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Mise-en-Scène

Herodotus was the first to write of the A-Mazons, placing them in Pontus near the shore of the Euxine Sea, and describing their raids against scythes, Thrace, and the coasts of Asia Minor. No men were permitted to dwell in their country, though once a year the warrior women visited a neighboring nation for purposes of procreation, slaying all male children or returning them to their fathers, and recruiting the baby girls. Their name allegedly came from the Greek *a-mazos* (without breast), from their custom of amputating the right breast to make the drawing of the bow more convenient, but a variety of other derivations have been put forward. The explorer Francisco de Orellana, at Amazonas Forest, 1541, said that women at Maranhão River threw arrows against his expedition. This myth dissipated that because of these actions the women received the name of the Greek warriors.¹ Who were those “single-breasted” maidens, and what was their role in society? And how did their sexuality defy gender relations?

Embarking on Isabel de Montoya’s individual life history, and thereafter parting onto the vast landscape of singleness in early and mid-colonial Mexico, the goal of this book is to provide a fresh approach to lingering views on single, plebeian women in Latin American historiography in general, and in Mexico in particular. This book is dedicated entirely to single women of the lower echelons of society, whether they were Spanish, creoles, *mulatas*, or blacks. Indigenous single women during the period discussed amounted to as high as 39% of all mothers in rural areas such as San Martín Huequechula (state of Puebla); however, they are usually

unattended to by the sources. The issue of why plebeian women remained single and established their own, female-headed households is approached here from many different angles and according to key themes that are gleaned from these women's discourses. The proportion of women in mid-colonial New Spain who never married probably rose to unprecedented level. In this present study of New Spain's single plebeian women's households, single, plebeian women either chose to dissolve their marriages, remain in alternative, long-lasting cohabitations, outside of marriage, with various male partners throughout their lives, or create alternative, women-led households and "sisterhoods" of their own. As is argued here, the institutionalization of female-headed households in mid-colonial Mexico reveals wide-ranging repercussions and effects on mid-colonial values and has particular relevance to the history of emotions, sexuality, gender concepts, perceptions of marriage, life choices, and how honor and shame were construed by the lower echelons of colonial society. Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, for example, writes about "emotional communities," within the frameworks of which "social norms, fundamental assumptions, rules of behavior, cultural scripts, modes of expression, and religious values" were formulated and articulated (2014, 60; see also Rosenwein 2015). We may take this a step further and hypothesize that ethnic groups, as well as particular *castas* (generic term for racial mixtures), operated as cultural enclaves within Spanish colonial society, which would definitely impact their attitudes toward honor, promiscuity, and gender relationships.

Why should we be concerned with rituals when discussing the social history of single women in early to mid-colonial Mexico? This book responds to this question by highlighting that embedded in the rituals crafted by single women (discussed at length in chapters 6 and 8) is the idea that the rituals reversed, as well as transgressed, the dominant relationships of power between the genders and relegated women the position of controlling the chaotic male arena. Active participation in religious frameworks within the church, such as lay confraternities, and outside it—formulating their own unique ritualistic practices and networks—allowed single, nonelite women to reaffirm and consolidate mutual interests and common grounds. They also accomplished this community outside the realm of religion. In a direct conversation with what is elaborated in this present book, Catherine Komisaruk in her book *Labor and Love in Guatemala* (2013) and Brianna Leavitt-Alcantara in her book *Alone at the Altar* (2018) have shown, in parallel, how through their own spiritual biography and spiritual networks, as well as through life of singleness, Anna Guerra de Jesús and Isabel de Pinzón, very poor single mothers and spiritual personas in eighteenth-century El Salvador and Guatemala, could redeem themselves from the abuse they underwent during their life of marriage and were able to experience autonomy and a certain independence, for the first time; they

also “successfully navigated gendered tensions associated with their status as non-elite women living outside both marriage and convent.” Furthermore, Komisaruk also convincingly suggests, though does not develop, that local city authorities’ persecution of women’s ritualistic “heretic” practices in Santiago de Guatemala should be linked with their growing role within the illicit market economy (2013, 20, 29, 30, 78; see also Leavitt-Alcantará 2018). Added to that are, obviously, the *calidad* (nature; nobility, rank) of casta women and that of their legitimate or illegitimate offspring. On the issue of how such plebeian women contested their social status (by birth), devoid of wealth, in ways that could transcend this barrier, Karen B. Graubart recently exclaimed that “but even the poorer classes found other ways to contest *calidad*” (2007, 105). One of the goals of this present study is to be able to identify precisely through which particular channels such a contestation operated.

Single women also assumed a far more active and central role in economic systems, social organizations, cults, and political activism than was previously thought.² The ritualistic facet also reveals that in spite of social barriers, they were aptly able to create distinct spaces for themselves, where they could initiate, as well as maintain, their autonomy and values, distinct from those of the general societal norms of the time. Could one, then, consider these women “marginal”? Was there a real gap between the declared norm and the social praxis, which was usually far more flexible and tolerant than one tends to think? An answer to this may be found in the precise exploration of how limited what we would call “free choice” was during the early modern era, in general, and during the early to mid-colonial Mexico, in particular, and how these women’s agency was all about basic, existential choices they made on an everyday basis. Nonetheless, not a few social historians of colonial Latin America have already stressed in this very context that, by contrast with women of the elites, whether Spanish or Creole, plebeian women, predominantly castas, were somewhat more relieved of the elite economic preconditions associated with honor and shame that, otherwise, would have meant paying a heavy price for their decision to part on their own own road to independence (Lavrin and Couturier 1979, 280–304).

It is also suggested in this present study that a number of specific circumstances directly related to unique cultural patterns in early to mid-colonial Mexico should be taken together as substantially “contributing factors” to choosing a life outside matrimony. These factors have already been mentioned in many previous studies cited here. Nevertheless, what I aim to do here, in contrast to previous studies, is to try and salvage these women’s words and deliberations out of the very often highly fragmented testimonies that we, as early modern historians, usually find in the archives (Davis 1987). Nonetheless, one needs to get a sense of intimacy with these women’s mental gamut. In choosing to do so, I deliberately present before the reader large, original chunks of these women’s own utterances as they are, and only later do I analyze

them. Through such testimonies one is, hopefully, able to obtain at least some shreds of the mental world of these women, even when such fragmented testimonies are heavily filtered through social and cultural biases and norms. Let us take, for example, the practice of elopement, as early as the age of fourteen, namely, paying the girl's parents for their consent to "kidnap" their daughter and live with her with only the intention of getting married. This practice was not uncommon in colonial Mexico. In direct conversation with this theme I highlight in chapter 4 that in many of the post-factum testimonies of single women one finds that they expressed no real aspirations when they were girls toward a long-lived marriage, full-fledged motherhood in general, or giving birth in particular. The consequences of these actions, besides obviously turning them into adolescent women who could not easily trust men in their lives, were many and diverse, and they ought to be considered by us in depth. Culpable men could easily plead "not guilty" when they stood up in court, blaming the plaintiff for trying to defame their honor, or leading licentious lives. Laura Gowing, in parallel, compares use of language in allegations filed by men against women's immoral behavior, and in parallel, women's allegations against men's sexual roles (cited in Boyer 1995, 15–33). Lawrence Stone has commented that "depositions in the ensuing litigation reveal, as no other data can, changing ideas among different layers of society about such matters as marital fidelity, marital cruelty, sexuality, patriarchal authority, individual autonomy, the expected roles of the two genders, and the rival responsibilities and claims of husband and wife." (1993; see also Phillips 1980).

Why did plebeian women increasingly resort to the channel of "ecclesiastical divorce" during the period under review? Relying upon the women's discourses, I respond to this in chapter 2 from a number of angles. Primarily, these women were no longer willing to be relegated to the "sacrificial" position of the wife, vis-à-vis her violent and negligent husband, willing instead to sacrifice her marriage. The data suggest that spousal cruelty was indeed a trigger for separations to be permitted after repeated court denouncements, if at all. In this context, Jessica Delgado writes that "Only severe abuse, or in some cases infidelity, justified a request for permanent separation, and options were limited for wives living apart from their husbands" (2009, 1:113). While judges showed sympathy for the plight of women, they also reminded women to fulfill their roles as wives; hence judges acted in favor of adhering to the institution of marriage, much more than in favor of other considerations such as curbing family violence.

Mexican colonial women, castas in particular, were indeed apt to enter into independent forms of living with spouses. As this present study aims to highlight, as informal marital arrangements, especially among the subaltern, racially mixed castas, and the practice of elopement of young girls were far more common in Mexico at that time, such commonplace forms subverted a "neat" patriarchal model in many ways. As the

caste system was in effect a colonial fictive reality, the patriarchal model of subordination was also very much a fiction, and I cite in this respect Kimberly Gauderman in her study of colonial Quito in saying that “the apparent stability of patriarchal gender norms across this period is a fictive tradition reinforced by later legislation” (2003, 24). It was in fact acknowledged that sexual encounters prior to conjugal benediction were illicit and did not carry the value of a pledge between the involved parties if one of them declined to continue into formal matrimony (Covarubias y Leiva 1734, 154). The general public often reported such couples to the authorities, but also “tolerated a good deal of it” (Boyer 1995, 31, 65, 96–97). The cohabitants themselves were not always happy with this confining arrangement. Steve Stern has described how “even when a woman questioned a man’s sincerity and intentions or when marriage clearly lay outside the prospective horizons of a relationship, a poor woman could not easily afford to rule out a sexual liaison” (1995, 270–71). Those among them who were more ambitious and wished to upgrade their social standing, in order to transcend the existing social and legal constraints, chose to remain single and become cohabitants of men from the upper echelons of local society.³

Listening attentively to the women’s claims, in their own words, one is able to identify distinct milestones of a life in flux—of giving up marital life for the sake of claiming their freedom, of becoming voluntarily single. How precisely did such a decision-making process function among single, plebeian women in early to mid-colonial Mexico? And, also, what were the precise circumstances under which such women entered lifestyles other than marriage, namely, long- or short-lived cohabitations? No, doubt, such an individual process of trying to gather up forces and set out on a new road, in itself, required stamina and a strong will to challenge the diverse and extremely difficult consequences. As discussed at length in chapter 3, women-headed households in colonial Mexico, “sisterhoods” in particular, created a solid alternative to the *paterfamilias* and the patriarchal family model. Female-headed households functioned as pseudoconsaguinal “families” that included either biological, fostered, or adopted children, as well as functioned as alternative frameworks for the attainment of inheritance and self-sustenance. As shown, the perseverance and strength of women-headed households, as a new model for a social convention, especially in urban areas, stood up in sheer contrast to Spanish code of law represented in the Spanish matrimonial model.

THE SPANISH MATRIMONIAL MODEL AND ITS TREATMENT OF “SINGLENESSE”

During the sixteenth century, according to Spanish law, men were relegated to the heads of families and filled most of the roles within the family and outside it: the

paterfamilia was responsible to educating his children, and he was in charge of managing the legal and economic affairs of the family, as well as the transfer of property. A woman who wished to file an appeal in court was bound to her husband's authority and physical presence in court, and women were not allowed to serve as guardians of their children. Three decades ago, the most common view was that in Latin America, family and kinship have historically served as safe havens, constituting critical institutions for social stability. Latin American family historians of Latin America, through an intensive review of the literature, now question many previous assumptions about various social realities that existed during the early and mid-colonial periods. Accordingly, patterns of living, residence, adherence to patriarchal rule, and family norms were far more flexible and accommodating than was previously thought (Lavrin 1989a, 47–95). These studies have opened up new paths that demand significant modifications to our thinking about how subaltern groups lived and died, women in particular. This optimistic, state-of-the-art thinking is in sheer contrast with that of only a decade ago, when Karen Vieira Powers lamented that “after careful review of all textbooks and related classroom materials (collections of essays and document readers) on colonial Latin American history published from 1980 to the present, I found that not one devotes more than 25 pages to women's experiences, in spite of the recent production of a considerable corpus of new primary research” (2002, 9–32).

Women's norms of living, marriage, and residential patterns, as recent research undoubtedly shows, were influenced predominantly by manifestations of economic instability that impelled frequent migrations. The stable, patriarchal household model previously assumed to have been dominant has been shown by recent research to be no longer valid—certainly not in circumstances in which both formal and informal unions were in large numbers being dissolved after a period of only two or three years, leaving the family without a *paterfamilias*. Within this new approach to the history of the family in this continent, the place of women, and single women, in particular, is highlighted. In her influential book *The Women in Colonial Latin America* (2002), Susan Migden Socolow stresses, “as local economy deteriorated, the percentage of female-headed households tended to increase. Even in the wealthier cities as one went down the social scale, there was a growing probability that the head of the family would be a woman, probably single or widowed.” Komisaruk exclaims that “Anna's biography challenges narratives about the marginalized or subversive position of women who fell outside the confines of both marriage and convent in colonial Spanish America and in the broader early modern Church” (Komisaruk 2013, 38; see also García Peña 2004, 647–92; Socolow 2000, 76).

Besides the emotional factors were the economic considerations. Perhaps the most outstanding feature in Spanish colonial formal marriage arrangements was

the prevalent family law governing colonial Mexico between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, by which dowry payments, at least for Spaniards and Creoles of the upper echelons of local society, were expected to be transferred from the bride's side to the groom's family, which in colonial Mexico amounted to between 1,000 and 5,000 pesos, equal to the cost of the purchase of between three and sixteen slaves (Lavrin and Couturier 1979, 280–304; see also Korth and Flusche 1987, 395–410; Philips 1988). Lavrin and Edith Couturier have described the dowry as the woman's, and even returned to her upon the unlikely dissolution of the marriage. Although the husband administered the estate and the joint assets, the dowry was not his and he was unable by law to sell the dowry property. Therefore, uncertainty about the economic benefits of marriage, as well as the burden of dowry, could well have encouraged the development of attitudes favoring "singleness," especially among plebeian women. Yet another demographic factor that ought to be taken into consideration while determining what was the range of choices for these women was the dreadful marriage "markets" in colonial Mexico cities, given the tendency toward urban female majorities. In her study of Medieval England, *The Ties that Bound*, Barbara Hanawalt writes: "When a young woman, through her initiative and wages, managed to accumulate a bit of chattels and land and paid her own merchant, she could choose her own marriage partner. But the freedom in choice of marriage partners may have been a larger phenomenon, going far beyond those without property" (1986, 202). Hanawalt puts the weight on economic reasoning—so as to avoid such unmatched expenditures, such women sought alternative ways to fulfill their goal. However, in our present case, there are many other reasons to be examined. Under harsh economic and social circumstances, marriage options for single women, especially *casta* women, were poor, especially if they came from the subaltern groups in local society.

"SINGLE"

For the early modern period discussed in this book, the definition of the term "singleness" is taken directly from the eighteenth-century Spanish *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1739, vol. 6): "La persona, que está sin tomar estado. Dixose de la voz Suelto, por no estar ligada con el matrimonio" (this is a person who has interrupted living together with his/her spouse, though maintaining his/her marital bonds): "Lat. *Solutus. Liber. Celebs, ibis* [Single, is the person who is in a state of not married; loose, for not being associated with matrimony]" Also, "suele usarse también por lo mismo que suelto, ò libre"; "Lat. *Solutus. Dissolut* [it is also possible to use it in the same manner as being free, A.M.]" In the same dictionary one finds under the entry *separado/a* [a person who is separated] the following explanation:

“Dicho de una persona: Que ha interrumpido la vida en común con su cónyuge, conservando el vínculo matrimonial” (It is said of a person who has disrupted the common living with his/her partner, while still maintaining the marriage ties). Unless otherwise stated, all the translations are my own.

Therefore, the term *soltera* (“single” woman) applies during the early modern era to a woman who was not a virgin in contrast to *doncella* (virgin or maiden), and should include widows and spinsters, meaning women who never married, due to a variety of reasons, as well as women who, under worsening circumstances, either made a poor prospect for marriage and were unable to attract a potential husband or were abandoned by their husbands. What this present study emphasizes, in contrast to previous studies cited below, is that the status of being single or becoming single was *a permeable possibility and an ever-changing reality that could be explored and taken advantage of*, among many women, plebeian women in particular, during the period reviewed here, as attested to by the source material. Also included within the category are women, who, under worsening circumstances, remained unwed for a lifetime; and women who either had passed the normative age for marriage (between 15 and 29) or fertility (between 15 and 40) and, thus, would not normally be considered feasible candidates for marriage. Within this category also were young women who, at one point or other, had been deserted by their husbands and decided not to remarry; women who had actively sought to put to an end their unhappy, torturous marriages or seek refuge from their partners. Moreover, the term “single mothers” utilized here throughout, refers to women of the middle to lowest strata of Mexican colonial society and were raising children independently, without the economic or social backing of a stable male partner. This diapason of statuses and choices differs starkly from how Jane E. Mangan, for example, defines single women: “Though both single and widowed women were unmarried, the status of single women was distinct. Having never been married, they had no inheritance from husbands.” This last part of her citation is significant when it came to the issue of inheritance to single women’s offspring, as is demonstrated later, in chapter 4 (2005, 150).

“SEPARATED”

During early to late colonial Mexico, the only choice available at the time for separation was through the process of “ecclesiastical divorce,” which separated the married couple from each other, but did not dissolve the marital bond altogether. The circumstances that enabled ecclesiastical divorce were cruelty, maltreatment (both physical and emotional), threat of murder, and infertility of one of the spouses, adultery or abandonment, and failure to provide for the necessities of the wife

and children, as well as proofs of heresy or paganism. Accordingly, the husband and wife would live in separate houses, but remained married until one of them died. The ecclesiastical divorce could be restricted to a distinct period of time or an indefinite time limit, or be permanent. Nonetheless, all of “divorced” persons would never remarry but resort instead to consensual relationships (Arrom 1976, 16–17; see also García Peña 2006, 71–72; Gauderman 2003, 49–50; Komisaruk 2013, 125–27). Furthermore, women who were deserted by their husbands could not marry, unless they chose to become bigamists. Legal marriage was monogamous, a formal union of man and woman of proper age and status. Aside from rank, freedom to enter into marriage meant that the parties were not bound by a previous and “undissolved” marriage, were not within forbidden degrees of consanguinity and spiritual relationship, and had not taken vows or holy orders.

Can one, therefore, interpret such a contemporaneous definition as having attributed to women who opted for such choices of living separately and on their own, a preexisting disposition toward lesser commitment to long-term relationships and trust? Ann Twinam writes in this very context: “Relationships between unmarried men and women without any commitment to matrimony were presumably more tenuous than those in which the parties vowed to wed. In most other respects, however, such affairs are indistinguishable from extended engagements.” (1999, 82–83). By contrast to women of the elites, described by Twinam, our case studies below of plebeian women show that most of them actually preferred “consensual,” long-term commitments to those that involved marriage.

THE GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

The geographical scope of this study covers essentially the two urban metropolises of Mexico City and Puebla, and their archbishoprics, as well as a number of smaller urban centers located in between the two cities, such as Tlaxcala, Cholula, and Huejotzingo. As such, I chose to refrain from treating the rural areas, and the indigenous communities, in particular, concentrating instead on where I found the most substantial populations of single plebeian women relevant to this study, that is, in the two largest urban centers: Mexico City and Puebla. The decision that guided me stemmed from the fact that it was in those cities that I found the richest and most substantive data. Moreover, it would be quite safe to generalize that in the urban areas the degree of illegitimacy of children, as well as the extent of singleness, would be much more acceptable than in the rural areas given the distinctive social structures in the cities; the diversity of the local populace, arriving from many parts of the nation, with many of the migrants unmarried and unconstrained by former ties of kinship and societal norms; the relative flexibility of the social system; and the greater opportunities for cohabitation. In

addition, cities were filled with property-less men and women, many of whom were recently arrived from the rural areas, in search of such as domestic servants, whose means of sustenance were evidently hazardous and temporary, which meant that they could not afford to set up stable economic arrangements, such as marriage and an independent household. Komisaruk suggests that the lack of balance between the male and female populace in the cities may have “triggered marital dissolutions and sizable number of unmarried women and female-headed households” (2018, 29) What J. Hanjal remarks about city life is especially relevant here: “The right inference to draw from a high proportion of single women in a city is often not so much that urban life discourages marriages but that cities provide opportunities for single women to earn a living and single women, therefore go to live there.”⁴

According to Aguirre Beltrán, in 1742 the total population in New Spain stood at 2,477,277. By the mid-seventeenth century, the “Afro-mestizo” population, as Beltrán refers to it, was around 300,000, with 35,000 Africans. Between 1550 and 1750, the period reviewed here, a total of 70,195 slaves landed in the port of Veracruz and 426 in the port of Campeche. However, by the late seventeenth century the numbers had shrunk drastically: between 1676 and 1775, the total number of black slaves who landed in Mexico was insignificant by comparison to other parts of the New World: 2,586 at the port of Veracruz, while in the port of Campeche, merely 170 (“Slave Voyages” n.d.). By 1650, the *mestizo* populace constituted nearly 25 percent of the total population, blacks constituted 0.81 percent, Creoles 15.80 percent, indigenous 62.17 percent, and *mulatos* 10.75 percent, and Europeans (mainly Spaniards born in the Iberia Peninsula), 0.39 percent (Aguirre Beltrán [1946] 1972).

The demographic estimates concerning the size of the population of Mexico City during the period reviewed vary considerably. For example, in 1571, a partial survey conducted in this city included over 10,000 Spaniards and about 3,000 Africans, but the latter possibly numbered far more than truly estimated. However, this very partial survey did not include either individuals or groups of mixed origins among the castas, nor individuals without a fixed residency, namely, all those who lived away from the main towns, especially in the rural areas. Aguirre Beltrán, utilizing the Mexico City figure cited in Tomás de Torquemada in 1609 of 15,000 *vecinos* (citizen of a city, or a town; usually restricted to whites in colonial times) in the metropolis, estimates the total population to have been about 75,000 (Aguirre Beltrán [1946] 1972). The crown historian, Vázquez de Espinosa, gives an estimate of 145,000 inhabitants in the city in 1612, while Thomas Gage estimated its populace to be about 98,000 during his visit to New Spain in 1630. Gemilli Carreri cited 100,000 inhabitants for the year 1697 (cited in Vázquez Valle 1975, 86). And in 1765, Fray Francisco Ajofrín of the Capuchin Order, in his *Diario de viaje*, estimated that

in Mexico City alone were at the time were “more than 50,000 Spanish, European and patricians, 40,000 mestizos, mulatos and blacks, together with other castas, without counting more than 8,000 indigenous persons within the city and in the slums” (Ajofrín [1726] 1959, 1:65). Furthermore, by 1607 the entire region of the central Basin of Mexico included 180,000 people (Denevan 1992, 370). Besides the indigenous populace living permanently within the city (except for the *traza* [boundaries of the various divisions of Mexico City, especially those separating Spaniards from the castas and Indians] area of the city), there was a regular flow of indigenous labor into the city on a daily basis, which was badly needed for a great variety of tasks, both skilled and unskilled, in the markets and elsewhere. So the casta population, as well as Spaniards, were intimately engaged with the indigenous presence in the heart of the city (Bailey-Glasco 2010, 27–28).

One striking factor in Aguirre Beltrán’s analysis of the 1748 census of the Alcaicería quarter in Mexico City, and which may serve well our own purposes here, is that the percentage of women in the four major casta sectors of the population was substantially higher than that of males: among slaves and free blacks, the percentages were 62.78 and 37.21 correspondingly; among the mestizo sector, the number of adult mestizas was double that of adult male mestizos; among the castizos, the percentage of females was also much above that of males, though an exact figure is not available; and among the Spaniards, the percentages of females and males were 54.58 and 45.41 (Aguirre Beltrán [1946] 1972).

Where did castas, Spaniards, and the indigenous inhabitants interact closely on a daily basis? Primarily, in *pulquerías* (taverns), at the public fountains, from where water was carried to the homes on a daily basis, and at the marketplaces—in San Hipólito, in San Juan, in the southwestern corner of the *traza*, in the Alameda, and in the Plaza Mayor. The Plaza Mayor was the seat of the viceroy’s royal palace, the city council, and the metropolitan cathedral. Mexico City’s cathedral stood at the forefront of this huge square, on its northern side. To the south stood the lord mayor’s office, the metropolitan’s law-enforcing agency, the judges’ residences, the public granary, and the metropolitan prison. Behind, one would come through the major storehouses of the city. The mansions of the most prosperous merchants and city officials occupied most of the western part of the square, together with five or six storehouses selling golden embroidery styled in Europe. To the east was the palace of the viceroy, the Royal Audiencia, the university and Santo Domingo College, and the Holy Office, at the corner of which stood the Casa de Moneda.

The Plaza Mayor was where during major festivities and holy days, as well as in times of important inaugurations of high appointments—such as that of a new viceroy or newly arrived archbishops—processions, and street parades were publicly staged. As Father Ajofrín likewise describes, “On 1 January, a 40-hour jubilee

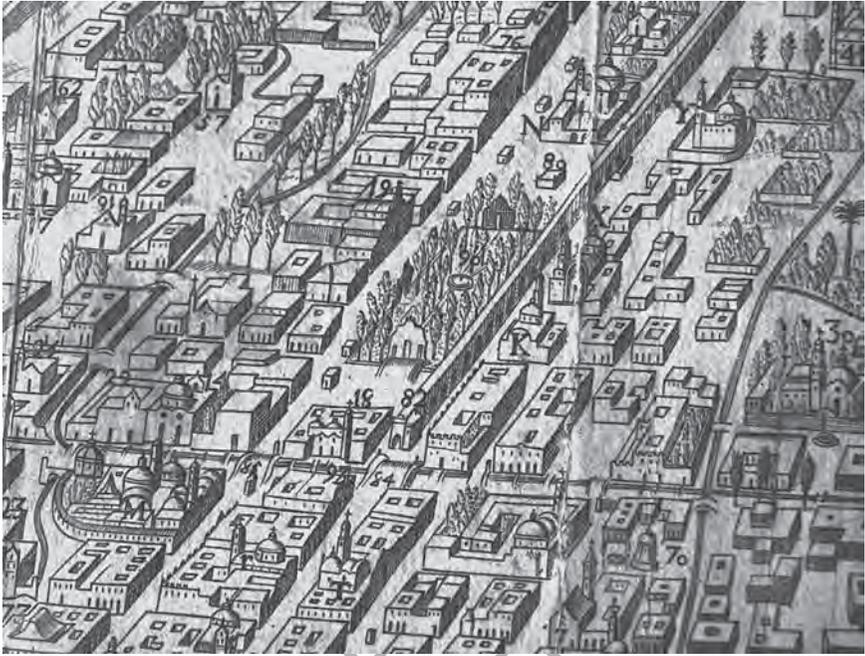


FIGURE 1.1. The Traza and the Zócalo in 1720 (a blowup of the central section), BNF, Fondo Mexicain 149, © BNF, Paris.

would take place at the Cathedral, accompanied by a lavish procession beginning at 11 A.M and lasted, with a huge crowd filling the Plaza by day and by night” ([1726] 1959, 2:35). It was there also that a bustling market was located and stalls were put up selling foodstuffs, cheap clothing, pottery, and a great variety of herbs and medicinal stuffs. The nearby Plaza de Volador, founded in 1624, was an additional bustling public area southeast of the Zocalo. Small and medium-size stores sold a large variety of merchandize there, including foodstuffs, slacked lime, and pawned garments.⁵ The Plaza de Volador was also the most popular public space in the city for Spaniards, Creoles, and indigenous persons, as well as the different castes, to stroll, meet, and interact informally. It became the main arena for the *corrida de toros* (running of the bulls) and public games during festivities and holy days. During the early part of December, each year, bullfights would take place there. During the feast of Santa Cruz, bullfighting was also on display in the Plazuela de la Trinidad (Ajofrín [1726] 1959, 2:80). The Plaza de Volador also became the capital’s main marketplace for castes and indigenous persons alike. Indigenous fruit and vegetable merchants reached this site from the floating markets of Chalco and Xochimilco, arriving by

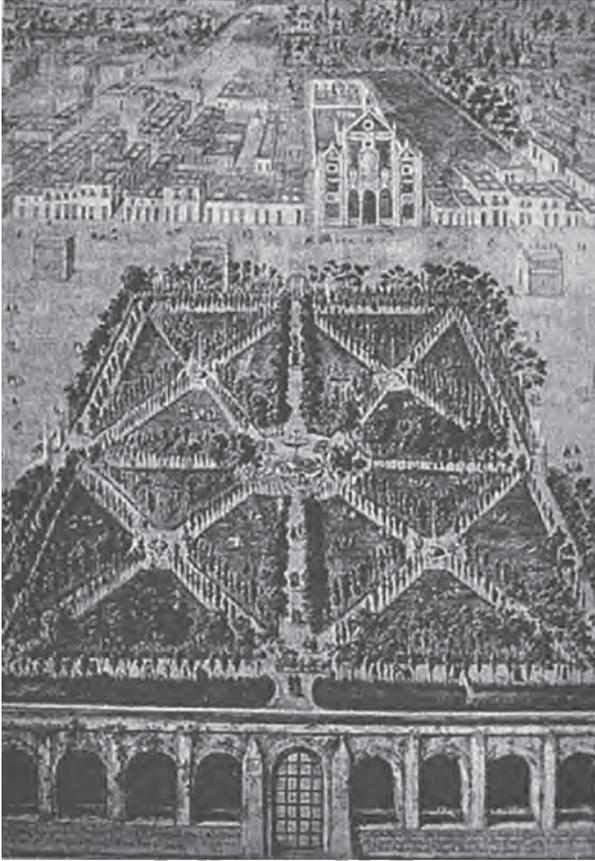


FIGURE 1.2. The Alameda during the early part of the eighteenth century. © Colección Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City.

canoe through the La Acequia Real (Royal Canal), which began in the town of Tláhuac, to the south of the capital. From there hundreds of canoes, traditional vessels called *chalupas* and *trajineras*, carried the city's supply of fresh fruit, vegetables, and flowers. The most prestigious commerce (retail merchants, imports) remained in the hands of powerful Spanish and Creole tradesmen who established themselves at El Parían market, located on the west side of the Zocalo.⁶ The buildings included seven different households, with a total of forty-three inhabitants.⁷ It was an area packed with vendors' stalls in which many peddlers and grocers would set up shop, sometimes permanently, throughout the archways, out onto the street, and even reaching the plaza itself. Three blocks north of the plaza was the Plaza de Santo Domingo, where the Royal Custom houses were located, side by side with the Tribunal of the Inquisition. The nearby Alameda Central, the first public park

in Mexico City in the early seventeenth century, was intended at that time only for the “upper classes.” Official documents of this period show that the local law enforcement agency was ordered to ban “coarsely dressed people, barefoot, beggars, or nude or any other indecent people.”

Furthermore, one also needs to stress here the sheer polarity that existed in Mexico City between rich and poor during the period reviewed. Father Aljofrín, upon visiting Mexico City in 1763, was overwhelmed by the striking social divide that he had seen before his eyes, especially at the “El Baratillo”—The thieves’ market—which specialized in the sale of used and stolen artifacts and clothing and other secondhand merchandise and as such was of vital service to the poor:

Out of a hundred people that one encounters on the streets, you would hardly find one who is dressed and wearing shoes (or sandals). You see in this city two diametrically opposing extremes—much wealth, and maximum poverty, many trappings, side by side with outmost nudity, great cleanliness and much filth . . . the rest of the poor people dress as best as they are able, normally speaking, the shoeless sell shoes while the unclothed sell clothes . . . In the famous Plaza “del Baratillo,” is the celebrated gathering place of all the lepers and quarrelsome persons of Mexico; it is the university of the idlers, and *zaramullos*, in which the dean of them all is the famous Pancho Moco, where they learn so many subtle devices and schemes for the sake of robbery without being indicted or identified. ([1726] 1959, 2:80)

Added to this was the poor hygiene, drainage and sanitation in this city, especially among the poor, who were living mainly in adobe, rundown houses, with an open sewage flowing freely on the streets and with piles of both private and public garbage disposed without any restraint whatsoever on every single corner, together with dead corpses of recently deceased men and animals alike (Cope 1994, 27, 34). Conditions among the poor, in particular, became obviously extremely stressful and unbearable under the dire straits of floods and epidemics, as they were fully exposed, living virtually on the street level, and with a large proportion of the population in abject poverty, subject to frequent shortages of food and other essentials. Daily life was extremely harsh, dreary, and dangerous. Numerous vagrants and beggars actually lived on the street side by side with the piles of garbage and the open sewage; bands of drunken men and women, as well as gangs of “bad sorts,” roamed from place to place looking for trouble; horses galloped regularly on the streets, burglary and thefts were widespread, and bodily assaults and knife battles were common scenery (Bailey-Glasco 1910, 4, 17). Prices of rent and basic commodities soared in times of floods, bad harvests, and scarcity. Between 1691 and 1692, for example, Central Mexico suffered from a severe grain shortage, which indirectly led to the great food riots during that year (Aljofrín [1726] 1959, 121).



FIGURE 1.3. Portal de los Mercaderes, map in color, from *Mapas y Planos de México, siglos XVI al XIX, catálogo de exposición*, Museo Nacional de la Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec, INEGI/INAH, 1988, lámina No. 232. © Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Mexico City.

During the last decades of the sixteenth century, the total nonindigenous population of Puebla amounted to 20,100, including 14,400 Spaniards, 3,000 mestizos, mulatos, and free blacks, and 2,500 black and mulato slaves (Martínez 2008, 144). By the late seventeenth century, the city had already become the economic, political, religious, and administrative capital of an enormous province and by then included more than 50,000 inhabitants. In 1746, this city's population was merely 50,376 (Villa Sánchez [1746] 1972, 65). Only during the first decades of the nineteenth century, and after a slow recovery, did Puebla become the second-largest city in New Spain after Mexico City. The city itself was surrounded by about 800 haciendas that were the property of its most notable Spanish residents. In addition, Puebla was the capital city for numerous indigenous towns and rural communities in its environs. As Martin Bosch describes, "With the growth of the non-indigenous population in Puebla, the houses of the mestizos, mulatos, and other castas were built within the city, between the Spanish sector, and the indigenous sphere (1999, 64)."

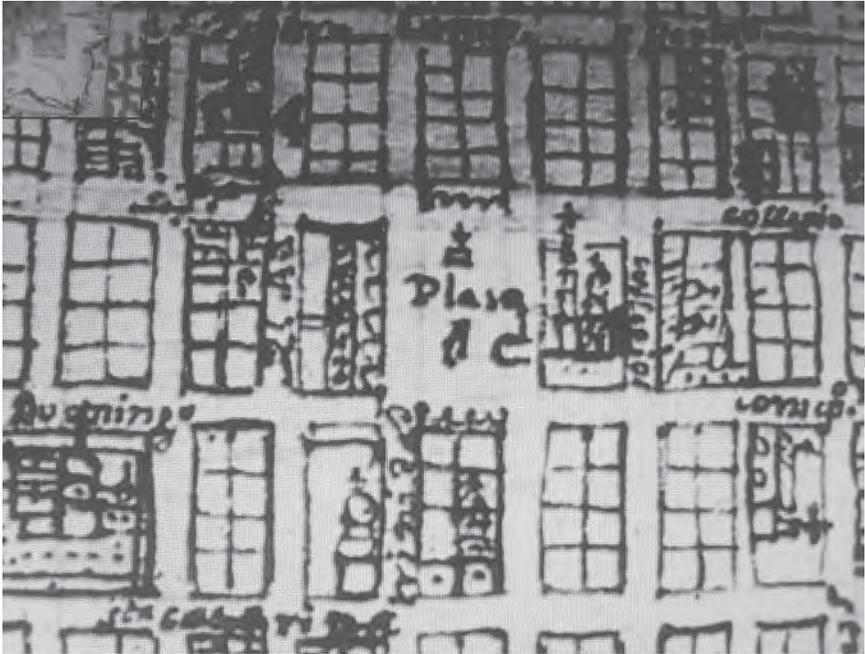


FIGURE 1.4. Map of Puebla, view of the main plaza, 1698. © Gusvel, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fundaci%C3%B3n_de_la_Puebla_002.JPG, accessed 11 February 2019.

How were these two major metropolises affected by the disastrous smallpox, measles, and typhus epidemics that ravaged the entire landscape of New Spain between 1520 and the middle of the eighteenth century? We are talking about recurring waves of *matlazahuatl* (typhus), between 1576 and 1736–39—the most notable outbreak in 1631—and smallpox, pneumonia, measles, typhus, and smallpox pandemics, between 1711 and 1748 (Ajofrín [1726] 1959, 2:145; Bailey-Glasco 2010, 51). Lourdes Márquez Morfín (1993) cites three major smallpox epidemics, in 1711, 1734, and 1748. Peter Gerhard (1993) cites fourteen outbreaks during the entire sixteenth century, and eleven for the seventeenth century. Between 1678 and 1746, the city of Puebla alone lost about one quarter of its inhabitants (!) due to a number of disastrous plagues (Kicza 1988, 453–88). In addition to the plagues and the epidemics, there was also a series of floods that critically affected the entire city beginning on 29 September 1629, and ending in 1633; during the great flood of 1629. For example, that lasted for thirty-six hours, the only means of transportation throughout the city was by canoes; entire houses were ruined, and food supplies became scarce (Ajofrín [1726] 1959, 1:76–79).

Let us bear in mind that these two cities were far from being closed; they were heavily impacted by migrations from the environs, as well as from other distant areas. They were also constantly nourished from what these migrants and passersby brought over with them, whether it was germs, marriage habits, beliefs, ritualistic prescriptions, and many other influences.

THE RACIAL FACTOR: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS RELATED TO THE CASTE SYSTEM

In 1765, while summarizing his observations regarding Mexican society that he just visited, Father Ajofrín says:

“The castas of people, of which emerged various generations, when mixed together, have come to corrupt the customs and habits of the popular people.” (Ajofrín [1726] 1959, 2:66–67)

Mexico’s colonial matrix, the social and cultural infrastructure under which women grew up and into which they were obliged to integrate[,] is the subject of this section. Within the discourses of single, plebeian women, one finds the major theme of their ability and aptitude to social mobility, transcending socioeconomic boundaries and racial denominations that presumably existed within the colonial caste system. In his classic book from 1947, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas*, Frank Tannenbaum established what is now known as the Comparative Slavery School. In 1967, evaluating the impact of the Latin American caste system upon ideas about race and racial mixture, Magnus Mörner defined Latin America as a “caste society” (Mörner 1970, Introduction). His findings helped prompt the “caste versus class” debate that continues to this very day; a theoretical framework for discussing how blacks integrated into colonial and early national societies. A major, although problematic[,] contribution to the literature that helped to shape the field of Afro-Latin American Studies, is F. P. Bowser’s, *Neither Slave nor Free: The Freedman of African* (1972). This study has remained influential in shaping the trajectory of more modern studies in this field. In his study written twenty years ago on plebeian society in Mexico City during this period, Douglas Cope questioned and qualified the assumption that the urban poor in Mexico sought to climb the ethnic hierarchy and to “pass” as Spaniards [Cope 1994]. Cope demonstrates that the castas were neither passive nor ruled by feelings of racial inferiority; indeed, they often modified or even rejected elite racial ideology. Castas also sought ways to manipulate their social “superiors” through astute use of the legal system. Cope describes how social control by the Spaniards relied less on institutions than on patron-client networks and intertwining individuals, a fact that enabled the elite

class to choose the more prosperous among the castas. Cope questioned and qualified the assumption that the urban poor in Mexico sought to climb the ethnic hierarchy and to “pass” as Spaniards. He demonstrates that the castas were neither passive nor ruled by feelings of racial inferiority; indeed, they often modified or even rejected elite racial ideology. Castas also sought ways to manipulate their social “superiors” through astute use of the legal system. (Cope 1994)

Cope drew upon quantitative data gleaned from the registers of casta marriages at the Cathedral of Mexico City between 1694 and 1696 (Cope 1994). Consistent with this, Pescador shows how, in the Santa Veracruz parish where Isabel de Montoya lived, between 1749 and 1810, endogamy rates among *españolas* remained virtually unchanged (86 percent vs. 85 percent), while for men they dramatically increased, from 77 percent to 95 percent (1992, 167–69). When examining Cope’s figures, this is also ostensibly true for mulatos and mestizos, as well as “Spaniards.” However, if one scrutinizes Cope’s data more carefully, it clearly shows that a large percentage of mulatos in fact intermarried with mestizos and thus did not rigidly preserve the endogamous norm. Furthermore, when Cope draws conclusions about the second and third generations of mixed races, he writes: “We suggest that they were drawn into the social network of one parent or the other, whichever was more advantageous,” which might possibly distance them from their own caste and enable their children to potentially pursue outside channels of support, as the latter could rely upon the effective mechanism of *compadrazgo* (coparenthood, god-fatherhood) and diverse partnerships, also taking into account individual predispositions (1994, 78). Furthermore, the category *españoles* was deliberately obscured by the Spaniards themselves, so as to avoid differentiation between Gachupins (Spaniards born in Iberia), and Creoles (Spaniards born in the New World) in relation to the subaltern castes, in spite of the fact that Creoles were by then already thoroughly “mixed” with other castes (Megged 1992, 421–40).⁸

Relying mostly on qualitative sources, Robert C. Schwaller has recently furthered the theme of racial designations, indicating that the term *mulata* might well have come to be popularly associated with both indigenous and African descent in areas where they intermingled, at least culturally (Schwaller 2011, 885). He further suggests that the physical attributes associated with African ancestry tended to be more salient in racial ascription than those of indigenous ancestry, and that this is one reason why we tend to see greater conformity in ascriptions of Africanness than in ascriptions of indigeneity. The examples he brings are, however, more in the direction of indigenous cultural impact on Africans than not and also confirm that intermarriage was quite normal among them: “Francisco made no mistake in describing his wife as both the daughter of an indigenous man and as a mulata; rather, he was using the contemporary definition of mulato which placed individuals of

European-African descent and African-indigenous descent within the same socio-racial category” (903).⁹ Schwaller’s remarks on intercultural mingling between indigenous women and African slaves in the Mixteca area of rural Oaxaca does indeed convey a similar air to that of the above case of Isabel de Montoya. In rural areas near the city of Puebla, castes intermingled freely with the local indigenous populace and thus crossed the lines between the two distinct domains of the República de Españoles and the República de Indios. The latter, ministering to the needs of the former without being part of it, implied the development of two worlds, indigenous and European, linked to each other in numerous ways, but preserving their distinctive identities. Also included within the República de Españoles were the castas. Between the two, belonging wholly neither to one nor the other, were the mestizos, rapidly increasing in numbers and acquiring during the course of the seventeenth century some of the characteristics of a caste. However, in this tripartite society the República de Españoles was the one that dominated. In parallel to Schwaller, Joan Cameron Bristol indicates that “while natives could redeem themselves and enter Spanish society, the descendents of Africans could not.” She further suggests that by contrast to the indigenous populace, the Afro-Mexicans were not allocated their own judicial status and were therefore inseparable from the República de Españoles but in an innate inferior designation, according to color, and not by ethnic designation (2007, 46–47, 55). This may explain, in the case of Isabel de Montoya studied below, why Isabel chose to identify herself during her inquisitorial interrogations as “partly Indian,” rather than according to how friends and neighbors often designated her, as “black or mulata.”

Unlike the case of Isabel de Montoya studied by here in great detail, in the case of Francisca de Acosta studied by Schwaller, one is provided with no biographical details whatsoever about the subject’s ancestry. Regardless, yet another important difference between the two cases is that in Montoya’s case, the latter was well aware of the need to distance herself from any supposed African affiliations, as well as from a suspected lack of a *limpieza de sangre* (“purity of blood”), as was the case with African descent, that might be presumed by those who did not know her personally when standing before the inquisitors. However, in the cases that Schwaller brings, the persons described did not seem embarrassed by or feel the need to hide their African origins. Moreover, Schwaller’s study and our own do converge with each other on mutual grounds in that, and I cite Schwaller’s final remarks, “Scholarship must not further the stereotyping of the colonial period but seek to find the contradictions and contingencies which ultimately made such terms legal fictions” (2011, 907).

In *Hall of Mirrors*, Laura Lewis begins an in-depth discussion on the coexistence of *raza* (race) and *casta* (caste) within the same social hierarchy. Lewis argues that race was not always the sole determinant of social class in New Spain. Mestizos

and mulatos, she finds, could be granted further rights to “Spanishness” when their Spanish fathers acknowledged them.¹⁰ Lewis suggests “Spanishness” was, in many instances, of more importance than race itself (2011, introduction). Indeed, all of the more recent studies have effectively highlighted the fact that by the middle of the seventeenth century, one of the most conspicuous features of colonial society in Mexico was its steeply rising rate of miscegenation (Seed 1988a, 24–25).

All of the more recent studies on colonial society in Mexico have effectively highlighted the fact that, by the middle of the seventeenth century, and after more than a century of Spanish colonial rule, castes, those of racially mixed ancestry, became the dominant element, competing with the different phenotypic groups for space and a limited autonomy under Spanish colonial rule.

This is also the case for the *sistema de castas* (caste system), and its direct impact on the lives of single plebeian women; indeed, the overwhelming ramifications of race and caste make the experience of singleness much more complex than that for women in early modern Europe. At the core of the colonial enterprise, then, was a system that one may consider to have constituted an “ideal model” of how a colonial society *ought* to be organized, rather than mirroring actual realities.¹¹ As all recent studies clearly demonstrate, the gap between this ideal mental model and concrete social reality was far wider than those who initiated it ever imagined. In fact, this system was far more flexible and transmutable than what was previously considered by historians. Thus, the benefits of social and cultural connectedness, such as the backing of powerful and affluent patrons and godparents or partaking in social networks such as the various “sisterhoods,” were even more important to one’s place in society than were the color of one’s skin or the other types of *naturaleza* (predisposition) of a person. This system and its attendant customs created a class of mixed-race women who, for various reasons, did not marry in equal proportions to white European women. Under such a system, largely due to race, caste—mulata/mestiza women were more likely to become or to remain single mothers.

From what will be highlighted in the chapters that follow, one may say that the social-cognitive classification in colonial Mexico included the following characteristics:

- A. Raza/calidad (religion/belief; ethnic affiliation); In Colonial New Spain, the term indicated aspects of color, occupation, wealth, purity of blood, honor, integrity, and place of origin. Africans and their descendants were usually classified by their color, than according to ethnic designations (Bristol 2007, 55).
- B. Naturaleza (predispositions, including the cultural environment of origins).

C. Gender.

D. Casta.

E. Civil status (“free,” “slave,” “single,” “widowed,” “married”).

F. Occupation.

G. Personal competence / resourcefulness / audacity/stamina.¹²

The last, very qualitative characteristic could doubtless assist individuals in transcending many social and economic barriers of the time, as well as choose partners from social classes other than their own. One viewpoint is that of Cope, who asserts that “Mexico’s social structure was based on two fundamental principles: (1) the division between Spaniards and indigenous persons; and (2) the maintenance of internal stability within each sphere. Spaniards believed that the castas threatened both principles. Biologically, of course, the castas did not really fit into either *república*. More important, they had no legitimate socioeconomic niche” (1994, 15). I, alternatively, tend to put far more emphasis on point G, namely, “competence,” as well as on disposition. Furthermore, the core contributing factor that I believe enabled single, plebeian women to navigate within the colonial caste system and also to transcend barriers of race and class was “transmuted identities.” Most, if not all, of our records attest to the fact that single plebeian women solidly navigated within this fluid and elusive caste system. In their discourses they attest to their ability to “change hats,” namely, play out distinct identities vis-à-vis the church and local authorities, while at the same time using different hats, such as different civil statuses, elsewhere. The changing of hats is also depicted in the interchangeability of ethnic identities, such as that highlighted in the case study of Isabel de Montoya, allowing the transcendence of single women from one denomination to another, from one caste to another, stretching identities to the limits.

As will be observed throughout this book, a direct outcome of these phenomena was that women in general, and single plebeian women in particular, were far more flexible in their choice making than earlier assumed. As indicated above, racial/caste identities remained quite flexible and transmutable throughout the early to mid-colonial era, varying under changing circumstances and social conditions. The issue of racial identity, whether rigid or flexible, is extremely relevant here in the context of our discussion of how single plebeian women were able to operate and make their choices within local colonial society, and transcend different barriers of law and prejudice.¹³ The rapidly changing social and racial equilibrium, as well as the intrusion of members of subaltern castes and their growing demographic predominance, required adjustment of the laws separating the different phenotypical groups. In those insecure times, strict measures became particularly necessary to demarcate

crumbling norms, violated limits, and spoiled practices, sifting out the transgressors. Nevertheless, as shall be seen, the netherworld between law and actual social reality, between what was permissible and unacceptable by society, was still very broad and flexible.¹⁴ Likewise, the term Creole, as used in the colonial sources, was ambiguous. At first, it seemed to designate blacks born in the Americas but later on it could also refer to Spaniards born the Americas, as well as their offspring, of mixed blood. In order to demonstrate such patterns, exemplary cases of discourses concerning social and racial identities will be analyzed.

Judith Butler has termed the phenomenon of being able to “change hats” as “performativeness,” and has argued that if society defines mores in a certain way, then the individual may act in a subversive or “joking” manner against these standards and norms of conduct (Butler 1988). Moreover, if one employs here Ludwig Wittgenstein’s and John Austin’s philosophical analysis of language and its social functions (Potter 2001), one may emphasize the wording (cultural standards) and perceptions of racial distinctness that such women utilize to draw the line between a seemingly Spanish environment and upbringing and the “inferior” and “degenerate” world of the castas. As our study highlights, once left on their own, such young women succeeded in transcending the constraints and barriers of language and culture, deviating from the ideologically defined physical norms of both dress and language, and crossed the lines from one cultural milieu and its strict restrictions to another. Through such life stories one obtains an entire mental gamut of social and cultural biases and norms dividing the different groups and castes side by side with social realities and practices that easily transcended and even discredited those very norms and biases.

In her self-representations, Isabel de Montoya, for example, situated herself in both the República de Indios y República de Españoles (Spanish and indigenous realms) at the same time. On the one hand she associated herself with the Spanish conquistadors and their native allies, while on the other hand she linked herself with the indigenous Cuicatec nobility of southwestern Mexico, traceable back to long before the Spaniards arrived in the area. This doubling may partly explain Montoya’s projected ambivalence over her caste identity, as well her maneuvering between such caste categories. Nevertheless, it is absolutely clear that she fully acknowledged the elites’ tenets, or mental constructs, that blacks or mulatos “were of a different breed,” that the former were assigned derogatory associations by the Spaniards, and that, accordingly, they would not yield solid or “healthy” lineages, as those created by procreation between Spaniards and Indians, especially when the indigenous persons were of noble lineage, “like herself.” From the testimonies of Montoya’s acquaintances, one is able to glean additional descriptive details. Petrona de Medina, wife of Pedro de la Cruz, a Creole from Tlaxcala, who resided in Isabel de Altamirano’s household in Mexico City, proclaimed in court that “she did not know whether

Montoya was a *mulata* or an indigenous [woman].” Gertrudis de la Cruz, a *mulata*, and doña Isabel’s slave, proclaimed that “Montoya appeared to be a *morisca* . . . She wore a cotton hood, an old skirt the color of pineapple; an old linen, rotten shirt; rotten shoes; she had two rings, the one with a figure of Unicorn.”¹⁵ María de Rivera, one of Montoya’s “sisters” and co-practitioners, described Montoya as “una *mulata libre*” (a free *mulata*).¹⁶ Yet another example: during Mónica de la Cruz’s hearing before the Inquisition in Mexico City on 28 June 1652, she declared that “on her father’s side Montoya was a descendent of Creoles, while on her mother’s side, of Christianized indigenous persons.”¹⁷ The above examples and the mixed vocabulary of cultural designations, especially so in Isabel de Montoya’s contradictory description of herself, clearly motion toward the fluidity of such patterns of classification, as well as of the social and cultural attributions rendered to them by the various observers, whether coming from the official, administrative sectors or from the popular sectors.¹⁸ Patrick J. Carroll, for example, in his study of colonial Jalapa highlights the significant presence of indigenous African intermarriages during the seventeenth century (see Chance 1978, 126–27; Carroll n.d., 111–25).

One additional factor for consideration—being aware that many among the single, plebeian women came from the lower castas of blacks and *mulatos*—is that the latter’s position in society was precarious, and therefore single women from among them may have developed special sensibilities to navigating skillfully to avoid all kinds of menaces and prejudices. Blacks and *mulatos/as* were likewise routinely accused by officials of being haughty, insolent, lazy, and loud, given to theft, and prone to revolt. Measures to curb their cohesiveness as a group were issued with regularity but seemingly to no avail. Blacks and *mulatos* were barred from holding royal, municipal, or ecclesiastical offices (Israel 1980, 64). The 1612 Uprising in Mexico City began already a year earlier with a wave of coordinated protests initiated by hundreds of blacks and *mulatos* right across the viceroy’s palace at the plaza, from where they proceeded to the calle de Santo Domingo, and to the Inquisition’s palace carrying the corpse of a dead female slave, presumably killed by the inquisitors. By 1612, when the uprising broke out, the city and state authorities had already feared a major conspiracy on the part of those two castas to put an end to Spanish dominion, and ended it with the prosecution of the presumed instigators and with the extraction of confessions through torture.¹⁹

In 1647, during the infamous conflict between the Bishop Pallafox of Puebla and Viceroy Salvatierra, the anti-Spanish sentiments of blacks and *mulatos* were revealed in their open defiance of the viceroy. The *Gente vil* (lowly, foul), as they were dubbed, were a special group of undesirables marked by many societal restrictions. Among the many restrictions, blacks and *mulatos* were not permitted to bear arms, nor could they occupy the position of owner in most artisan guilds. Yet, a far

more significant prohibition, not consistently enforced on this group, beginning in 1623, was the ban on maintaining independent households. The viceroy of New Spain, the Marqués de Gelvez, promulgated a decree obliging all castas to live with Spaniards, preferably with their Spanish owners. To see to it that the ban was properly enforced, on 19 February 1633, the *contador general* (accountant; one of the four treasury officials assigned to New Spain to look after the Crown's fiscal interests) of New Spain published an ordinance instructing all free persons belonging to blacks, mulatos, and Zambahiqos (one of the many categories invented and designated for third-generation persons of mixed blood)—living either on their own or in dependent households—to report within fifteen days, for a general survey of their numbers and ages, as well as of their places of residence.²⁰ And in 1672, a royal decree threatened slave owners against allowing their women slaves to sell foodstuffs or clothes on the streets (Bristol 2007, 80).

However, the fate of those among these castes procreated by men belonging to uppermost castas, that is, españoles—*hombres nobles*—was unquestionably far better than that of the rest. Take, for example, Francisca de Reynoso, a free mulata, who appealed to the Viceroy's court in order to make an exception in her case, exempting her from the new ordinance made public a year earlier (1640) prohibiting blacks, and free mulatos, whether men or women, from living in a house of their own, as well as from wearing silk and precious jewelry.²¹ In Francisca de Reynoso's case, as in others similar ones, the viceroy was indeed in favor of an exception being made, as indicated in the sources.²² In reaction to this same ordinance, in January 1641 a number of black and mulato families—headed by Domingo Perez, Francisco Gutiérrez, Juana de Espinosa, Francisco Vázquez de Loya (and on behalf of his black father, Antón de Loya), Catalina de Loya, and Francisca de Loya—appealed to the viceroy, Marqués Luis de Tovar Godines, calling him to exclude them from these prohibitions and “allow them to live in dignity, together with their wives and children in Mexico City and elsewhere, in their own independent households.” However, after submitting their plea for review to an especially commissioned councilor, Doctor don Luis de las Infantes, the viceroy turned down their appeal, but he instructed the justice authorities and the priesthood serving in their parishes “not to cause them further harm concerning such mischief that they were accustomed to in the past.”²³ These restrictions merit special attention when one reviews cohabitation of single women belonging to these groups.

EXPLAINING THE SOURCES

The qualitative facets of this study are based upon a diversity of records in the Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico City) repository, documenting lay views of

single women's conduct, beliefs, and practices. These were found in the following sections: Archivo Histórico de Hacienda; Inquisición; Notaría; Tribunal Superior de Justicia; Bienes Nacionales; Civil; Escribanos; General de Parte; Indios; Jesuitas; Matrimonios; Ordenanzas; Bienes de Difuntos; Reales Cédulas; Real Junta; and Tierras. In the section of Bienes de Difuntos, one finds, for example, that among the richest and the most informative sources are *Cotejo de testamentos* (wills and bequests), as well as *diligencias de reclamo de herencias* (petitions and claims for inheritance) of single women and their property and those of their heirs. Within records of *hospitales, casas de misericordia* (almshouses and parish orphanages), and in parallel documents—such as letters of debt, memoranda of orphans, and affidavits given by the women themselves—I was able to locate orphans and pursue their subsequent whereabouts. Similarly, the options available to women who became separated from their spouses, or to single women who sought asylum, come to light through private petitions and public decrees related to the establishment and maintenance of poorhouses and hospitals for women of the subaltern groups (e.g., the Casa de Magdalenas and Amor de Dios, in Mexico City) and requests for the reassignment of women to these houses. These are supplemented by letters of admittance of single women into such institutions and by reports detailing their conduct in such places. Apart from this, these women are ubiquitous in parish records of baptisms and marriages, in censuses, in private letters, in legal proceedings of legitimization, and in ecclesiastical records of “ecclesiastical divorce” and betrothal, and in lawsuits over concubinage. Furthermore, appeals to ecclesiastical courts for the annulment of marriages, reports to the civil and church authorities about maltreatment, and both civil and criminal litigation filed by women against men who abused them inform us about the social circumstances behind such petitions. Within the proceedings of the ecclesiastical court of the Archbishopric of Mexico City during the seventeenth century, for example, there are many records recounting the fate of such women. Typically, the narratives relate how they had married, while still very young, men ostensibly of their own social standing, but shortly afterward discovered that their spouses had actually deceived them regarding their true background and civil status. Thus, these women sought to dissolve their respective marriages. Reports filed by church authorities and prelates of the religious orders throughout Mexico regarding the circumstances of such women who appealed to the ecclesiastical courts for help are valuable historical sources that tell why and how couples separated.

For example, in the Notaría (notary's office) section in the Archivo Nacional de la Nación (AGN), under the documents entitled *Escrituras de servicio* (service agreements), I was able to track petitions filed by either single plebeian women, or by their children, to be placed under the tutelage of a person of profession,

who would teach them a trade and provide them with room and board. Here is an example:

Scripture of deposit. Before Lic. Francisco de Leos *alcalde del Crimen* of this court, appeared a twelve-year-old mestiza girl, Juana, an orphan from both father and mother and said that she would like to be hired for service by someone who would treat her honestly and in a state of chastity, teach her good habits and Christian doctrine. And when the *alcalde de corte* [judge of the civil division of the *audiencia*] witnessed that she was without any clothes on, and maltreated, he deposited her to Licenciado Francisco de Figueroa Venegas, *relator* de la Real Sala del Crimen, for a period of six years, obliging him to keep her honest and teach her good customs, provide her with food, clothes, shoes, medicines for her illnesses, good treatment, and at the end of the six years, he should provide her with 30 pesos to be able to get married . . . Mexico City, 24 April, 1614.²⁴

Added to all the above sources are those linked to ostensible criminality, that is, the *racionales* and circumstances under which single women were detained, incarcerated, and prosecuted. The AGN in Mexico City holds 148 volumes of inquisitorial proceedings, which provide us with abundant references to single, unwed women accused of *amancebamientos* (cohabitation), as well as found guilty in a large variety of crimes and sins falling under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. Among these I found documented the life stories of approximately 190 single women who were prosecuted by the Spanish Inquisition, which unfold a whole range of social realities, social interactions, and networks of mutual trust and assistance among single plebeian women. The inquisitorial records utilized here throughout are particularly suitable for the practice of the qualitative methodology, especially where one is in need of applying the “interview mode.” Witnesses, like culprits, were interrogated to excess by the inquisitors. The word-for-word court proceedings/minutes left behind in the archives allow us to review both witnesses’ and culprits’ responses in great detail, a fact that facilitates the application of a present-day “interview mode” on such responses from the distant past and to be able to sort them and classify them according to major and recurring themes as the qualitative methodology instructs us to do. However, by contrast to a present-day “interview mode,” which poses open questions to the interviewees, the inquisitorial interrogatorium is a closed “questionnaire” and focuses on distinct themes, mainly those that deal with blasphemy, Devil worship, and religious and moral deviance, but also racial affiliation, including genealogical background, all of which are aimed to provide the interrogators with a solid basis for conviction. My purpose, by contrast, is to be able to extract from such responses/data all what interests us in particular, namely, social networks, mutual assistance, ritual practices, genealogies, and full life histories, as

in the case of Isabel de Montoya (see appendix 1) and, if indeed possible, from how these women describe their experiences *in their own wording*.

The judicial archives of the city of Puebla house extraordinarily rich sets of the *fiscal del crimen* (Crown or city attorney attached to criminal cases) and his corps of constables' records documenting local allegations against single women, where one is able to pursue the fragmented, personal experiences of eighty-nine of such women, between 1603 and 1642. Such sources best detail the circumstances under which single women were confined to houses of seclusion or houses of correction and are invaluable supplemented by city authorities' reports on the locations and social contexts of the households in which these women reestablished themselves after they were released from such confinement. In addition, I am utilizing here qualitative sources, such as incantations and ritualistic images and paintings, for the sake of seeking social realities, that historians previously made use of for the sake of gleaning religious beliefs and practices only. I argue, for example, that ritual formula was not centered merely on the goals of "love-magic," as some historians may be inclined to interpret it but, rather more so, on appropriating spaces and its male sovereigns, in the combined social and gendered sense, not just the symbolic context, and that such ritual practices truly mirrored single women's subversive aspirations, as well as manifestations.

The quantitative database for this study is embedded in records from Mexico City and Puebla and consist of (a) a sample of baptismal records from the Sagrario Metropolitano, in Mexico City, 1672–80 and 1681–88; (b) a sample of baptismal records from the Sagrario Metropolitano of Puebla, 1650–89; (c) the baptismal records of San Martín Huaquechula (state of Puebla), San Salvador El Verde, near Tlaxcala (state of Puebla), and San Juan de los Llanos, Libres (state of Puebla); (d) the burial registry of the parish of Santa María de la Natividad, Atlixco (state of Puebla) for the years 1704–14, as well as a quantitative survey of pleas for ecclesiastical divorce and verdicts reached by civil and ecclesiastical courts in Mexico City alone concerning charges of concubinage; (e) A door-to-door, partial census, conducted between 1670 and 1678, that covers eleven different *barrios* (quarters), as well as additional residential areas, including small alleys, bridges, and squares in this part of Mexico city that I have recently unearthed at the AGN.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Essential to this present study are numerous other studies. Within the context of early modern Europe, the most relevant studies are Joanne M. Ferraro's *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (2001); on spousal struggles in Venice between 1564 and 1650, Amy Froide, *Never Married: Single Women in Early Modern England*

(2005); on single women testators in early modern Southampton, Bristol, Oxford, and York, England, Lawrence Stone's, *Broken Lives; Separation and Divorce in England 1660–1857* (1993); and Roderick Phillips's, *Family Breakdown in Late Eighteenth-Century France, Divorces in Rouen 1792–1803* (1980). Family historians of Latin America have been working hard for the past three decades or so. Historical studies of colonial society in New Spain, based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches, have questioned many previous assumptions about various social realities that existed during the early and mid-colonial periods. Accordingly, patterns of living, of residence, adherence to patriarchal rule, and family norms have been found to have been far more flexible and accommodating than was previously thought (see Lavrin 1989a). Take, for, example, Juan Javier Pescador's, "Vanishing Women," in which he examines the reality of indigenous women migrating to Mexico City to look for work and a place to live.²⁵ These studies have opened up new paths that demand significant modifications in our thinking on how the overall mass of the subaltern groups lived and died. Their norms of living, marriage, and residential patterns, as recent research undoubtedly shows, were influenced predominantly by manifestations of economic instability that impelled frequent migrations, for example, as we know to have been the case in particular in mining areas such as Guanajuato in New Spain. The stable, patriarchal household model previously assumed to have been dominant has been shown by recent research to be no longer valid—certainly not in circumstances in which both formal and informal unions were in large numbers being dissolved after a period of only two or three years, leaving the family without a paterfamilias.

It would suffice at this point to mention the most indispensable secondary literature that impacted this present study. Komisaruk's *Labor and Love in Guatemala: The Eve of Independence* (2013, chs. 2, 3, and 4, in particular) is one of them. Indeed, through her close study of a number of nonelite women during the mid- to late eighteenth century in Santiago de Guatemala, Komisaruk brings to the fore the very critical themes that ought to be further evaluated concerning single women, and therefore I cite her often in this book. Patricia Seed's classic study *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico* (1988a) maintains that cultural changes spurred behavioral change, which in turn led to legal and institutional changes, and that three major values affected marriage: *voluntad* (will), *amor* (love), and *honor*. According to Seed, the tenet of individual consent to marry and the exercise of freedom of choice or free choice in choosing a marriage partner were embedded in the belief that *voluntad* was rational. However, contrary to Seed, our use of the term "free choice" theorizes that remaining single (though not celibate) should be approached from the perspective of a *conscious decision*, undertaken by single plebeian women in a variety of situations discussed in the book. What Dora Dávila Mendoza expounds

in her book on ecclesiastical divorce in eighteenth-century Mexico (2005), as well as what Ana Lidia García Peña describes in her own book (2006), fit this notion only partly. And I quote from Dávila Mendoza: “The objectives that the women appealing for divorce sought on the grounds of maltreatment varied but the essence was in not wanting to keep on tolerating situations that they did not deserve nor did they wish to continue with, due to having already been conscious of what they desired [for themselves], and they knew that they were able to rely on ecclesiastical support and on legal assistance” (2005, 195) In this present citation, as in others of her book, Mendoza and García Peña both emphasize maltreatment and violence as the driving force behind such conscious decisions taken by elite women during this period, and not any other kind of circumstances. García Peña asserts that “the fear of dying during a fury of blows directed these women to justify divorce as a distinct form of remaining in peace, not being able to pursue another alternative that would resolve their situations” (2006, 196). Such a choice of either remaining or becoming single is explored in this present book from a greater variety of perspectives, including, but not limited to, violence. As such is Richard Boyer’s *Lives of the Bigamists: Marriage, Family, and Community in Colonial Mexico* (1995), in which Boyer highlighted the unique strategies of bigamists in early to mid-colonial Mexico. In contrast with this study, Boyer does not discuss single women from their own vantage point, but rather as victims of abandoning husbands who formed new lives elsewhere. In my opinion, it would be constructive to reexamine resistance and diverging alliances of single plebeian women not from the dichotomist approach of “resisters” versus “subordinators,” but rather from a far more multifaceted vantage point that takes into account internal factionalism within each group, as well as shifting roles. For example, Susan Gal has commented that “the dichotomy of ‘we as victims’ versus ‘they who have the power’ can be recursively applied, so that any imagined assembly of ‘us’ can be further subdivided into an ‘us’ and a ‘them.’” Ortner emphasizes how a single activity may simultaneously constitute both resistance *and* accommodation to different aspects of power and authority, allowing resisters to remain within the social system they contest (Ortner 1995, 173–93; Gal 1993, 407–24).

Also especially relevant to the discussion on the daily world of poor urban women are Sonya Lipsett-Rivera’s *Gender and the Negotiation of Daily Life in Mexico, 1750–1850* (2012), Nicole von Germeten’s *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* (2006), and her other book, *Violent Delights, Violent Ends* (2013), on Cartagena de Indias; and Sandra Lauderdale Graham’s study on *Brazil, House and Street: The Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (1992); as well as Jane E. Mangan’s *Trading Roles: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Urban Economy in Colonial Potosí* (2005). Addressing the issues of ethnic/racial identities and illegitimacy of offspring is Ann Twinam’s earlier

book *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, Sexuality and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (1999), and her most recent book, *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattoes and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (2015). The latter work focuses on the eighteenth-century term, *Gracias al sacar*, denoting a formal process, undertaken by the king of Spain and his Cámara de Diputados, of “laundering” or whitening, of applicants from the colonial elites who were standing for royal offices in the colonial bureaucracy, through the payment of large sums of money to the royal treasury. In both her books, Twinam thoroughly studies these appeals for “laundering” originating from across Latin America, and she has uncovered thirty such petitions for the Audiencia of Mexico, constituting 13.9 percent of the total number of petitions from across the colonies. Twinam convincingly maintains that the major rationale behind such petitions were “honor and property.” Nevertheless, both her books are focused on men and women firmly entrenched in the colonial elite circles, between the mid-eighteenth to the early part of the twentieth century, in contrast to this present study, which examines the social phenomena “from below,” as well as during the early colonial period. Take, for example, Twinam’s comment that “the concealment [of a pregnancy] considered essential for an unmarried mother of eighteen might not be as critical for a spinster of thirty-six” (Twinam 1999, 62). This is indeed the case for elite women, but for single plebeian mothers in early colonial Mexico this would never have been a real concern. In addition are Karen B. Graubart’s *With Our Labor and Sweat* (2007); Asunción Lavrin’s and Edith Couturier’s pioneering study “Dowries and Wills: A View of Women’s Socio-Economic Role in Colonial Guadalajara and Puebla, 1640–1790” (1979); Silvia Marina Artoni’s two classics, *La mujer mexicana ante el divorcio* (1976) and *The Women of Mexico City, 1790–1857* (1985); and Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru’s *Familia y orden colonial* (2005), whose chapter “Los recursos familiares de adaptación” centers on the very same parishes of Santa Veracruz and El Sagrario in Mexico City, under study here, between the 1650s and 1660s. All those works converse very well with our own records on baptisms, marriages, and ecclesiastical divorce in these two parishes, during the same period. Also essential, on the issue of the assimilation of women of African origins in Mexican society of the time, especially their role in the creation of black and mulato confraternities, is Joan Cameron Bristol’s *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, which is very relevant for this book’s treatment of the place of single African women within the domain of religious practices (2007).

ISABEL DE MONTOYA: THE CASE STUDY (SEE APPENDIX 1)

The persona of Isabel de Montoya, nicknamed La Centella (The Morning Spark)—a middle-aged, single, and a racially mixed plebeian woman who could

sign her name was able to confess in “elegant Romance”—but could not read nor write, is intriguing, particularly because of the multifaceted and dichotomous sensation it sparks. Much of the time, Isabel seems to us as though she is moving relentlessly from daylight into shade; at times, she is described by her acquaintances and by herself as coming from indigenous background, at times she appears to be a mulata, at times she is very generous and warm with her friends and neighbors, at times she is both rowdy and mean. Notwithstanding, at other times, she is being portrayed as deeply engaged in the spiritually soothing, magical, and otherworldly essences. Furthermore, one can easily admire Isabel’s resourcefulness and creativity that helped her greatly in gaining grounds where obstacles were unbridgeable: vis-à-vis her parents, during her adolescence, and later on in life, switching between careers when a particular one became a peril or between men she desired only to leave behind for good, as well as vis-à-vis her interrogators at the court of the Inquisition.

Where did I find the story of Isabel? I found her at the Van Pelt Library, at the University of Pennsylvania, while visiting, and by pure chance. I came across two large volumes that, apparently, were records of the Holy Office in Mexico City, of the trials and tribulations of an unmarried *castiza* (of a mixed, second-generation indigenous-Spanish ancestry), by the name of Isabel de Montoya.²⁶ This study strives to suggest in fact that it is precisely the multifacetedness and inconsistencies in Isabel’s life story and personality that were reflective of reality, as well as replicated the anomaly of Mexican colonial society at large. Such circumstances, which are analyzed at length, obligated Isabel to accommodate her behavior accordingly, in order to “manage best in both worlds.” Such a comprehension of the existential choices single women such as Isabel made is indeed essential to our understanding of the full range of choices and strategies, as well as the spiritually soothing ways adopted, by single women in order to enhance their existence in the threatening and rough environment in which they lived. Could one associate the large presence of single plebeian women in the urban scenery of Mexico to her “agency” or, rather, to the socioeconomic circumstances that impelled such a phenomenon, or, alternatively, might not better answers be found in their private life stories? I approach this theme by highlighting the possible role played by channels of mutual assistance and trust among these women. What were the reasons that may have kept plebeian women—midwives; clothing and flower sellers; seamstresses; housemaids; bread, fruit, vegetables, and stand vendors; bakers and cooks; and other servants—in a lifestyle of singlehood, outside marriage? A close consideration will be undertaken of a number of focal issues: the presence of single women in early to mid-colonial Mexico City and Puebla; the racial factor: local social and economic constraints that are closely related to the caste system;

reasons for remaining single; channels of mutual assistance and trust among single plebeian women; and caretaking of their children. But, prior to that, the following chapter introduces the major themes of concern, as they are projected from single women's discourses during early to mid-colonial Mexico, through a close analysis of the form and significance of their own words.

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