixteenth-century Granada. Reacting to the erosion of elite Moriscos' political status—as ruling Castilians transformed Granada from an Islamic to a Christian city—some Moriscos instigated a complex hoax in order to claim a Christian heritage more ancient than that of their Castilian neighbors.³⁷ They buried tablets with Arabic script that documented the Christian evangelization of Granada in the first century AD. Once the tablets were purportedly discovered, some Moriscos claimed that the inscriptions proved that Arabic speakers had converted to Christianity far earlier than Castilians and that Granada was the earliest region of Iberia to convert to Christianity. Free black individuals' claims of Old Christian black lineages mirror these instances of colonial subjects engaging with Iberian Catholic intellectual and theological milieus in order to shape a religious heritage that might provide equal access to the privileges afforded to Old Christians in colonial society.

González and hundreds of other free black individuals who obtained travel licenses to cross the Atlantic often referred to themselves and were labeled by royal officials as black vecinos of specific locales in the Hispanic empire. Such a finding complicates a body of historiography that underlines how the categories of *naturaleza* and *vecindad* worked in the early Spanish empire to exclude black people. For example, Tamar Herzog argued that while Catholicism was a precondition for membership in Castilian society, it was not sufficient in its own right. Instead, place of birth and treatment by a community as a vecino or *natural* remained crucial to determining one's place in the Spanish empire. However, in Herzog's reading Iberians excluded black people from *naturaleza* and *vecindad*: "The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants was also applied to people of different ethnicities, races, religions, or vassalage. It justified the rejection of *converso* Jews, the persecution of the Gypsies, the exclusion of individuals of African descent, and on the contrary, the welcoming to Spain of foreign vassals and foreign Catholics."³⁸ According to Herzog, "Africans and their descendants lacked both the legal capacity and the (presumed) will to be naturalized in Spain and Spanish America."³⁹ In later work, Herzog suggested that perhaps *naturaleza* operated differently for the black diaspora in Castile than for those in the New World. Drawing on art history, Herzog hinted that in Castile black individuals might have been incorporated into the community through a process of whitening (whereby they were no longer perceived as black or African). Yet Herzog underlined that in the New World black skin color

37. Harris, *From Muslim to Christian Granada*; Coleman, *Creating Christian Granada*.

38. Herzog, *Defining Nations*, 1–2.

39. *Ibid.*, 160.

rendered individuals ineligible for full membership in communities as *vecinos*.⁴⁰ María Elena Martínez also grappled with the question of community belonging, arguing that by the mid-sixteenth century gaining freedom did not allow black individuals to make genealogical claims; because Iberians generally assumed that blacks had arrived in the New World as slaves, free blacks “were not recognized as a community that had willingly accepted Christianity and Spanish rule and that was in a contractual relationship with the Castilian crown.” Martínez argued that from this time onward free Afro-Mexicans and their descendants were rarely granted *vecino* titles and Old Christian status, because they were “marked as descendants of natives of distant, infidel lands who had lost their freedom.”⁴¹

Recent scholarship on African diasporas in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Hispanic empire demonstrates that such claims of a blanket exclusion from the benefits of *vecindad* do not reflect the diverse lived experiences of many free black men and women that emerge in local archives. Most prominently, David Wheat has explored how some of the African diaspora in the Hispanic Caribbean became important settlers in early colonial society. Drawing on a wide source base, Wheat highlighted how significant numbers of free black individuals in Havana, Cartagena de Indias, Nombre de Dios, Portobelo, and Panama were labeled *vecinos*, often owning property and eligible to participate in trades traditionally reserved for Iberian settlers. Wheat also explored how free black women who married white men sometimes developed significant influence and wealth in certain Hispanic Caribbean sites.⁴² Scholars such as Karen Graubart (discussing early seventeenth-century slave-owning black merchants in Lima) and Pablo Gómez (exploring early seventeenth-century black healers who circulated between Cartagena de Indias and the circum-Caribbean) have highlighted how specific black historical actors often were not excluded from *vecindad* in those locales.⁴³ Separately, Matthew Restall has traced the lives of Castilian black conquistadores who traveled to New Spain in royal armies and played important roles in the conquest of Yucatán in the mid-sixteenth century; they subsequently received royal privileges and pensions.⁴⁴ Further, scholarship on maroon communities—especially in the Tierra Firme region—demonstrates how insurgent runaway

40. Herzog, “Beyond Race.”

41. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 159.

42. Wheat, *Atlantic Africa*, 166–80, 207–15.

43. Graubart, “Lazos que unen”; Gómez, *Experiential Caribbean*; Gómez, “Incommensurable Epistemologies?”; Gómez, “Circulation.”

44. Restall, *Black Middle*.

and free groups of black individuals sometimes negotiated with royal authorities and accepted to be reduced into specific black towns, most prominently that of Santiago del Príncipe on the outskirts of Nombre de Dios, in turn receiving some privileges of subjecthood.⁴⁵ For late sixteenth-century Veracruz (and later Nueva Veracruz), Antonio García de León has outlined how free and enslaved black individuals constituted the majority of the town's year-round population, underscoring how the de facto community of that port city was comprised of black men and women.⁴⁶ Leo J. Garofalo has explored House of Trade travel license records for Afro-Iberians, highlighting "the unexpected presence and mobility of Afro-Iberians as they became a part of urban southern Iberian society, moved back and forth to the Americas, and served the Spanish Crown as sailors and soldiers in the Americas and along the coasts of Africa."⁴⁷ Finally, Herman L. Bennett persuasively argued that in early seventeenth-century Mexico City "free blacks had created areas of private and community life reflective of their desires, not those of colonial authorities."⁴⁸ These studies, while geographically dispersed and refraining from specific analytical foci on the category of *vecindad*, nonetheless fundamentally shake the notion that free black individuals were excluded from *vecindad* in the early Hispanic Atlantic.

I explore *vecindad* and purity of blood through transoceanic biographies from the early Hispanic Atlantic that I have reconstructed from archival fragments scattered across different institutions of colonial governance. Travel licenses from Seville's House of Trade demonstrate that in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, hundreds of free black men and women, some of them first-generation Africans (former slaves), obtained royal permits to cross the Atlantic as Old Christian vassals of the Spanish crown.⁴⁹ The testimonies provided in license applications reveal significant biographical information about the applicants' lives and the strategies they employed to prove an Old Christian lineage. Cases concerning *bienes de difuntos* at the House of Trade also captured the lives of black Castilians in astonishing detail.⁵⁰ The crown's concern for the return of Castilians' orphaned property—when no heirs existed

45. Tardieu, *Cimarrones de Panamá*; Wheat, *Atlantic Africa*, 1–4. See also Landers, "African Landscape."

46. García de León, *Tierra adentro*, 536–75. See also Domínguez Domínguez, "Entre resistencia."

47. Garofalo, "Shape of a Diaspora," 27.

48. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness*, 49. See also Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres*.

49. See note 5. Leo Garofalo has also analyzed the presence of black individuals in royal travel license records: Garofalo, "Shape of a Diaspora"; Garofalo, "Afro-Iberian Subjects."

50. García López, "Los autos."

in the Indies—to the kingdom of Castile led to the establishment in the mid-sixteenth century of tribunal seats of bienes de difuntos across key cities in the Indies. Such courts dispatched officials to inventory orphaned goods, establish biographical information on heirs, and send the worth of the property to the House of Trade.⁵¹ Once monies arrived in Seville, House of Trade officials would alert potential heirs in a three-pronged effort: publishing written information for public viewing at the House of Trade's patios, employing town criers to voice news of death and property in Seville's public squares, and dispatching messengers to the deceased's places of *naturaleza* across the kingdom of Castile. As such, Castilians' deaths in the Indies—including free black men and women's—often became etched in the historical record. The paperwork generated by bienes de difuntos cases highlights how various royal officials across the empire categorized members of the black Castilian diaspora as *vecinos*, rightful *naturales* of Castile, and vassals of the monarch. As Jane Mangan has found for mestizos in sixteenth-century Lima, such records bring to life a world of transatlantic obligations, family values, and practices that collapses many ideas about the existence of strict racial categories and practices of difference in early colonial society.⁵² Surviving notarial records from Mexico City, Seville, and Xalapa also evidence free black *vecinos*' social and commercial ties across the empire. Finally, depositions by black individuals accused of witchcraft and of entering into multiple marriage sacraments in inquisitorial courts in Cartagena de Indias and Mexico City detail the lives of black Castilians who settled as *vecinos* across the Atlantic, often decades after they had first embarked on their transoceanic journey. Weaving a world of black *vecinos* whose lives spanned vast distances across the early Hispanic Atlantic uncovers how black colonial subjects shaped discourses of blackness, Christianity, and empire in the early Hispanic world.

Consider Antonio Sigarra, a former slave who perished in the port city of Nueva Veracruz in 1609 from a stab wound. Officials for his bienes de difunto case in New Spain and at the House of Trade in Seville categorized him as a black *vecino* of Nueva Veracruz and a *natural* of Castile. Prior to embarking on a journey to the New World in 1603, Sigarra had experienced a lifetime of domestic slavery in Castile.⁵³ Although Sigarra had obtained the promise of freedom in his owner's will in 1596, a proviso mandated that Sigarra first spend

51. Scholars who have explored bienes de difuntos collections in detail include Almorza Hidalgo, "Género"; González Sánchez, *Dineros de ventura*; Mangan, *Transatlantic Obligations*; Tempère, *Vivre et mourir*.

52. Mangan, *Transatlantic Obligations*.

53. Antonio Sigarra, 1612, AGI, Contratación 303, no. 2, fols. 2r-12v.

six years serving his owner's niece, doña Juana Sigarra de Saavedra, who lived in Écija. While residing in Écija, Sigarra married Felipa de la Cruz, an enslaved black woman who lived in a large household near the imposing San Salvador church in the center of Seville, where Sigarra and his new mistress would often stay when visiting the city.⁵⁴ After six years of service in Sigarra de Saavedra's household, Sigarra gathered a host of witnesses and successfully petitioned that the *alcalde* of Écija confirm his status as a free man. And two months later, Sigarra repeated the time-consuming and costly process of obtaining a legally binding certificate of his freedom in Seville.⁵⁵ Armed with two freedom certificates, Sigarra embarked on an Atlantic journey to the Indies. First traveling to Santo Domingo as a wage-earning servant of a friar, Sigarra later sailed to Nueva Veracruz in New Spain, where he developed independent economic activities such as renting cornfields from an *encomendero* about a half league away from the port, acquiring some livestock, and engaging in petty trading.⁵⁶ Written correspondence from his enslaved wife demonstrates that the pair maintained contact during his absence from Seville.⁵⁷

Transoceanic itinerancy enabled Sigarra to become a free black vecino in Nueva Veracruz. In spite of Sigarra's former enslaved conditions, black skin color, and intestacy, royal officials treated him as a *natural* of Castile after he perished in the Indies in 1609, bestowing Sigarra the bequeathal rights and privileges afforded to Castilians. Officials for the bienes de difunto case in Nueva Veracruz collected and inventoried Sigarra's property in order to send the value to his heirs in Seville. In the seven years since Sigarra had obtained his freedom in Écija, he had lived in three different cities—Seville, Santo Domingo, and Nueva Veracruz—and accumulated belongings worth 44,500 maravedis, which included a few pieces of furniture, clothes, about 20 reales in coins, some sheep, 16 chickens, a rooster, and a few uncollected debts in Nueva Veracruz, including 210 pesos owed by an *encomendero*.⁵⁸ Sigarra thus had developed modest economic independence in the seven years since obtaining his freedom. For a sense of how much such a figure was worth in Seville, where the value of Sigarra's belongings were sent, the following vignette might prove helpful. In 1593, a free black woman named Inés Pérez obtained permission to

54. *Ibid.*, fols. 13v–15v.

55. *Ibid.*, fols. 12r–14v.

56. *Ibid.*, fol. 21r.

57. I analyze the couple's transatlantic correspondence in a separate article in progress titled "Whispers, Murmurs, and Letters: Atlantic Trajectories and Transoceanic Ties of Captive and Free Blacks in the Early Hispanic Atlantic." See also Germeten, *Violent Delights*, 100–102.

58. Antonio Sigarra, 1612, AGI, Contratación 303, no. 2, fols. 21r–21v.

travel to the New World as a recently freed woman.⁵⁹ According to the freedom certificate that she presented as evidence of her status, her master had manumitted Pérez and her three children in her testament, on the condition that they serve the master's husband until his death, and had promised that Pérez would receive 40,000 maravedis upon manumission, slightly less than the value of Sigarra's property in 1609. As I discuss later, though, the value of Sigarra's belongings paled in comparison to that of another former black slave, Lucía Tenorio Palma, who died in Portobelo (in Tierra Firme) in 1615 and whose property fetched 2,168 pesos and 6 reales.⁶⁰

Like Sigarra, many black individuals traversed the Atlantic Ocean as *criados*. The term—as employed in royal travel license applications—represented a variety of contractual labor arrangements often formalized in Seville's notary offices. Some individuals crossed the Atlantic as *criados* in order to earn an income.⁶¹ Sigarra received “102 pesos de oro común” for accompanying a friar from Seville and serving him for two years in a Dominican convent in Santo Domingo, before moving independently to Nueva Veracruz.⁶² Perhaps Sigarra contracted himself to the friar as a servant or indentured laborer for a specified period of time in order to pay for the costly passage and maintenance for such a transatlantic journey. Certainly, individuals hailing from the lower socioeconomic rungs of society signed such contracts in Seville's notary offices for this purpose. For example, in 1535 three black men from Portugal named Juan de Acosta, Gaspar González, and Cristóbal Hernández signed notarial contracts in Seville with Alonso de Herrera, a Seville-based merchant, promising to serve him in New Spain for three years from the day they arrived in the port of San Juan de Ulúa. Herrera, in turn, would pay their passage and maintenance to the Indies and would pay each 40 ducats annually.⁶³ And a former slave named Francisco Pérez signed a similar labor contract in the early sixteenth century. Brought to Castile from the Indies in 1513 as a slave, Francisco Pérez bought his manumission from his owner, Garcia Pérez, for 240 ducats. In 1535 Francisco Pérez obtained a royal decree permitting him to travel to the New World in order to serve in the royal armies.⁶⁴ In spite of this permission, Pérez signed in

59. Inés Pérez, 1593, AGI, Contratación 5241, no. 2, ramo 33.

60. Lucía Tenorio Palma, 1621, AGI, Contratación 526, no. 1, ramo 1.

61. For another analysis of free black men and women who traveled as servants, see Garofalo, “Shape of a Diaspora,” 33–36.

62. Antonio Sigarra, 1612, AGI, Contratación 303, no. 2, fol. 23r.

63. *Escritura de concierto*, 31 May 1535, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Sevilla (hereafter cited as AHPS), signatura P-5856, libro del año 1535, oficio 10, Escribanía de Pedro de Coronado, ramos 24–26, fols. 82v–83r.

64. Real cédula, 1535, AGI, Indiferente 1961, libro 3, fols. 324r–24v.

the following year a notarial contract to accompany Diego de Montesino—a Seville-based slave merchant—to the provinces of Peru and labor as his servant for four years. In return Montesino would pay Pérez 27 maravedis a year and provide a bed and sustenance.⁶⁵ That Pérez signed such a notarial contract when already possessing royal permission to travel to the Indies suggests that he lacked the funds to pay for his voyage; by contracting himself as an indentured servant for a limited time, he could fund his voyage across the Atlantic.

Servant labor and the label of *criado* therefore had multifaceted meanings, often formalized through specific contracts. Sometimes such status entailed more equitable relationships, as when in the early sixteenth century Juan de Zafra, the domestic slave of a renowned Seville-based physician named Diego Álvarez Chanca (1463–1515), later became the physician's trading factor in Santo Domingo. In 1503, Zafra appeared in Seville's notarial documents as Chanca's slave, receiving a pardon for a stab wound inflicted on a *vecino* of Seville.⁶⁶ Six years later, Zafra had gained his freedom, signing a notarial contract as the doctor's *criado*.⁶⁷ However, while the physician remained in Seville, Zafra had sailed across the ocean and settled in Santo Domingo, where he acted as Chanca's trading factor. In February 1509, Chanca gave Zafra power to receive 150 boxes of "carne de membrillo" (quince jelly) in Santo Domingo and to sell these on behalf of Chanca and his associate, a Seville-based pharmacist named Juan Bernal, while in the following month Chanca sent Zafra 16 wine and 3 flour barrels to sell in Santo Domingo.⁶⁸ Three years later, Chanca authorized don Bartolomé Colon, *adelantado de las Indias* (royally sanctioned conquistador), to receive payment from Juan de Zafra, "of black color and present in Santo Domingo," for the sale of the merchandise that Chanca had sent from Castile the year before.⁶⁹

It is unclear whether Zafra traded solely for Chanca or developed independent trading activities upon reaching Santo Domingo. Certainly other

65. Francisco Pérez, 7 Oct. 1535, AHPS, signatura P-53, libro del año 1536, oficio 1, libro 2, Escribanía de Alonso de la Barrera, fols. 908r–9r.

66. *Perdono*, 16 Feb. 1503, AHPS, signatura P-2163, libro del año 1503, oficio 4, libro 2, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 333.

67. *Poder*, 23 Mar. 1509, AHPS, signatura P-2183, libro del año 1509, oficio 4, libro 2, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 895.

68. *Compañía*, 19 Feb. 1509, AHPS, signatura P-2182, libro del año 1509, oficio 4, libro 1, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 597; *poder*, 23 Mar. 1509, AHPS, signatura P-2183, libro del año 1509, oficio 4, libro 2, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 895v; "Asunto: Juan de Zafra," 23 Mar. 1509, AHPS, signatura P-2183, libro del año 1509, oficio 4, libro 2, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fols. 899r–900r.

69. Diego Álvarez Chanca, 28 July 1511, AHPS, signatura P-2195, libro del año 1511, oficio 4, libro 4, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 2465.

small-scale free black merchants traded independently in trading entrepôts of the Hispanic Indies during this period. For example, in Puerto Rico a black merchant named Francisco Gallego bought a wide range of goods from the ship *San Francisco* in 1516.⁷⁰ And the following year Alonso del Algaba, a vecino of Seville and master of the ship *Santa Maria de los Remedios*, sent Francisco Gallego, “of black color,” in Puerto Rico 10 tons of merchandise from Seville.⁷¹ It is possible that Zafra received his freedom so that the physician could circumvent the potential difficulties of obtaining a royal license to send his slave to the Indies. And indeed Zafra may have retained an indentured labor contract with the physician; unfortunately, the notarial documents remain silent on the issue. However, a 1509 notarial record listed Zafra as vecino of a different Seville parish (San Miguel) from the physician’s (San Andrés), implying that Zafra no longer—or indeed never had—lived in the physician’s household.⁷² The vecino label suggests that Zafra developed significant socioeconomic capital in the years between 1503 and 1509. It is worth considering whether Zafra’s trading activities in Santo Domingo contributed to the shift in how he was categorized in Seville; within a decade, Zafra’s status had changed from slave to criado and then vecino. Finally, one wonders how Chanca’s own experiences of serving as a physician in the royal court from 1480 to 1501 and accompanying Christopher Columbus on the 1493–1495 voyage to Santo Domingo shaped Zafra’s life in captivity and, later, as a free man and trading factor.⁷³

Free black women who interweaved the Atlantic as wage-earning servants were also often known as vecinas in their places of residence in the Indies. Angelina Díaz, a free black woman from the city of Portobelo, traveled to Castile as a servant in 1595. That same year, Díaz applied for a travel license at Seville’s House of Trade to return to her native city, explaining that she owned a house and other property in Portobelo and that her many children and grandchildren resided there too. Merchants acting as witnesses in her travel license application stated that many women “similar to” Díaz would labor as servants for passengers on Atlantic voyages. A Seville-based merchant claimed to have known Díaz well in Portobelo during the previous 20 years through

70. “Registros de naos correspondientes al tesorero Andrés de Haro,” 1516–17, AGI, Contaduría 1072, no. 1, ramo 3, fols. 381r–91v. I thank David Wheat for sharing this reference with me.

71. “Asunto: Alonso del Algaba,” 21 Oct. 1517, AHPS, signatura P-1518, libro del año 1517, oficio 3, libro 2, Escribanía Juan Ruiz de Porras, fols. 29r–30v.

72. *Compañía*, 19 Feb. 1509, AHPS, signatura P-2182, libro del año 1509, oficio 4, libro 1, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 597.

73. Hernández González, “En torno a una biografía global”; Morales Padrón, *Primeras cartas*, 69–82.

"dealings and communication" with her when he passed through that city on his trading routes. Due to Díaz's fame and notoriety in Portobelo, the merchant insisted that he was usually abreast of any news pertaining to her. As such, he had been aware that Díaz had embarked from Portobelo on an Atlantic voyage as a servant even though he had been in Castile at the time of her departure. In 1596, within a year of leaving Portobelo, Díaz returned home from Castile, serving a different passenger for a salary.⁷⁴ Díaz's life traversing the Atlantic as a servant to different masters for wages highlights how travel license applications tell a story not just of transoceanic travels of black Castilians to the Indies but also of free black naturales and vecinos of the Indies traveling to Castile.⁷⁵

Some individuals who embarked to the Indies as servants or maritime laborers from Seville notarized a testament prior to their departure. Inés de Campos, a former slave and *mulata* vecina of the San Gil parish who resided outside the Puerta de la Macarena, composed a testament in 1580 before leaving to New Spain as a wage-earning servant.⁷⁶ In that document, Campos named an heir in Seville and requested that her executor distribute alms to various Seville-based churches. That same year, Pedro de Montesdeoca, a *mulato* from Seville who lived in the San Juan de la Palma parish, composed a testament in light of his impending departure to the Indies to labor as a soldier and sailor. He named his brother, Juan de Montesdeoca, a *mulato* vecino of Seville, as his universal heir.⁷⁷ Pedro de Montesdeoca died at sea 11 years later, in 1591. A bienes de difuntos judge in Cartagena de Indias collected Montesdeoca's property, which amounted to 522 reales. Once the monies had arrived in Seville, Juan de Montesdeoca successfully petitioned the House of Trade to inherit his brother's property, presenting a copy of his sibling's notarized testament that named the former as the universal heir.⁷⁸

74. Angelina Díaz, 1595, AGI, Indiferente 2102, no. 166; Angelina Díaz, 1596, AGI, Contratación 5251B, no. 2, ramo 42.

75. For examples of black naturales from the Indies traveling to Castile, see Jeronimo González, 1592, AGI, Contratación 5238, no. 1, ramo 38; Pero Hernández, 1561, AGI, Indiferente 2049, no. 54; Sebastián de Robles, 1616, AGI, Contratación 5352, no. 33.

76. Inés de Campos, 1580, AGI, Contratación 5538, libro 1, fol. 256v; "Testamento de Inés de Campos, mulata libre," 21 May 1580, AHPS, signatura P-152, libro del año 1580, oficio 1, libro 2, Escribanía de Diego de la Barrera Farfán, fols. 313r-13v (I thank David Wheat for sharing a transcription of this source).

77. "Testamento de Pedro de Montesdeoca mulato libre," 24 May 1580, AHPS, signatura P-152, libro del año 1580, oficio 1, libro 2, Escribanía de Diego de la Barrera Farfán, fols. 353r-53v. I thank David Wheat for sharing a transcription of this source. For a broader discussion of black sailors in the early Hispanic Atlantic, see Garofalo, "Shape of a Diaspora," 38-41.

78. Pedro de Montesdeoca, 1591, AGI, Contratación 485, no. 4, ramo 5.

It remains difficult to discern the economic opportunities for criados who traveled to the New World after their employment contracts ended—especially for those black Castilian criados who, unlike Antonio Sigarra or Pedro de Montesdeoca, did not have their lives etched in the historical record through bienes de difuntos cases. However, records for the inquisitorial courts of New Spain and Cartagena de Indias provide further insights into the fates of black criados after they left Castile. For example, the lives of two black Castilians detained by the Inquisition of New Spain—María Gerónima and Cristobal de Castroverde—highlight how former criados established residency across the Atlantic. The latter, a freeborn *mulato*, spent his entire life working as a servant for different masters across the Hispanic empire. A native of the village of Carmona and resident of the nearby city of Seville, Castroverde embarked in 1594 on a journey to the Indies as a servant for a *fiscal* of the Inquisition of New Spain. After two years of serving the *fiscal* in Mexico City, Castroverde returned to Seville in the employ of a friar named Cristobal Guerrero. In Seville, Castroverde resumed living with his wife, a free *mulata* named Isabel de Herrera, and the couple moved between rented rooms in the parishes of Santa Catalina and San Gil, in Seville, and San Blas, in Carmona. Two years later, in circa 1600, Castroverde returned to New Spain, serving his former employer, Friar Guerrero, on a second Atlantic voyage. Traveling via Cartagena de Indias, their journey to Mexico City lasted two years due to delays en route. Upon arriving in Mexico City, with the help of his first employer—the *fiscal* for the Inquisition—Castroverde found work as a servant in the mines of Caqualpa and Ixmiquilpan (northeast of Mexico City). Six years later, Castroverde moved to the mines of Pachuca (further east), where he served two other masters for a couple of years. Thereafter, he married Francisca Locano, an “Española,” and continued to work in the mines of Pachuca, by then for different masters—that is, until inquisitorial authorities arrested him for bigamy in 1616.⁷⁹

Castroverde’s life working as a servant for numerous employers over the two decades after he first departed Seville contrasts with María Gerónima’s experiences in the New World. A *mulata* born free to an enslaved black mother in a village near Écija in Castile, María Gerónima married a Portuguese servant in the same house where she was born.⁸⁰ The couple had a son, and they resided in Seville for two years. Thereafter, Gerónima wended across the Atlantic to Cartagena de Indias as a wage-earning servant for an inquisitor named Joaquín

79. “Proceso contra Cristobal de Castroverde,” 1616, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter cited as AGN), GD61 Inquisición, vol. 310, exp. 7.

80. “Trial of María Gerónima [de Vallejo], Mulatto, for Witchcraft,” 1626–35, Huntington Library, San Marino, box 5, HM 35165.

Prado. After a year-and-a-half sojourn in Cartagena de Indias, Gerónima was prevented from serving Prado on an onward journey to Peru due to an ongoing illness. Instead, Gerónima parted ways with her employer and journeyed across the Hispanic Caribbean to Nueva Veracruz. Her husband later joined her from Seville, although he perished soon after arriving. In Nueva Veracruz, Gerónima worked as a healer and established an inn for soldiers, seamen, and travelers passing through the port. While there, she remained in touch with her Seville-based son through written correspondence every few years.⁸¹ Her list of creditors and debtors suggests that she engaged in a world of petty trading within Nueva Veracruz, especially among other free black women.⁸² In the New World, Gerónima therefore became a small business owner in addition to working as a wage-earning servant and a healer. She was not, however, wealthy. Inquisitors detained Gerónima for suspected witchcraft in 1618, almost 30 years after she had left Castile. When condemned to perpetual exile from the Indies to Castile, Gerónima did not comply with her sentence, later arguing that she lacked sufficient funds for the journey.⁸³ Gerónima framed her impoverishment as a result of inquisitors confiscating her property to cover the costs accrued over her years of imprisonment in the Inquisition's secret jails in Mexico City. So dire was her economic predicament that she found herself forced to beg in the streets of Mexico City to raise enough to pay for her return journey to Nueva Veracruz.⁸⁴

The biographical sketches that Gerónima and Castroverde provided through depositions in their respective inquisitorial trials underscore a degree of autonomy in their choices to sojourn between different locales in the Hispanic empire. Castroverde served at least eight employers across New Spain, leaving Seville working for one master and returning to Castile employed by another. In contrast, Gerónima first traversed the ocean as a wage-earning servant to Cartagena de Indias; within a year or two she had left her employer and sailed aboard a ship to Nueva Veracruz, where she established residency and became a *vecina*. These details are visible in the historical archive because both individuals came under the purview of the Inquisition, decades after their original departures as *criados* from Seville. Their contrasting stories highlight the variety of lived experiences for those of the black Castilian diaspora who, lacking sufficient economic capital to pay for their own Atlantic journeys, contracted themselves as laborers. Both Castroverde and Gerónima established

81. *Ibid.*, fols. 34–35.

82. *Ibid.*, fol. 116.

83. *Ibid.*, fols. 109, 111.

84. *Ibid.*, fol. 116.

residency, trades, and social and economic ties while living in the Indies, until they met different fates after inquisitors hauled them to the secret jails of the Inquisition in Mexico City.

Other free black men and women accumulated enough economic wealth or social capital in their lifetimes to pay for their transatlantic journeys from Castile. Juan de Sevilla, for instance, appeared in the passenger seat records of 1513 described as “of black color and vecino of Seville.”⁸⁵ In the same year, Sevilla agreed to pay a shipmaster named Diego Rodrigues Pepino 3,000 maravedis for passage and upkeep on a ship until he reached Hispaniola.⁸⁶ Similarly, in 1529 two black women named Juana Rodriguez and Elvira Prieta paid Fernando Gómez, a ship captain from Palos, 40 gold coins (*castellanos*) for their passage and maintenance from Seville to San Juan de Ulúa.⁸⁷ Like many other free black women who appeared in travel records, Rodriguez and Prieta journeyed without men, taking just one young child with them. Ana Gómez, a renowned merchant in late sixteenth-century Tierra Firme, obtained a loan of 600 ducats from a well-known converso merchant of Seville and commercial associate named Juan de la Barrera in order to fund her journey from Castile in 1579.⁸⁸ Gómez also traveled to the Indies with merchandise to sell on behalf of a wealthy Seville noblewoman.⁸⁹ Families who traveled together also often paid for their own passages. In 1515, Juan de Bonilla and his wife, both free black vecinos of the San Salvador parish in Seville, traveled with their two children to the Indies.⁹⁰ In 1577, the aforementioned Francisco González and his wife Juana Rodriguez paid for their journey to Veracruz—and that of their nephew and a servant—while also leaving 100,000 maravedis in bond as assurance that they would reside in Veracruz for eight years and that he would exercise his trade as a diver in that city.⁹¹ Finally, a widowed Portuguese *mulato* named Juan Limón—who had previously endured a life of captivity in Portugal—journeyed through the Gulf of Panama, in the Pacific Ocean, toward the port of Guayaquil (in present-day Ecuador) in the early months of 1607 on board the

85. Juan de Sevilla, 1513, AGI, Contratación 5536, libro 1, fol. 284(5).

86. Juan de Sevilla, 16 Aug. 1513, AHPS, signatura P-2205, libro del año 1513, oficio 4, libro 3, Escribanía Manuel Segura, fol. 451.

87. Juana Rodriguez and Elvira Prieta, 6 Mar. 1529, AHPS, signatura P-3276, libro del año 1529, oficio 5, libro 1, Escribanía de Francisco de Castellanos, fol. 604.

88. Ana Gómez, 1600, AGI, Contratación 257A, no. 3, ramo 12.

89. *Ibid.*, fols. 89r–116r.

90. Juan de Bonilla, 1515, AGI, Contratación 5536, libro 1, fol. 417(4).

91. Francisco González, 1577, AGI, Indiferente 1968, libro 21, fol. 131v; *asiento de pasajeros*, AGI, Contratación 5538, libro 1, fol. 431v.

San Luis accompanied by his slave (whom witnesses described as a 28-year-old "black Angola") while carting over 880 pesos, 30.5 silver *patacones*, and a casket with clothes and some papers—including his freedom certificate.⁹² That such individuals had obtained enough capital to pay for their own Atlantic passages highlights the varying degrees of social and economic capital among former slaves and freeborn black men and women in Seville and other Hispanic cities in this period.

Some of the black Castilian diaspora in the Indies accumulated significant wealth in their lifetimes, as demonstrated by slave-ownership patterns. Magdalena de la Paz, a "black atezada, *natural* of Seville," received permission to travel to Peru and Tierra Firme in 1561 and subsequently became a slave-owning petty merchant in early seventeenth-century Lima; her will listed two slaves among her property.⁹³ Lucía Tenorio Palma, a free black woman who had been born into captivity and whose free black husband liberated her from slavery, perished in Portobelo in 1615 owning 12 slaves, a wooden hut, furniture, and merchandise. An auctioneer raised 2,168 pesos and 6 reales for her property, which royal officials distributed among her heirs, including Tenorio's daughter who lived in Seville.⁹⁴ And a less wealthy black merchant named Inés Ordóñez, who died in 1583 in Veragua (in Tierra Firme) arranged to manumit her black slaves—Ysavel Biafara and her eight-month-old son Diego—in gratitude for Biafara's good service.⁹⁵ First, however, Ordóñez stipulated that Biafara's labor be rented out for one to two years to the highest bidder in Veragua in order to raise 220 "pesos de oro fundido y marcado," which would contribute to repaying Ordóñez's Seville-based creditors.⁹⁶ The testament of Ordóñez—born in another port city of the Caribbean, Santo Domingo, and living in Veragua, where she was married to a "poor Español" from the Canary Islands—highlights her economic ties and debts in Seville, even though it remains unclear whether she ever traveled to that city.⁹⁷ Finally, the aforementioned well-known and wealthy slave-owning merchant Ana Gómez still had eight slaves after Sir Francis Drake's armies captured an unspecified

92. Juan Limón, 1636, AGI, Contratación 5581, no. 72, fol. 4.

93. Magdalena de la Paz, 1561, AGI, Contratación 5537, libro 2, fol. 145. On the fact that she was a slave owner, see Graubart, "Lazos que unen," 630.

94. Lucía Tenorio Palma, 1621, AGI, Contratación 526, no. 1, ramo 1.

95. Inés Ordóñez, 1583, AGI, Contratación 477B, no. 2, ramo 18; Inés Ordóñez, 1582, AGI, Contratación 220B, no. 2, ramo 5.

96. Inés Ordóñez, 1583, AGI, Contratación 477B, no. 2, ramo 18, fols. 7–8v.

97. The same Inés Ordóñez is listed as married to "Luis Gonzalez, español . . . pobres que no tienen cien pesos de hacienda" in Veragua in 1577: Alonso de Herrera, 1577, AGI, Panamá 40, transcribed in Jopling, *Indios y negros*, 452.

number of her slaves during their 1595 raid on Nombre de Dios.⁹⁸ Gómez stipulated in her will of 1585 that she wished to free the children of two of her slaves and to have her remaining slaves auctioned to the highest bidder.⁹⁹

While the archival records on slave-ownership patterns among free black individuals are more plentiful for the black Castilian diaspora in the Indies—mostly due to the House of Trade’s role in administering the property of Castilians who perished in the Indies—the accumulation of economic capital among free black men and women was not limited to those who were Castilian-born. An inventory of the property of free black women accused of witchcraft in the Inquisition of Cartagena de Indias between 1632 and 1637, for example, demonstrates that at least six of the fifteen detainees—who were naturales of sites across the Hispanic Caribbean—were slave owners.¹⁰⁰ Testaments and sales deeds composed with notaries in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Xalapa, Mexico City, and Veracruz also highlight free black vecinos’ slave ownership, as do inquisitorial records pertaining to black men and women in New Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹⁰¹

The lives of free black individuals who traveled to the Indies and accumulated significant wealth in their lifetimes provide insights into how black vecindad operated across the Castilian empire. For instance, Ana Gómez became a wealthy vecina in two Hispanic cities on either side of the Atlantic: Seville and Nombre de Dios.¹⁰² Born in Niebla near Huelva, Gómez moved to Seville, where she married and subsequently became the widow of Juan Pérez. During her years in Seville, she interacted in high society circles, obtaining loans and trading on behalf of the city’s elite, in addition to becoming the owner of properties across three parishes in the city that earned 1,500 ducats of annual rental income. Gómez arrived in Tierra Firme in 1579, where she became a wealthy trader over the following two decades. After her death in 1596, the judge in her bienes de difunto case in Portobelo spearheaded an exhaustive

98. Ana Gómez, 1600, AGI, Contratación 257A, no. 3, ramo 12, fols. 112r–26r, 152r–70r.

99. *Ibid.*, fol. 110r.

100. “Inventario y almoneda de los bienes secuestrados a varias reas del Tribunal de la Inquisición de Cartagena de Indias,” 1632–37, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Inquisición, 4822, exp. 2.

101. *Testamento*, 20 July 1593, Archivo General de Notarías, Mexico City, Acervo Histórico, Escribano Andrés Moreno, año 1593, mes 07, día 20, notaria 374, vol. 2463, libro 2, fols. 38–39v, ficha 158.0; *venta*, 17 Apr. 1615, Archivos Notariales de la Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, año del protocolo 1609–1617, no. 4, fols. 342–43; Magdalena Sossa, 1594, AGN, GD61 Inquisición, vol. 208, exp. 3. See also Williams, “Polonia de Ribas”; Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres*.

102. Ana Gómez, 1600, AGI, Contratación 257A, no. 3, ramo 12.

investigation into her life and property in order to determine which parties should inherit her belongings, a process complicated by Gómez having composed three separate wills in her lifetime and the loss of a significant proportion of her property during Francis Drake and Richard Hawkins's sacking of the city in 1595.

Gómez saw herself living between two cities on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. The three wills that she composed while living in Tierra Firme evidence her bilocal Atlantic *mentalité*.¹⁰³ For example, writing from Nombre de Dios in 1585—six years after having left Castile—Gómez made different provisions in her testament for her burial service whether she happened to die in Nombre de Dios or in Seville: "And if I died in Spain in Seville they should bury me in the Magdalena Church of Seville."¹⁰⁴ She also arranged to distribute money to dozens of churches and confraternities in Seville, Niebla, and Nombre de Dios. Her most treasured link was with the Magdalena church in Seville, where she arranged to establish a perpetual *capellanía* that would hold Masses on her behalf and pray for the salvation of her soul—a costly enterprise for which she set aside 2,600 ducats of Castilian gold and permitted the church to receive rental income eternally from the properties that she owned in Seville. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the generous bequeathal of her property, Gómez's *capellanía* remained active for two centuries following her death. In correspondence regarding the administration of Gómez's *capellanía*, representatives of the Magdalena church and Seville's archbishopric referred to it as belonging to "Ana Gómez, *la morena*" during the subsequent two centuries.¹⁰⁵

Ana Gómez's life highlights how her black skin color did not seem to prejudice her from gaining *vecina* status in two cities in the late sixteenth-century Hispanic world. Owner of numerous black slaves, Gómez traded in precious stones and clothes with a wide variety of individuals across the Hispanic Atlantic. In Nombre de Dios the local community treated her as a *vecina*, and she also maintained economic links with the aforementioned nearby village of black *cimarrones* (soldiers) called Santiago del Príncipe.¹⁰⁶ Well known across the Tierra Firme region, she even figured in correspondence from royal officials in Portobelo to the crown in Castile, referred to as a free black woman named "Ana Gomes, the wealthy trader."¹⁰⁷ Highly literate, Gómez often wrote to

103. *Ibid.*, fols. 89r–116r.

104. *Ibid.*, fol. 97r.

105. "Libro de Capellanías de Santa Maria de Magdalena," Archivo General del Arzobispado de Sevilla, sección 2, Libros del Capellanías 2043, no. 5, leg. 03448, fol. 236.

106. Ana Gómez, 1600, AGI, Contratación 257A, no. 3, ramo 12, fols. 192v–201v.

107. "Carta de Miguel Ruiz de Elduayen . . .," 1596, AGI, Panamá 44, no. 22, fol. 107v; "Carta del oidor licenciado Salazar," 1596, AGI, Panamá 14, ramo 12, no. 68, fol. 8r.

priests, family members, and her creditors and debtors in Castile and the wider Tierra Firme region; she kept copious copies of her transatlantic written correspondence.¹⁰⁸ Gómez's life—much like the transoceanic biographies of other free black men and women in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—highlights how blackness did not necessarily negatively affect an individual's ability to establish residency in different locales and to claim *naturaliza*, *vecindad*, and Old Christian status.

While Gómez's socioeconomic capital and the personal and commercial relationships that she developed appear to have played a larger role in determining her lived experiences than her black skin color, it is significant that royal officials engaged in her lengthy 1596 *bienes de difunto* case and other officials corresponding with the Spanish crown in the same year about the English attacks on Nombre de Dios and Portobelo described Gómez interchangeably as “morena” and “negra.”¹⁰⁹ Such officials did not betray any sense of disbelief that a black woman owned vast sums of property and sought to establish a perpetual *capellanía* in a prominent Seville church. While only fragments of Gómez's life and various interactions with imperial authorities became recorded in historical archives, the snippets that appear suggest that when executing her wills royal officials (judges responsible for *bienes de difuntos* in Tierra Firme and officials at the House of Trade in Seville) did not question her status as a black Old Christian vassal of the crown and a property-owning *vecina* of two cities.

In fact, the suspicions that royal officials at the House of Trade did express regarding the religious descent of *mulatos* applying for travel licenses illuminates how such authorities rarely thought that blackness signified irredeemably stained blood. Instead, their deliberations about individuals' skin color highlight how blackness and West African heritage often signaled Old Christian lineage. When *mulatos* applied for travel licenses, royal officials often questioned whether they were in fact other ethnic minorities in Castile, including Moriscos and conversos, posing as black Old Christians. For example, in 1598 officials feared that a *mulata* resident of Seville named Magdalena de Tuesta was in fact a Morisca.¹¹⁰ Tuesta had applied to travel to Tierra Firme as the servant of Luis de Morales. Her application stalled as officials questioned whether she was black and accused her of Moorish or Jewish lineage. They requested further information from witnesses in her birthplace of Trigueros (in Huelva). This second set of witnesses confirmed Tuesta's West African heritage and her clean

108. Ana Gómez, 1600, AGI, Contratación 257A, no. 3, ramo 12, fols. 60r–62r.

109. *Ibid.* And see note 107.

110. Magdalena de Tuesta, 1598, AGI, Contratación 5257, no. 10.

Christian lineage, refuting the possibility that Tuesta was a New Christian. Juana Mejía encountered a similar experience when applying to travel to the Indies. A former slave from Palos, Mejía returned there from Seville in order to gather further information that would prove that she was "morena atezada" and not a *mulata*, *Morisca*, or any other "caste" that the crown had prohibited from passing to the Indies. The three witnesses whom Mejía presented—all of whom observed Mejía obtain her freedom from slavery years earlier—confirmed that she was indeed a black Old Christian.¹¹¹

Royal officials sometimes called into question *mulatos'* claims to an African Old Christian lineage when disputes arose over property inheritance. Such conflicts emerged after Diego Suárez's death in 1589. The life of Suárez, a *mulato* actor, soldier, alms collector, and Atlantic traveler, provides important insights into the elasticity of religious lineage in the late sixteenth century. He spent most of his life traveling freely across the Spanish Atlantic, forging relationships with varied communities in different sites. The son of Barbola Hernández, a well-known free black woman who sold nougat sweets on the streets of Seville, Suárez worked as a stage actor by trade and in the 1580s embarked on various journeys to the Spanish Americas, where he continued to perform in comedies on stages in different Atlantic cities. In Peru he also forged strong ties with Catholic brotherhoods, which added to his repertoire of close relationships with religious confraternities in Seville.¹¹²

After Suárez's death in Peru, a lengthy dispute over the inheritance of his belongings ensued in Seville between the monastery of San Francisco and an *alguacil* (royal bailiff) named Antón Sánchez. The monastery of San Francisco and its associated convents argued that the House of Trade should uphold the last testament that Suárez composed while in Peru, in which he requested that his executors distribute his possessions to his mother and, were she to have perished, to the monastery and a number of confraternities in the Arequipa region of Peru. Further, Suárez had collected alms in the Indies on behalf of one of the confraternities of the San Francisco monastery.¹¹³ In contrast, Antón Sánchez claimed that Suárez's belongings should be seized by royal authorities because Suárez had traveled to the New World pretending to be a black Old Christian when in fact he was a Morisco whose mother was a *berberisca* (Moor) born in North Africa ("tierras moras"). Sánchez argued that Suárez was a criminal for not obeying royal edicts that prohibited all New Christians,

111. Juana Mejía, 1598, AGI, Contratación 5255, no. 2, ramo 63.

112. Diego Suárez, 1599, AGI, Contratación 255, no. 1, ramo 5. See also Garofalo, "Case."

113. Diego Suárez, 1599, AGI, Contratación 255, no. 1, ramo 5, fols. 27r–30r.

Moriscos, conversos, and criminals from traveling to the Indies. The king, Sánchez argued, should confiscate Suárez's property and distribute it between royal coffers and the Mercedarians in support of their efforts to retrieve Christian captives from North Africa.¹¹⁴

The diverging witness statements presented by both parties to the House of Trade reflect many scholars' conclusion that an individual's religious heritage in this period was often defined and negotiated locally; one's status depended on interpersonal, political, and patronage networks within a specific locale.¹¹⁵ Religious heritage remained elastic in the sense that financial means, reputation, and local circumstances could determine an individual's ability to claim an Old Christian title.¹¹⁶ Witnesses presented by the monastery argued that Suárez and his mother enjoyed close ties with their institution, often donating alms.¹¹⁷ The witnesses agreed that both Suárez and his mother were well known in their neighborhood in Seville as Old Christians and *vecinos*. Further, they argued that Suárez was an Old Christian because no New Christian could be a *cofrade* (brother) in their confraternities, a position that Suárez had held. They also pointed out that Suárez had worked in the service of the king as a soldier and that officials at the House of Trade had regarded him as an Old Christian, for they had issued him a royal travel license. The witnesses emphasized that Suárez was honorable and always impeccably dressed; wherever he went, no one ever doubted his status as a free man. Additionally, he owned a number of expensive costumes and jewelry pieces for his representations onstage. Conversely, the *alguacil* presented an array of witnesses who testified that Suárez and his family were in fact Moriscos, arguing that his mother spoke Spanish with an accent and that his family had marks on their faces. Moreover, they added, everyone in their Seville community knew of the family's Morisco heritage.¹¹⁸

Debates among House of Trade officials over the authenticity of *mulatos'* Christianity demonstrate that elements of the Spanish empire's official mind in the sixteenth century accepted the possibility of free black men and women possessing an Old Christian African religious lineage. In Suárez's case, representatives of the monastery of San Francisco and royal officials showed an acceptance of Old Christian black men and women from Africa (even if the

114. *Ibid.*, fols. 67r–150r.

115. Starr-LeBeau, *In the Shadow*.

116. See also discussion of “*vecinos memoriosos*” in Gonzalbo Aizpuru, “La trampa,”

130.

117. Diego Suárez, 1599, AGI, Contratación 255, no. 1, ramo 5, fols. 67r–150r.

118. *Ibid.*

former's strategy was just to cash in on Suárez's belongings); the dispute centered on whether Suárez belonged to that lineage or to the well-known group of Islamic converts to Christianity. After decade-long judicial proceedings, officials at the House of Trade sided with the monastery and their narrative of Suárez's lineage: that he was a *mulato* Old Christian and not a Morisco, as Sánchez had argued.¹¹⁹ That Sánchez and his witnesses argued that a Morisco could indeed successfully claim an African Old Christian heritage suggests that officials feared that conversos and Moriscos might tap into and forge black Old Christian religious lineages in order to access spaces that they were excluded from—in this case, the New World.

Throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, free black men and women argued at the House of Trade that they were Old Christians from West Africa and that they were therefore not of the newly converted but rather "of the caste of black Christians." Magdalena de Tuesta, Juana Mejía, and Diego Suárez's cases demonstrate how it could be problematic if an applicant claimed an African Old Christian lineage when their skin color appeared lighter than other Afro-Iberian counterparts. Individuals who could unequivocally claim to be black seemingly found it easier to convince royal officials of their eligibility to travel to the Indies, while descendants of mixed Afro-European heritages faced more difficulties in proving their religious origins. Therefore, while many of the black petitioners who succeeded in obtaining travel licenses between 1500 and 1640 were Hispanicized (*ladinos*), as they tended to be well known in the cities of the Hispanic world where they lived, ultimately it was the color of their skin and their West African origins that enabled them to successfully argue that they were as old a Christian as any white Castilian Old Christian. These cases demonstrate that black skin color did not necessarily equate to a lower status in Iberian perceptions of blood lineage. In fact, in specific colonial settings, especially the House of Trade's bureaucracy, officials understood black skin color as synonymous with an Old Christian religious lineage.

The hundreds of free black men and women who obtained royal travel licenses from Seville's House of Trade in order to journey to the Indies reveal how—in that institution, at least—officials did not perceive blackness to signify irredeemably stained blood. Instead, judges accepted and even expected free black men and women to identify as Old Christians with African heritages and displayed skepticism when individuals of lighter skin color attempted to claim a black Old Christian lineage. Such findings call for a historiographical

119. *Ibid.*, fols. 166r–67v.

revision of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Iberian understandings of concepts of blackness, whiteness, and Castilianness, as well as the relationship of these concepts to religious lineage and purity of blood in the early Hispanic empire. The acceptance of black Old Christians with African Catholic heritages suggests that Castilianness was not necessarily ubiquitously tied to ideas of whiteness, to the exclusion of blackness. Furthermore, the transoceanic biographies of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century free black men and women highlight varied lived experiences of blackness in this period. While some of the individuals surveyed lived on the edges of poverty—sometimes as indentured servants, with the menacing and violent shadow of slavery not far behind—others lived as well-respected and wealthy vecinos in various cities of the Hispanic Atlantic for whom blackness did not appear to be a significant marker of difference in their day-to-day lives. What these diverse individuals shared is that, in moving to the New World and between sites of the Hispanic Atlantic, they too expected to be afforded the privilege of Castilian Old Christians—that is, to travel to the Indies as vassals of the crown. Exploring the transatlantic lived experiences of free black individuals thus demonstrates the need to reevaluate the meanings of subjecthood, belonging, and skin color in the Castilian empire.

Finally, this research highlights the necessity of interrogating (1) the meanings of *vecino*, *natural*, and *Old Christian*; (2) whether certain regions became sites of greater integration and opportunity for free black men and women than others; and (3) at which point in time, if indeed at all, ideas that tied blackness to impure lineages solidified in the Hispanic empire. First, in spite of the rich biographies that emerge from the records for free black travelers, it remains difficult to discern the meanings of categories such as *vecino* in terms of power. The freeborn and formerly enslaved black men and women surveyed in this article often became highly integrated into Iberian Atlantic economies. However, none of those analyzed became members of the powerful classes of *cabildos*, *alcaldes*, or *regidores* in the locales where they lived—while other white Castilian vecinos might have aspired to such titles. As such, we require greater precision in defining *vecino*, *natural*, and *Old Christian* across different times and places, taking into account that the terms did not necessarily work to exclude blackness—at least not pervasively in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—while also exploring the relationship between these terms and the varying levels of subjecthood and access to positions of power within communities.

Second, the itinerant lives of free black men and women raise important questions as to whether the New World and especially the port cities of the Hispanic Atlantic became frontiers of *naturaleza* and *vecindad* in the early

Castilian empire. Ana Gómez amassed significant wealth, property, and social standing as a *vecina* in Seville prior to moving to the New World. In *Nombre de Dios* she continued to accumulate property—especially slaves, precious stones, and clothes—through her extensive trading activities. Antonio Sigarra left Castile within a year of obtaining his freedom; it was in Nueva Veracruz that he developed independent economic activities and accumulated some modest capital. A freeborn *mulato* from Huelva, Bartolomé Martín arrived impoverished in New Spain in the early 1570s and by all accounts perished as a rather wealthy individual in Xalapa who owned an orange grove, some land and houses, and four slaves. All of this suggests that these individuals might have accessed opportunities in port cities and hinterlands of the Hispanic Atlantic that they could not experience in Castile. Yet the fact that officials at the House of Trade in Seville administered the value of the belongings of these free black individuals to their respective heirs suggests that such authorities respected free black individuals' status as *naturales* of Castile and vassals of the crown. And it is important to note that it was officials at the House of Trade who labeled and accepted hundreds of black individuals as *vecinos* and *naturales* of various regions of the Hispanic empire by issuing royal travel licenses.

As such, this research highlights the need to interrogate more deeply the lives of free black *vecinos* in Castile and across the early empire in order to disentangle the plural meanings of blackness and its relationship to subjecthood and empire in this period. What the cases surveyed do demonstrate is that subjecthood and vassalage were not necessarily dependent on skin color in the early Hispanic world. Such a finding raises an important final research question: Did ideas about blackness solidify in the Hispanic world, in turn leading to greater discrimination and exclusionary practices? And if so, why did such shifts occur, beyond explanations that rely on the idea that Iberians ubiquitously regarded blackness as a metaphor for irredeemably stained blood?

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