InVisible Culture • Issue 31: Black Studies Now and the Counter-Currents of Hazel Carby

“Negros, aquí? Blacks, here?”: Blackness in the Mexican Archive

Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva¹

¹University of Rochester

Published on: Nov 15, 2020

DOI: 10.47761/494a02f6.588e2d78

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Featured image: Black Lives Matter, Washington DC, August 2020, Copyright Erica Jae.

"If someone I found disappeared without explanation from a subsequent record, I hoped they ran, ran fast and far and re-named themselves so as to be forever

hidden from capture by former owners and the archives."

—Hazel Carby, "The National Archives"¹

I have a vexed relationship with colonial archives, especially those located in Puebla, Mexico, my hometown. For the better part of the last fourteen years, I have struggled with Puebla's archives, with what they reveal and conceal. My work has focused on the intersection of slavery, freedom, urban spaces, blackness, and the social relations that gave meaning to all of the above. I have drawn deeply from the archive of the seventeenth century and am conscious of the violence embedded within it and cognizant of the dehumanization it enabled. And yet, I cannot help but wonder what Afro-Poblano history would be without the colonial archive. Indeed, in the wake of Professor Hazel Carby's visit to the University of Rochester in 2019, I found myself pondering what are, for a historian, dangerous questions: If the archive informed, enabled and empowered the slaveholder, do we simply reify racial power when we engage the archive of slavery? And if so, is it better not to know?

Blackness is a decidedly foreign concept in Puebla. Foreign in that blackness is not imagined as a vital element of local society, culture or history. Foreign in that the vast majority of poblanos do not interact with black people, although they consume the tropes and stereotypes projected through the U.S. film and television industry. Foreign in that black and poblana/o are considered mutually exclusive categories for all but a very, very small community. In Puebla, 0.23% of the population claims African descent.²

We know this only because in 2015 the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) conducted a detailed survey of Mexico's socioeconomic and demographic trends. Question 7 posed the following: "According to your culture, history and traditions, do you consider yourself black, in other words, Afro-Mexican or afrodescendiente"? Never before had the INEGI asked the question, given Mexico's historic aversion to racial nomenclature.³ On a national level, the survey revealed the presence of 1.38 million Afro-Mexicans, largely concentrated in the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca, where festivals and gatherings celebrating African heritage have become commonplace over the past three decades. This is not the case in Puebla today. However, my time in the colonial archives gradually revealed a process of black community formation that redefined the parameters of freedom in Mexico and of belonging in the city of Puebla.

"*Negros, aquí?* Blacks, here?" was the perplexed response from poblanos when I admitted, upon traveling there in search of records, that I had conjured an impossible, irrelevant, or worse still, an insulting doctoral project. Colonial-era interactions with

indigenous people (Nahuas, Mixtecs, Zapotecs) were acknowledged in Puebla, but to speak of Angolans, Kongolese, Mandingas, Carabalís? Why? How could I justify a project focused on enslaved *mulatos* and *negras*, terms that produce discomfort in twenty-first-century Mexico? Unlike what Carby sought in the National Archives of the United Kingdom, I could not claim a genealogical interest in this project. Nonetheless, I was motivated by a profound desire to understand what I had never been taught.

That desire led me to the notarial archive located in the Instituto Cultural, in what had been a notorious colonial prison. In the mid-2000s, the Instituto contained a children's library, an hemeroteca (newspaper archive), and the Archivo General de Notarías de Puebla, simply known as "Notarías" for those interested in its files, contemporary and colonial alike. The historians were decidedly the smaller contingent, with lawyers, homeowners, executors, landholders and state bureaucrats dominating the space. Notarías was (and is) very much a living archive. Any dispute, irregularity, suspected fraud or family tragedy having to do with real estate in the state of Puebla was recorded there. A hierarchy of office workers followed the commands of the director who stamped, signed, denied, amended and otherwise ruled over the realm of property transactions. The staff issued certified duplicates and triplicates in exchange for small fortunes, in many ways replicating the colonial *modus operandi* and its "papereality."⁴

The colonial archive had no catalogue. Its earliest records date from 1536, when there was no certainty that a five-year old settlement on a flooded plain would survive another rainy season. (It has now been 484 rainy seasons, but the archive still has no catalogue.) All files in the archive were assigned to one of six notarial offices that at one point or another preserved property transactions somewhat chronologically. "Can I see Notaría 3, Box 49?" was the typical, uncertain request for a document penned in 1625. "How about Notaría 4, Box 122?" A frustrated researcher on a short research trip from Spain once asked me how to know what to ask for without a guide. "We just pick a box and read it all," I replied before sharing some of my notes. Indeed, there was no effective method of accessing this particular infrastructure of information and power. Within beige cardboard receptacles, books of bound colonial papers revealed debt contracts, testaments, apartment rentals, dowry arrangements, freedom papers and slave purchases. The first and last pages of the bound books were usually terribly deteriorated, if fragments of them remained at all. At times, the writing on the watermarked folios produced illegible agglomerations as the ink seeped from recto to verso, transposing donors, recipients, goods and signatures. In retrospect, the association between imperial recordkeeping and "legibility and storage" was often entirely absent.⁵

In other cases, the power in Notarías was all too present. On one of my first days in the archive, I unexpectedly located a disintegrating notebook entirely composed of bills of slave purchase. They advertised sales of black people "recently arrived from their land" as if the Passage was voluntary. I soon found that seventeenth-century slavery was everywhere and simultaneously enveloped by everything else: a novitiate entering the cloister with a slave retinue, a transaction for chiles, beans and wheat in exchange for two African youths. "May all who see this letter know that" on April 4, 1625, Domingo Rodríguez Ribero sold Cristina, a *negra Angola*, 14 years old, and Juana, *negra Sao Tomé*, 20, to his brother Pedro Bravo Milanés.⁶ They were valued at 625 pesos according to the notary, Alonso Corona.

At least 20,000 people were sold on the Puebla slave market in this manner during the seventeenth century.⁷

Most of the enslaved sold in Puebla were African or born of African parents, although several hundred captives were born between India and the Philippines and mislabeled as *chinos*. Slave traders, merchants and customs officials branded the arms, shoulders, and chests of the Africans with iron or silver rods known as carimbos. The "CR" or "DP" initials burned into African skin were then replicated on thick colonial paper for fiscal purposes. On other occasions, Puebla's scribes could not decipher competing epidermic marks. The ritual incisions that marked some black bodies prior to the Atlantic crossing remained within the realm of the unknowable for the imperial bureaucrat. Those, the initiated, entered the notarial record as *rayadas* or *rayados*, due to the ritual scarification that graced their cheeks and temples. Such was the case of Anton, described in 1635 as a twenty-six-year old enslaved black man "of the arara nation, rayado."⁸ He was not alone. In fact, we are forced to wonder how Anton interpreted the ritual marks of others from Allada and the Bight of Benin. What did these signs and faces mean to him? The archive does not say.

The notarial archive is also silent on the upbringing of creole children, born of African or Native American women in Mexico, and raised in polyglot households where everyday life was navigated in Nahuatl and Spanish, but also in Kimbundu, Kikongo and many other African languages. Many of these children evaded archival detection, their lives never notarized. They would remain in the service of a single family for the duration of their entire lives. Their bondage was not dictated by the notary's quill, but by no means did these children escape the relations and spaces of enslavement that bound them to a house, a convent, a textile mill or a marketplace. Slavery and its racialized violence bound them to Puebla, certainly, but so did the affection of their

grandparents, childhood friends, cousins and companions. As they grew, lovers, friends, spouses, godparents (*comadres* and *compadres*), and co-workers would intensify these bonds. Most of the enslaved did not seek refuge with the maroons of the mountains, even if the rumor of insurrection filtered down to the city. Most did not join Yanga, the legendary maroon leader. Most stayed, endured, built community and, in so doing, slowly eroded the pillars of slaveholder power. In the colonial archives, I found myself increasingly drawn to their story and struggle.

In Notarías, no classificatory system confined me, other than my own interests and biases. These eventually displaced a focus on slavery for one on *afrodescendiente* families and the spaces they occupied. I found no collections of family papers in the Puebla archives, as one might encounter in a South Carolina research library. But I did find black and mixed-race families, enslaved, partially manumitted and free families. As I researched my way through the seventeenth century, I found that Afro-Poblano families gradually faded from the grasp of the notarial record, their absence an index of fractional freedoms won. The papers that had once sentenced them to a state of human property now seemed more fragile, impermanent, even porous.

In search of the free children and grandchildren of Africans, I shifted my research to the archive of religion and to the old parish churches: El Sagrario, San José and Santo Angel Custodio. There they were. Attached to vibrant communities of faith and to different notions of belonging, the Monsón, Rodríguez de la Torre and Terranova families now claimed their own pieces of paper, scribes and archives. Black parishioners, confraternity members, residents of the Analco barrio, these where the labels affixed to *afrodescendiente* people in the old parish books.

When María de la Encarnación, a mestiza woman, took Joseph Suárez de Medina as her spouse in 1696, she evidently looked past his status as an enslaved mulatto man.⁹ Because Joseph was, in fact, so much more. A master painter, widower, and member of the San José parish, he was deeply embedded in the fabric of the Baroque city, as was she. I know nothing more of the Encarnación-Suárez de Medina union. I can only situate their lives in a general context of Afro-Poblano freedom and empowerment.

By the late 1680s, two of every three infants of African descent were baptized as free people in Puebla's Sagrario parish. At baby Felipa's baptism, María de la O and Juan de Ibarra publically established their relationship to their daughter and commemorated her formal entry to the local Catholic community.¹⁰ As her biological parents, they also made sure to establish her rights to freedom and lineage by

recording their own status as *mulatos libres* in the parish book. Freedom being formulated at the baptismal font, black families in Mexico redefined the last quarter of the seventeenth century through an irreversible march away from slavery. Thousands upon thousands of marriage and baptism records attest to their strategy's success. In this regard, Puebla's "archive of slavery" demonstrates what such a corpus might look like "unmoored from its attachment to absence."¹¹

At the turn of the eighteenth century, blackness in Puebla could no longer be equated with enslavement. Instead, it was increasingly associated with free families of African ancestry, their complex relations to local communities of faith and fiscal obligations to the Spanish crown. In Puebla, it is a story 99.77% of us ignore. Indeed, after generations upon generations of racial mixture and social struggle, most Mexicans disregard their own black lineage. Now, three hundred years later, this colonial ancestry manifests itself urgently once more. Far from probing individual self-identification, the INEGI's racial question elicits a profound re-examination of a collective imaginary and its past, present and future archives: What is your history? Why do you belong here? And with whom?

Footnotes

1. Hazel V. Carby, "The National Archives," *InVisible Culture* 31 (2020), <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/the-national-archives/>. ↵
2. Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística, "Panorama sociodemográfico de Puebla 2015," 252-253. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/app/biblioteca/ficha.html?upc=702825082314>. ↵
3. Although many scholars refer to José Vasconcelos's "Cosmic Race" for this stance, the rejection of racial categories has significant roots in the 1813 "Sentiments of the Nation" by the afrodescendiente independence leader, José María Morelos y Pavón. Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race, Mixture, Racism and Blackness in Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14-17; Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, eds., *Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History* (Lanham: SR Books, 1998), 341-344. ↵
4. Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3-4. For a compelling analysis of "papereality" and its implications on slavery and archival practices in the Spanish empire, see Nancy E. Van Deusen, *Global Indios: The Indigenous Struggles for*

Justice in Sixteenth-Century Spain (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 128-131.

[↵](#)

5. Raman, *Document Raj*, 3. [↵](#)

6. Archivo General de Notarías del Estado de Puebla, Notaría 4, Box 124, no folio, April 4, 1625. [↵](#)

7. Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, *Urban Slavery in Colonial Mexico: Puebla de los Ángeles, 1531-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 107-143. [↵](#)

8. Archivo General de Notarías del Estado de Puebla, Notaría 3, Box 76, f. 1855, August 3, 1635. [↵](#)

9. Archivo de la Parroquia del Señor San Joseph, Libro de Matrimonios de Negros y Mulatos, 1692-1739, f. 30r. [↵](#)

10. Archivo del Sagrario Metropolitano de Puebla, Libro de Bautizos de Negros y Mulatos, 1677-1688, f. 379r. [↵](#)

11. Anjali Arondekar, "What More Remains?: Slavery, Sexuality, South Asia," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 147. [↵](#)