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"My Conscience is Free and Clear": *African-Descended Women, Status, and Slave Owning in Mid-Colonial Mexico*

On March 8, 1679, Polonia de Ribas entered her last will and testament into record at the offices of Alonso de Neira Claver, the royal notary public of Xalapa.[1] The will included information about Polonia's family, possessions, debts to be collected, and how she wanted her estate distributed after her passing. She was well acquainted with the appropriate processes and venues to ensure that such matters were officially acknowledged. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Polonia demonstrated her legal acumen by documenting half a dozen transactions with the notary public in Xalapa.

On March 14, 1679, just six days later, as she lay sick in bed, Polonia de Ribas notarized one final act by commissioning an official *carta de libertad* (freedom card) for one of her slaves.[2] In this notarial entry, she freed Gerónimo de Yrala, a 50-year-old man designated as a *negro criollo* (an African-descended man born in the colonies).[3] At first, this act might appear ordinary. Many slave owners freed some or all of their slaves on their deathbeds because they believed it to be their final act of generosity. But this manumission case is remarkable for two reasons: Polonia de Ribas was a wealthy free *mulata* and Gerónimo de Yrala was her brother.

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1. Archivo Notarial de Xalapa, Unidad de Servicios Bibliotecarios y de Información, Colecciones Especiales, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Veracruz [hereafter ANX], March 8, 1679, fols. 486v–489r.

2. ANX, March 14, 1679, fols. 489r–490v.

3. During the early and middle colonial period, the term "*criollo*" was used to designate people of African descent in the colonies, as opposed to someone born in Africa or Europe.

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This article explores questions of family, status, and colonial economic sustainability through the complex and provocative life of free African-descended slave owner Polonia de Ribas. While Polonia occupied an exceptional position as a slave owner of her own family members, she was not the only woman of African descent who owned slaves or wielded economic influence in late seventeenth-century Mexico. In the 1600s, when many African-descended people in Mexico still labored as slaves in fields and urban centers, a new demographic of colonial society began to emerge: free African-descended women of means. Although free African-descended people existed throughout the Spanish colonies, as early as the Conquest era, the seventeenth century witnessed tremendous growth in their numbers.[4] As colonial Mexico's institutions took shape and local economies diversified, free women accessed developing labor markets, demonstrated geographic mobility, and keyed into interracial networks to secure their livelihoods.[5] Free women employed strategies similar to those of other people of means, but they also applied gendered strategies and found themselves in circumstances specific to their race, such as having enslaved family members or having been enslaved themselves. This article argues that while slavery loomed large in the extensive rural periphery, some free African-descended women in the jurisdiction of Xalapa, Veracruz, attempted to create social distance from slavery with their classed status as slave owners.

Seventeenth-Century Xalapa

Xalapa, the present-day capital of the state of Veracruz, represented a significant hub of regional influence.[6] Throughout the early colonial period, new viceroys rested in Xalapa on their way to their investitures in the viceregal capital, often staying with a wealthy resident while enjoying the cooler weather of the hilly

4. Herman Bennett establishes that in New Spain there were significantly more free people of African descent by the mid seventeenth century. He states, "By 1646, the creole population, largely free and comprised of mulattos, numbered 116,529, whereas the predominantly African slave population totaled 35,089." Herman Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 27.

5. María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez's pioneering work on enslaved and free women in Mexico City is the only book in any language that is wholly dedicated to African-descended women's history in colonial Mexico. Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana, siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [hereafter INAH], UNAM, 2006). For a close examination of free women in seventeenth-century Xalapa, see Danielle Terrazas Williams, "Capitalizing Subjects: Free African-Descended Women of Means in Xalapa, Veracruz during the Long Seventeenth Century" (PhD diss.: Duke University, 2013). For an overview of experiences of free and enslaved women in central Veracruz, see Ursula Camba Ludlow, "Altanería, hermosura y prosperidad: reflexiones en torno a conductas de negras y mulatas (Siglos XVII–XVIII)," in *Mujeres en Veracruz: fragmentos de una historia*, 2nd ed., Fernanda Núñez Becerra and Rosa María Spinoso Arcocha, eds. (Xalapa, Veracruz: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2012), 19–31.

6. For clarity's sake, "Veracruz Port" and "Port of Veracruz" refer to the city. Discussions regarding "central Veracruz" and "the central Veracruz region" refer to the contemporary state.

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way station.[7] Spanish soldiers from the interior of Mexico traveling to the coast for expeditions to Florida also stopped in Xalapa for respite en route to the port of Veracruz.[8] Commercial businessmen from the port chose to maintain their stocked warehouses in the hillside town.[9] Most of the principal economic power players preferred the more moderate weather of Xalapa to the sweltering heat of the port, which helped shape the former town's distinctive profile.[10]

In the second half of the seventeenth century, Xalapa and its agricultural environs counted a population between 7,000 and 9,000 inhabitants.[11] Indigenous people always accounted for the largest percentage, although estimates vary widely, between about 60 percent and 85 percent of the total population.[12] Excluding the largely indigenous agricultural zones that surrounded Xalapa proper, the demographics of the town changed drastically over the course of the second half of the seventeenth century, with the indigenous population doubling from 1,163 in 1651 to 2,487 by 1700. The Spanish population also expanded, from 281 to 659. The number of mestizos increased from 99 to 247. However, people of African descent represented the most significant change in the profile of the city during this time period. At mid-century, African-descended people accounted for 193 of the inhabitants of Xalapa. By the advent of the 1700s, there were 542 African-descended people, nearly tripling that population in half a century.[13] Of the approximately 4,000 people living in the town of Xalapa, the demographic breakdown is as follows: 63 percent indigenous, 17 percent Spanish, 6 percent mestizo, and 14 percent of African descent. However, this data represents the residents of the town but does not account for the more transient people of diverse backgrounds who stayed days, weeks, or months for goods, services, or repose in Xalapa.

Sugar cultivation dominated much of the agricultural development, but the town and its environs bustled with an impressive array of enterprises that looked far beyond its own jurisdiction. More than a sugar-producing rest stop for travelers on the Camino Real, Xalapa included elites and merchants who often

7. Manuel Rivera Cambas, *Historia antigua y moderna de Jalapa, y de las revoluciones del Estado de Veracruz*, 5 vols., facsimile edition (London: British Library, Historical Print Editions 2011 [1869–1871]), 55.

8. Rivera Cambas, *Historia antigua y moderna de Jalapa*, 67.

9. Rivera Cambas, *Historia antigua y moderna de Jalapa*, 73–74.

10. Carmen Blázquez Domínguez estimates that important functionaries spent only about half their time in the port. Blázquez Domínguez, *Breve historia de Veracruz* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2000), 63.

11. Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 95.

12. Gilberto Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa, siglo XVII* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1995), 123; Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 168.

13. These numbers were extracted from Bermúdez Gorrochotegui's data. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 123. Carroll's population profile by percentage is similar for this same time period. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 168.

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had connections with the center of colonial authority, Mexico City.[14] Central Veracruz, anchored by Xalapa and its regional rural complements of Córdoba and Orizaba, formed the "heartland of New Spain's sugar industry until nearly the end of the seventeenth century."[15] Veracruz Port served as the major port of entry for transatlantic travel and trade in goods, including African slaves, until the end of the seventeenth century.[16] The central Veracruz region, as a whole, relied on indigenous labor, along with that of free and enslaved Africans and African descendants, to invigorate the colonial economy.[17] Through agricultural development and Atlantic commerce, central Veracruz battled bouts of retraction and experienced occasional expansion during the early- and mid-colonial periods.

Some women of African descent in the region created opportunities within these shifting economic and social parameters by purchasing slaves. Unlike the cooks, spinners, weavers, food purveyors, laundresses, and house servants of the colonies, women of African descent who owned slaves experienced relative economic stability and benefited from both tangible and intangible advantages.

14. Xalapa is approximately 100 kilometers (or 65 miles) from the Port of Veracruz.

15. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 20. Xalapa and Orizaba had an earlier initiation into the slave trade, but Córdoba had the longest-lasting involvement, and great economic investment, in the purchase and use of slave labor, especially during the eighteenth century. For a detailed examination of slavery on the sugar estates of Córdoba, see Adriana Naveda Chávez-Hita, *Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba, Veracruz, 1690–1830*, 2nd ed. (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 2008).

16. The port also served as a strategic point of military defense, often carried out by militiamen of African descent. Although the historiography has leaned toward their impact in the late eighteenth century, militiamen of African descent even earlier played a role in the defense of Xalapa and the port. While it is uncertain when they were first formed, Bermúdez Gorrochotegui cites a *compañía de pardos* in Xalapa by 1694. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 348. Christon I. Archer has noted that African-descended militiamen protected Veracruz Port as early as 1621. Christon I. Archer, "Pardos, Indians, and the Army of New Spain: Interrelationships and Conflicts, 1780–1810," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 6 (November 1974): 237. For an in-depth history of African-descended militiamen in colonial Mexico, see Ben Vinson III, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Ben Vinson III, "Los milicianos pardos y la construcción de la raza en el México colonial," *Signos Históricos* 2:4 (December 2000): 87–106; Ben Vinson III, "The Free-Colored Military Establishment in Colonial Mexico from the Conquest to Independence," *Callaloo* 27:1 (2004): 150–171; Jackie Booker, "Needed But Unwanted: Black Militiamen in Veracruz, Mexico, 1770–1810," *The Historian* 55:2 (Winter 1993): 259–276; and Christon I. Archer, "Pardos, Indians, and the Army of New Spain, 231–255.

17. According to Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, it was primarily enslaved indigenous and encomienda laborers who worked on Xalapa's earliest Spanish-owned farms. However, he adds, by the second half of the sixteenth-century, more encomienda indigenous workers, enslaved Africans, and free salaried employees filled the labor demands of the town and its environs. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 306. For important contributions to the regional study of Veracruz, see Adriana Naveda Chávez-Hita and Enrique Florescano, eds, *Historia General de Córdoba y su Región* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 2013); Citlalli Domínguez-Domínguez, "Uniendo el comercio de la mar del norte y la mar del sur: la bioceanidad en el Caribe vista través del eje Veracruz-Acapulco, en la segunda mitad del siglo XVI," *Iberamérica Social*, Special Volume 2 (February 2018): 10–26; Matilde Souto Mantecón, "La imagen de la ciudad de Veracruz en doce planos de los siglos XVII al XIX," in *El Golfo-Caribe y sus puertos: Tomo I, 1660–1850*, Johanna von Grafenstein Gareis, ed. (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2006), 377–410; Juan Ortiz Escamilla, ed., *El Veracruz de Hernán Cortés* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 2015); Citlalli Domínguez-Domínguez, "La población afromestiza de Coatepec, Veracruz: mestizaje e integración social, 1646–1791" (Bachelor's thesis: Universidad Veracruzana, 2006).

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In many ways, from their becoming moneylenders to their efforts to widen their children's social networks, female slave owners in seventeenth-century Xalapa offer a unique lens for examining the experiences of free women of African descent, their families, and their strategies of intergenerational economic survival. Finally, the notarial footprint of Polonia de Ribas offers important insights into how we understand slave owning among free people more broadly, and the gendered and racialized experience of slave owning, in particular.

Slave ownership among people of African descent continues to offer a complicated narrative. The vast majority of the scholarship on Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States focuses on the economic considerations of free people of African descent.[18] While there is greater historiographical coverage on slave-owning women in the United States, a few important works address the practice for colonial Latin America. Arguably, the most famous case in the history of free women slave owners is the exceptionally wealthy Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, more commonly known as Chica da Silva. Owning more than 100 slaves in her lifetime, Chica da Silva stands as an outlier among free women in Latin America.[19] In Júnia Ferreira Furtado's richly documented history of this remarkable slave owner and her family, she argues that Chica da Silva's impact cannot be measured in her slaves, diamonds, grand estate, lavish clothing, or luxurious household items alone. Ferreira Furtado reminds us that social influence, public perception, and the ability to mobilize powerful people and their structures for one's own ends are also defining aspects of Chica da Silva's legacy and, I argue, the legacies of even free African-descended women slave owners who lived comparatively modest lives.

18. Important contribution to these efforts in the historiography include Zephyr L. Frank, *Dutra's World: Wealth and Family in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Júnia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Kimberly S. Hanger, "Landlords, Shopkeepers, Farmers, and Slave-Owners: Free Black Female Property-Holders in Colonial New Orleans," in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004), 219–236; William F. Sharp, *Slavery on the Spanish Frontier: The Colombian Choco, 1680–1810* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976); Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943); Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974); Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790–1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985); Carter G. Woodson, ed., *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1924); Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Inge Dornan, "Masterful Women: Colonial Women Slaveholders in the Urban Low Country," *Journal of American Studies* 39:3 (2005): 383–402. A brief paragraph in a work by Luis M. Díaz Soler points out that both Spanish law and authorities sought to protect the rights of black slave owners. Díaz Soler, *Historia de la esclavitud negra en Puerto Rico* (Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Universitaria, 1965), 251.

19. Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 154.

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An examination of the historiography finds a wide array of practices and life chances for women who owned slaves. In the Brazilian context, Kathleen Higgins establishes that for one gold-mining community in Minas Gerais, African-descended women accounted for two-thirds of all African-descended slave owners and represented an overwhelming majority (70 percent) of women slave owners. However, she argues the prevalence may have had to do with the fact that Spanish men never felt economically threatened by free women who owned slaves, due to the small number of slaves the women individually held.[20]

The inability to compete with larger slaveholders may explain this social and economic opening, but without the broad documentation for historical figures like Chica da Silva it is challenging to understand some of the slave-owning practices of African-descended women. In a separate case analyzed in her study, even scholar Ferreira Furtado seems perplexed that a free woman from the Coast of Mina living in Brazil opted to purchase an enslaved girl instead of purchasing the freedom of one of her two enslaved daughters.[21] In his examination of the early colonial experiences of African and African-descended people in the circum-Caribbean, David Wheat underlines some characteristics and practices among women who owned land, businesses, homes, and slaves.[22] While slave owning was likely not widespread among free women during this period, Wheat argues, African-descended women seemed to demonstrate a politics in their slave- owning practices, specifically avoiding the purchase of people from their same "ethnolinguistic background."[23] In her examination of Cap Français, Saint-Domingue, Susan Socolow notes that free women tended to prefer purchasing African-born slaves but adds that this was likely because they were the "most numerous and the cheapest."[24] In Karen Graubart's examination of free women slave owners in Lima, she argues that these women understood how precarious their economic lives were in early colonial Peru, which manifested in few manumissions.[25] Freeing slaves meant losing future income and exposing oneself and one's family to financial ruin, especially given

20. Kathleen J. Higgins, *'Licentious Liberty' in a Gold-Mining Region: Slavery, Gender, and Social Control in Eighteenth-Century Sabará, Minas Gerais* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 82.

21. Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 147.

22. David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1640* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 151–155.

23. Wheat, *Atlantic Africa*, 155.

24. The free women of Cap Français were also more likely to purchase enslaved women than enslaved men. Susan M. Socolow posits that this was likely the case because free women needed laborers familiar with their industries or because "they believed they could more easily control slave women." Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the America*, David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 286.

25. Karen Graubart, "Los lazos que unen. Dueñas negras de esclavos negros, ss. XVI–XVII," *Revista Nueva Corónica* 2 (July 2013): 637.

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the prevalence of illness that could inhibit the productivity of a critical wage-earning member of a family.[26]

With the exception of Wheat, who identified some barriers that African-descended women seemingly did not cross, most of the literature establishes that people of African descent held very similar ideas about slave owning and slave-owning practices. The scholarship has relied heavily on notarial sources, specifically wills and bills of sale and purchase, as does this study. However, this article examines the rarely documented phenomenon of the gendered concerns of intraracial familial ownership, among rarely examined historical figures, that is, free African-descended women in colonial Mexico.[27] The particularity of female slave ownership may help us better understand the vulnerabilities of gendered freedom and the strategies of quotidian survival among free populations in slave societies.[28] For this, we return to the life of the protagonist of this endeavor, Polonia de Ribas.

EXTRAORDINARY TRAJECTORIES

Polonia de Ribas was born in San Antonio Huatusco, Veracruz (now in the municipality of Huatusco).[29] It is unclear when she moved to Xalapa, but in

26. Graubart, "Los lazos que unen," 635–636.

27. While there is a dearth of literature on free women of African descent, there are important contributions on enslaved women in New Spain, especially by pioneering Mexican scholars. See María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana, siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico City: INAH, UNAM, 2006); Cristina Masferrer and María Elisa Velázquez, "Mujeres y niñas esclavizadas en la Nueva España: agencia, resiliencia y redes sociales," in *Mujeres africanas y afrodescendientes: experiencias de esclavitud y libertad en América Latina y África, siglos XVI al XIX*, María Elisa Velázquez and Carolina González Undurruaga, eds. (Mexico City: Secretaría de Cultura, INAH, 2016), 29–58. For an examination of the significantly understudied history of enslaved children, including a discussion of enslaved girls, see Cristina V. Masferrer León, *Muleke, negritas y mulatillos: niñez, familia y redes sociales de los esclavos de origen africano de la ciudad de México, siglo XVII* (Mexico City: INAH, 2013).

28. I argue that Xalapa, even without the numerical representation of African descendants found in Mexico City or even Puebla, should be considered a slave society. Sherwin Bryant reframes the notion of the slave society as one that is not numerically conscripted but one in which the master-slave relationship permeates all of society, regardless of prevalence. Sherwin K. Bryant, *Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014). Herman L. Bennett argues that Africans and their descendants in Mexico, especially the increasingly litigious free population, help us reconsider the category of slave societies by focusing on their qualitative impact on labor systems, cultural expectations, and religious institutions. Herman Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Frank Proctor's work on the impact of African-descendant labor in the woolen mills is an important reminder that given the volatility of labor pools in the colonial period, African-descended people could have a significant impact on local industries, even those that historically sought indigenous laborers. Frank T. Proctor III, "Afro-Mexican Slave Labor in the Obrajes de Paños of New Spain, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *The Americas* 60:1 (July 2003): 33–58.

29. During the sixteenth century, San Antonio Huatusco, located in the province of Quauhtochco (now spelled Huatusco), was known as San Antonio Otlaquiquiztla. Located in central Veracruz, it was one of the oldest Spanish towns in the region, dating its founding to Cortés's visit in 1521. However, scholars believe that San Antonio Huatusco is noted in the Codex Mendoza and that the province served as a regional Aztec capital before the conquest. Modern-

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every instance for which she appears before the notary public she is designated in the records as a *vecina* (an acknowledged householder).[30] While her date of birth is unknown, Polonia was likely in her fifties when she submitted her last will and testament in 1679.[31] The documents do not reveal how long she lived in San Antonio Huatusco, but by at least 1655, Polonia was a resident of Coatepec in the jurisdiction of Xalapa.[32] Polonia's will later identified her as living in Xalapa proper. The notarial entries offer a few clues about Polonia's heritage. Her mother, Clara Lópes, was cited as a *negra* born in "Guinea."[33] Clara had been a slave for some unspecified amount of time at Tenampa, a sugar hacienda owned by a man named Pedro de Yrala.[34] On November 17, 1643, Pedro's nephew, don Joseph Ceballos de Burgos, granted a woman of about 60, named "Clara López," a carta de libertad.[35] Clara López was not a particularly unique name, but she was noted as a *negra* from "Berbesi," designating her as a *bozal* (someone born in Africa).[36] There is a possibility that this manumitted Clara López of 1643 was Polonia's mother, as the record describes her as a "negra bozal from Guinea," and given that it was Pedro de Yrala's nephew who freed her. It is uncertain when she passed away, but Polonia's 1679 will and testament noted that Clara was already deceased.

Her mother's history offers two important insights into slavery in colonial Mexico. First, Clara López's enslavement situates Polonia de Ribas one generation from bondage, establishing a significant trajectory for a woman

day San Antonio Huatusco is approximately 55 miles from Xalapa and 75 miles from the Port of Veracruz. Emily Umberger, "Huatusco," in *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*, Susan Toby Evans and David L. Webster, eds. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 349.

30. The term *vecino* denoted legal status as an acknowledged householder of a town or city. It could also indicate a long-time resident of a town.

31. Under Spanish law, the legal age of consent for women was 25. Polonia claimed to have been a slave owner from as early as 1646, and since she does not anywhere indicate that anyone ever served as her proxy before that date, she must have been at least 25 years old in that year.

32. For an examination of the eighteenth-century social dynamics of Coatepec's African-descended, indigenous, and Spanish populations, see Domínguez-Domínguez, "La población afromestiza de Coatepec, Veracruz."

33. ANX, March 8, 1679, folss. 486v–489r. The identifier "Guinea" does not refer to the contemporary nation but was a generic term identifying slaves born in various parts of West and West-Central Africa.

34. Tenampa is also referred to as Nuestra Señora del Rosario and Nuestra Señora del Rosario Tenampa. Tenampa included a sugar mill and a hacienda.

35. A *carta de libertad*, or "freedom card," was the notarized document that verified the manumission of a slave. ANX, December 17, 1643, fols. 426r–427r.

36. The term *bozal* referred to an unhispanicized person of African descent. It was usually assigned to someone born in Africa, or one who had not yet learned the Spanish language, or had not yet become acculturated to Spanish customs, including those not yet or only recently baptized. The term "Berbesi" loosely referred to groups of Africans who lived near the Guinea rivers, the area now known as the western Niger River. Other groups from this area included the Biafra, Mandinga, and Jollof. On ethnic designations of enslaved populations in Mexico, see Robert C. Schwaller, *Géneros de Gente in Early Colonial Mexico: Defining Racial Difference* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2016); Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, "The Rivers of Guinea," *Journal of Negro History* 31:3 (July 1946): 290–316; Peter Boyd-Bowman, "Negro Slaves in Early Colonial Mexico," *The Americas* 26:2 (October 1969): 134–151; and G. Micheal Riley, "Labor in Cortesian Enterprise: The Cuernavaca Area, 1522–1549," *The Americas* 28:3 (January 1972): 271–287.

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who would establish herself as a prominent and trusted member of Xalapa's elite. Second, Clara López's notarial life marks an important watershed in the history of slavery in New Spain. She and those who survived the Middle Passage with her represented one of the last generations of enslaved Africans brought to New Spain en masse.[37] With the dissolution of the Iberian Union in 1640, Spain experienced its final wave of high importation of African slaves to colonial Mexico.[38] Never again would thousands of enslaved Africans be forcibly displaced to the shores of New Spain each year, as had occurred when the Spanish crown benefited from the advantageous contracts most often brokered by Portuguese traders. Polonia de Ribas, the only documented living daughter of Clara López, would soon entangle her life with the institution that had fundamentally disrupted her mother's story as a West African-born woman and changed the trajectories and life chances of all of her family members.

Wealth Management

Unfortunately, there are no records that elaborate on the life of Clara López. Perhaps she quietly passed her days as a free woman by Polonia's side helping with her daughter's growing family. By the time Polonia registered her last will and testament in 1679, she had four daughters, Sebastiana, Josefa, Micaela, and Melchora de Yrala, and one son, Juan de Ribas. Her notarial footprint also demonstrates that Polonia de Ribas was a fairly wealthy woman. When Melchora married Diego de Villar, a Spaniard originally from Xalapa who had relocated to Veracruz Port, Polonia provided her daughter with a substantial dowry that included 3,000 pesos worth of slaves, jewelry, oxen, cash, clothing, and other items of value. Not only a mechanism to provide economic security for women, the dowry also served as a status marker.[39] As Asunción Lavrin has emphasized, "Women in good social standing were expected to provide a dowry for marriage," adding that wealthy women in Mexico City could offer 10,000 pesos, and some noble families could offer hundreds of thousands.[40] While not

37. Patrick Carroll establishes that the larger trajectory of enslaved Africans entering colonial Mexico was mirrored in Xalapa, citing that 65 and 70 percent of purchases of enslaved laborers occurred between 1590 and 1610. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 29–37.

38. While the transatlantic trade to New Spain decreased precipitously after 1640, the slave trade did not cease, due to the emergence of a thriving internal market of enslaved Africans and their descendants during the seventeenth century. For an examination of this internal market in the central Mexican region, see Tatiana Seijas and Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, "The Persistence of the Slave Market in Seventeenth-Century Central Mexico," *Slavery and Abolition* 37:2 (2016): 307–333.

39. For a discussion of the importance of dowries in colonial Mexico, see Asunción Lavrin and Edith Couturier, "Dowries and Wills: A View of Women's Socioeconomic Role in Colonial Guadalajara and Puebla, 1640–1790," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59:2 (May 1979): 280–304; Asunción Lavrin, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives*, Asunción Lavrin, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 23–59.

40. Lavrin, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico," 34.

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a quantitative study, María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez offers late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century examples of African-descended women from the middling economic sectors in Mexico City with dowries around 1,500 pesos in value. On the higher end of the examples, the African-descended daughter of a famed African-descended painter received a dowry of 2,206 pesos.[41]

Lavrin estimates that families in more provincial towns could likely offer from "one to several thousand pesos."[42] Xalapa fell closer to these regional ranges, with a few remarkable outliers. In a survey of 100 years of dowries of women from all backgrounds in Xalapa, only three times did families offer exorbitant dowries for their daughters—two of which were valued at 20,000 pesos each.[43] In 1669, when doña Juana Josefa Orduña Loyando y Sousa of Xalapa married don Juan Velázquez de la Cadena from Mexico City, her family offered a dowry of 30,000 pesos in cash, slaves, and other goods, perhaps feeling the pressure to compete economically with elite families of the capital.[44]

For the second half of the seventeenth century, when Polonia de Ribas likely transferred the gift to her daughter's new estate, it is challenging to establish an average dowry price.[45] One 1645 dowry clearly states its value at 2,876 pesos, broken down as 1,000 pesos in cash and the rest in clothing, jewels, and other domestic items.[46] A 1642 entry does not state an estimate but notes that the dowry comprised one half of the family's sugar mill, San Sebastián Maxtlatlan. The mill featured tracts of land, boilers, plumbing, living quarters, a number of storage rooms, various tools and packaging for transporting cane, 15 mules, 11 mares, four horses, 50 oxen, 40 cows and steers, 17 bulls, 25 other pack animals of various conditions and ages, 13 enslaved men, three enslaved women, and 90 pesos in back annuities from a convent in Puebla.[47] The line items are impressive, but Gilberto Bermúdez Gorrochotegui finds that San Sebastián Maxtlatlan was actually in decline by the 1630s and 1640s due to fire damage, the death of slaves, and "other impairments."[48] How promising

41. More research is required to establish whether these women were outliers or in some respects representative of African-descended women, but the question offers an impressive range of possibilities. Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano*, 267–269.

42. Lavrin, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico," 34.

43. ANX, February 4, 1609, fols. 477r–479v; ANX, June 29, 1643, fols. 398r–406r.

44. ANX, March 29, 1669, fols. 204v–208v. Doña Juana Josefa Orduña Loyando y Sousa is noted as a *vecina* of Xalapa.

45. While dowries could be transferred after the death of the parent, Polonia's will specifically stated that she had already provided her daughter with the stipulated amount. Unfortunately, Polonia's gift is not documented in the notarial archive as a separate entry that would establish the date of transfer. She likely intentionally included it in her will to offer a more formal postscript to the earlier unnotarized action. Polonia may have also cited it in the will to establish that Melchora was not due any further inheritance since her dowry was so substantial.

46. ANX, September 15, 1645, fols. 554bis v–558r.

47. ANX, May 5, 1642, fols. 294r–306r.

48. ANX 1642, fol. 545r, as quoted in Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 165.

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was the actual value of the dowry, given its deterioration from a once profitable estate?[49] Dowries could be misleading.

Of the 36 dowries examined, the values for two are ambiguous: the aforementioned dowry of one-half of the *ingenio* and another dowry that consisted of unvalued houses.[50] Of the dowries with discernible values registered in the mid 1600s, many (14) were valued at under 1,000 pesos.[51] However, these lesser cash value dowries were actually quite substantial. Five of the 14 included eight slaves, highlighting the importance of slavery in Xalapa and how "value" could be underrepresented in dowry prices.[52] Two of the 14 entries referenced funds to dower orphaned girls, which were valued between 150 and 200 pesos per dowry.[53] Excluding these seven dowries, only seven women received less than 1,000 pesos during this time period.[54] Seven women also received dowries between 1,000 and 2,000 pesos.[55] Three women had dowries valued between 2,000 and 3,000 pesos.[56] Only two women had dowries valued between 3,000 and 5,000 pesos.[57] Five dowries were valued

49. ANX, December 20, 1655, fols. 78r–79r. The *ingenio* San Sebastián Maxtlatlan experienced a boom in the early 1600s, as its owner Juan López Ruiz served as a supplier for markets in Puebla de los Ángeles and Veracruz. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa,* 163.

50. ANX, June 16, 1664, fols. 85v–87v.

51. I examined all dowries from 1600 to 1700. This data is specifically for the dowries registered between 1640s to the early 1680s. I analyzed this range to offer some comparative sense of the value of dowries around the time Polonia de Ribas would have offered her daughters their dowries, and to establish the value of dowries around the time of her passing.

52. ANX, December 22, 1654, fols. 63v–64v; ANX, December 13, 1655, fols. 106r–107v; ANX, December 9, 1673, fols. 71v–72r; ANX, April 4, 1675, fols. 97r–98r; ANX, August 17, 1676, fols. 154v–156r.

53. ANX, August 8, 1642, fols. 344v–335v; ANX, October 15, 1679, fols. 598v–599v. The practice of providing orphaned girls modest dowries was common in colonial Latin America. Susan Migden Socolow, *The Women of Colonial Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 119. Many of seventeenth-century Xalapa's Spanish families still had close ties to Spain and some likely saw these dowry donations as part of their religious duty. For the practice of charity dowries in Spain, see Valentina K. Tikoff, "Gender and Juvenile Charity, Tradition and Reform: Assistance for Young People in Eighteenth-Century Seville," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41:3 (Spring 2008): 307–335. While dowries are often discussed as crucial for well-heeled or aspirational families, A. J. R. Russell-Wood describes how precarious the lives of Brazilian women with little or no resources for a dowry could be: "For the daughter of poor parents or an orphan, a dowry could mean the difference between an honorable marriage and prostitution." A. J. R. Russell-Wood, "Women and Society in Colonial Brazil," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 9:1 (May 1977): 14. In late-colonial Venezuela, regular officers attempted to provide for the social welfare of economically vulnerable women with the establishment of a widow and orphan pension plan. Gary M. Miller, "Bourbon Social Engineering: Women and Conditions of Marriage in Eighteenth-Century Venezuela," *The Americas* 46:3 (January 1990): 261–290.

54. ANX, December 14, 1643, fol. 438v; ANX, May 16, 1644, fols. 466r–467v; ANX, December 29, 1647, fol. 244r; ANX, November 19, 1672, fols. 522r–523r; ANX, May 11, 1682, fols. 59r–62v; ANX, April 1, 1660, fols. 335v–337v; ANX, November 2, 1683, fols. 133v–135v.

55. ANX, September 15, 1640, fols. 143r–145v; ANX, November 23, 1646, fol. 340r; ANX, September 3, 1654, fols. 45r–48r; ANX, October 11, 1680, fols. 577r–581v; ANX, July 8, 1668, fols. 157v–162r; ANX, November 30, 1672, fols. 529r–533r; ANX, June 4, 1684, fols. 184v–187r.

56. ANX, September 15, 1645, fols. 554bis v–558r; ANX, July 11, 1669, fols. 231r–232r; ANX, March 3, 1685, fols. 224v–229r.

57. The first was valued at 4,412 pesos and the second at 3,731 pesos. ANX, March 16, 1675, fols. 90v–94v; ANX, October 23, 1681, fols. 34r–39r.

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between 5,000 and 7,000 pesos.[58] One woman received a generous dowry of 8,000 pesos.[59] Two dowries broke the mold with extravagant valuations of 20,000 and 30,000 pesos, demonstrating that a few families in this relatively provincial town had the resources to attract the most well-heeled marriage partners for their daughters.[60] Given this sample, Polonia de Riba's dowry stands up to those of most of the Spanish residents of Xalapa, offering a dowry larger than those of 24 other families. The historiography clearly demonstrates that dowries made for serious considerations for elite families but so too were they for at least one woman of African descent in colonial Xalapa who attempted to secure the best possible marriage prospect for her daughter.

RELIGIOSITY AND STATUS

In addition to the 3,000-peso dowry for her daughter, Polonia's de Riba's sense of belonging in Xalapa's spiritual economy may also signal her concerns about status. In her last will and testament, Polonia dutifully (and formulaically) noted that she "entrusts her soul to God, Our Father . . . [and] as such, dying under this disposition, I want to be buried in the church of Señor San Francisco of this town, shrouded in the habit and chord of his sacred religion."[61] The monastery of San Francisco, founded by Franciscan friars between 1531 and 1534, was Xalapa's oldest Catholic institution.[62] Polonia's belief that she should be buried in the church of San Francisco, where Xalapa's Spanish elites rested, speaks to her self-assurance that she had a place not only in the town's social milieu but also in its spiritual community.

Polonia also requested that the executors of her estate pay for a mass to be celebrated during her vigil as she lay in wake. She asked also that 20 masses be offered for her soul after her interment, with alms for the services to be paid for by her estate funds. Elite Spaniards in colonial Spanish America often commissioned masses for their souls, but so too did more middling members of society, often through membership in a *cofradía* (confraternity, or lay Church organization).[63]

58. ANX, October 11, 1664, fols. 105v–110v; ANX, December 14, 1677, fols. 265r–269r; ANX, April 22, 1671, fols. 370r–374v; ANX, September 15, 1671, fols. 396v–400r; ANX, September 30, 1671, fols. 412r–419r.

59. ANX, September 6, 1688, fols. 395r–396r.

60. ANX, June 29, 1643, fols. 398r–406r; ANX, March 29, 1669, fols. 204v–208v.

61. ANX, March 8, 1679, fols. 486v–489r.

62. For a more complete history of San Francisco, see Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 357–370.

63. For an examination of confraternities and mass requests, see Larkin, "Confraternities and Communities," 200–206.

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The women and men of cofradías participated in public and private religious celebrations, contributed to charitable efforts, and organized secular social events. Members represented the economic spectrum and all racial groups were encouraged to join.[64] The scholarship on cofradías has established that some African-descended people mobilized their memberships for social advancement.[65] So while cofradías often did assist in the burial costs of their more humble members, Polonia de Ribas, a member of two cofradías in Xalapa, did not require such services. Polonia belonged to the cofradía Santo Nombre de Jesús and the cofradía Ánimas de Purgatorio. She noted in her will that she was behind in her dues for the year and that her executors should pay each cofradía three pesos to settle her accounts. Polonia added that the officers of both cofradías should ensure that masses be offered for burial, "as they are said for all [members]." There is no specific mention of Polonia's responsibilities in either, but the cofradía Ánimas was one of the oldest in Xalapa, dating back to at least the early 1600s. It once had been granted the honor to adorn the pulpit of the main chapel in the San Francisco convent.[66] She may not have needed more than the customary bestowal of masses from her cofradías, but Polonia's membership demonstrated her range of religious commitments and the expanding scope of her social capital.

While business, familial, and confraternal connections denote a broad range of relationships, the archives revealed little about other interpersonal relationships. For example, given the demographic breakdown of Xalapa, it is curious that Polonia had no documented interactions with indigenous people.[67] Also, Polonia may have served as a godmother, as was common among elite women in colonial Spanish America, but she was not named in any of the surviving baptismal or confirmation records from Xalapa's parish.[68] Nor did any of her

64. For an overview of the institution in colonial Mexico, see Asunción Lavrin, "Cofradías novohispanas: economías material y espiritual," in *Cofradías, capellanías y obras pías en la Ámerica colonial*, María del Pilar Martínez López-Cano, Gisela Von Wobeser, and Juan Guillermo Muñoz Correa, eds. (Mexico City: UNAM, 1998), 49–64; Nicole Von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006); Larkin, "Confraternities and Communities: The Decline of the Communal Quest for Salvation in Eighteenth-Century Mexico City," in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*, Martin Austin Nesvig, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2006), 189–214; Nicole Von Germeten, "Routes to Respectability: Confraternities and Men of African Descent in New Spain," in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*, Martin Austin Nesvig, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2006), 215–234.

65. For the importance of confraternities among African-descended people, see Nicole Von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*; Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, "From Chains to Chiles: An Elite Afro-Indigenous Couple in Colonial Mexico, 1641–1688," *Ethnohistory* 62:2 (April, 2015): 361–384; and Joan Cameron Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 93–112.

66. This distinction was later taken up by Juan Díaz Matamoros, the wealthy slave owner and proprietor of the sugar mill Nuestra Señora de la Concepción. ANX, January 9, 1616, fol. 713r.

67. No indigenous people are mentioned in any capacity in her notarial documents.

68. The Xalapa parish secretary informed me that some of the documents were lost or severely damaged in a fire. Others were lost when they were temporarily removed from the church during reconstruction from the fire

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daughters take on the responsibility of god-parentage. Her son Juan de Ribas served as the godfather to a two-day-old mulata named Josefa Gregoria.[69] However, Juan does not appear in the parish records; his role as godfather was recorded in the notarial archive when he paid for the infant girl's freedom.[70] His sister Melchora also registered business with the notary public. She and her Spanish husband Diego del Villar notarized the sale of their female slave María to a man living in La Antigua, Veracruz.[71] Polonia's children, it appears, also had wide economic networks and disparate relationships with the institution of slavery.

Polonia's final notarial entry asserts her financial literacy. The first-person narrative reads, in a formulaic statement for wills, "I declare that I do not owe anything to anyone . . . my conscience is free and clear." As a single mother of five children who knew how to manage her finances, Polonia de Ribas proved to be a fiscally responsible woman.[72] Her impressive complex of associates, extending to include prominent religious communities, business and familial connections in Veracruz Port, and distinguished residents of Xalapa, may help to explain how and why she came to spend most of her life as a slave owner.

POLONIA, THE SLAVE OWNER

From at least the mid 1640s until her death in 1679, Polonia de Ribas was a slave owner, during a time when slave owning was not a venture accessible to all. She owned two of her brothers, Gerónimo de Yrala and Juan de Yrala, an unrelated slave named Diego de Yrala, two unnamed slaves, and an untold number of slaves referred to in her daughter's dowry. Slave owning marked an exclusive economic undertaking, and it cost a considerable amount of money.

damage. However, I reviewed all extant parish records for the seventeenth and early eighteen centuries. None of the baptismal, confirmation, marriage, or death records cite Polonia de Ribas or her five children. Archivo Eclesiástico de la Parroquia del Sagrario Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón, Entierros, Casamientos, Bautizos, caja 1, libros 1 and 3; and Entierros, Casamientos, Bautizos, caja 2, libro 4. For the importance and prevalence of godmothers, see Frank T. Proctor, "La familia y comunidad esclava en San Luis Potosí y Guanajuato, México," in *La ruta de la esclavitud en África y América Latina*, Rina Cáceres, ed. (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 2001), 240–250.

69. ANX, March 15, 1670, fols. 284r–285v.

70. While godparents could play many important roles throughout the life of the child, Frank T. Proctor reminds us that, at least among Spanish godparents, they rarely helped to manumit enslaved children. Frank T. Proctor III, "Gender and the Manumission of Slaves in New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 86:2 (2006): 325–326.

71. ANX, January 6, 1668, fols. 119r–121r.

72. In regard to her management of finances, Polonia de Ribas was cited as a vecina of Xalapa, but there are no references in her documents regarding tribute payments. In fact, none of the notarial files examined for this study cite tribute requirements for the African-descended population in Xalapa. Further study at the Archivo General de la Nación is required to ascertain whether Xalapa's residents were subject to tribute demands in the seventeenth century or whether this was the case only later, in the eighteenth century. For the history of tribute and how African-descended people negotiated this fiscal duty, see Ben Vinson III, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty,* 132–172.

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On average in Xalapa, slaves cost between 300 and 400 pesos.[73] As a point of comparison, a horse cost 15 pesos and a small urban house cost 200 pesos.[74] For less wealthy slave owners, the purchase of slaves was their largest financial investment. Even for large landowners, slaves were very costly. As Patrick Carroll establishes, "Slaves represented the most expensive single item on the inventories of many of the province's seventeenth-century estates, plantations such as Mazatlán, Almolonga, Santísima Trinidad, Concepción, and Rosario. They cost more than the land, the equipment, and the buildings."[75] Being known as a slave owner could establish or reaffirm one's social capital. For an elite set of free women, being a slave owner offered relative financial security, entry into wider community networks, and, in turn, greater social status. Only people with financial backers, profitable family ties, or particularly well-honed pecuniary skills could engage in slave ownership during Xalapa's economically unstable seventeenth century.

So how did a free mulata with at least one enslaved parent gain such valuable assets?

To begin, on February 25, 1655, don Joseph Ceballos de Burgos "donated" two slaves to Polonia. The two slaves were her half-brothers, Juan and Gerónimo de Yrala.[76] However, what is described as a "donation" in the 1655 document turns out to be not a gift at all but rather a business transaction. In Gerónimo's 1679 manumission order, Polonia registered his racial designation as *negro criollo*, and his age, then added that Gerónimo and his brother Juan were "exchanged for two other *negros bozales*, which I gave to the mill that produces sugar called Tenampa."[77] At the time of the trade, Juan and Gerónimo were 25 and 20 years old, respectively, and both were identified as *negros criollos*, indicating that they were born in the colonies. Juan and Gerónimo had been slaves on the Tenampa hacienda, the same place where their mother had been as an enslaved laborer. The owner of the Tenampa hacienda was Pedro de Yrala, the wealthy uncle of don Joseph Ceballos de Burgos. Pedro de Yrala was a man of distinction in Xalapa. By 1637, he was a resident at a sugar mill in Xalapa and served as a priest holding the honorific title of *bachiller*.[78] As the years passed,

73. I reviewed all sales of slaves from 1600 to 1700 in Xalapa. Throughout the seventeenth century, the average cost of a slave, male or female, in central Veracruz hovered between 300 and 400 pesos. Variations in price depended more on age and health than on gender. These averages are substantiated by Patrick Carroll's work. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 35.

74. The 1620 prices are noted in Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 35.

75. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 35.

76. ANX, February 25, 1655, fols. 69v–70r.

77. ANX, March 14, 1679, fols. 490v–492r.

78. ANX, December 16, 1637, fols. 16v–17r. A "*bachiller*" is defined as the "holder of a bachelor's degree," less common and more prestigious in the sixteenth century than at present. It could also be the honorific title of a

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Pedro increased his visibility and his titles. In 1643, he functioned as the *cura beneficiado* (or head priest) of Xalapa.[79] By that time, he also had access to greater income, having inherited the considerable Tenampa hacienda from his mother, and owned a number of slaves.[80] Known as the *hacendero* of Tenampa and for other business he conducted in the region, Pedro de Yrala boosted his prestige further in 1660, when he found a seat as an ecclesiastical judge, a common ascension of duties for curas beneficiados.[81]

Don Joseph Ceballos de Burgos, Pedro de Yrala's nephew, came from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the jurisdiction of Xalapa. He inherited the large, multi-industry estate of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción and administered and later purchased Tenampa from his uncle Pedro. He also owned another mill, called El Molino del Río Frío, and a cattle ranch called La Palmilla, both located in the jurisdiction of La Antigua, Veracruz.[82] Don Joseph regularly conducted business in Veracruz Port and Mexico City. By 1655, he was identified as the *justicia mayor* of Xalapa, a chief magistrate appointed by the viceroy.[83] It is no wonder that in the first half of the seventeenth century, don Joseph's ventures generated more than 60 entries in public records by the notary public. Beyond the business transaction in which she acquired her brothers, Polonia's notarial life documents further interactions with the Yrala and Ceballos de Burgos family, which demonstrates that her network of associates included wealthy and politically powerful men who held her in esteem.

In 1664, Pedro de Yrala bestowed upon Polonia de Ribas the legal right to represent him.[84] Specifically, Pedro wanted Polonia to collect on a sizeable debt,

secular priest. Ophelia Márquez and Lillian Ramos Navarro Wold, eds. *Compilation of Colonial Spanish Terms and Document Related Phrases* (Midway City, CA: Society of Hispanic Historical and Ancestral Research, 1998), http://www.somosprimos.com/spanishterms/spanishterms.htm, accessed April 12, 2018.

79. ANX, December 29, 1643, fols. 425r–426r. The title afforded Pedro de Yrala the status of "head priest," a position without term restrictions. He would have also "held the parish as a benefice or quasi-feudal property," which allowed him access to "parish income, labor, and provisions permitted by law or custom." William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 79.

80. ANX, December 14, 1643, fols. 433r–437r.

81. ANX, June 14, 1660, fols. 348v–349v. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred*, 79.

82. In the sixteenth century, officials had hoped that the site of La Antigua, Veracruz, with its landscape better protected than the Port of Veracruz from the severe northerly winds, would serve as the principal colonial port of what is now Veracruz state. The location was abandoned in 1599 due to its sandy inlets, which were incapable of sustaining large vessels. The principal port was relocated to a southern site closer to Hernán Cortés' original landing in 1519 and christened La Nueva Veracruz, today's Veracruz. Rivera Cambas, *Historia de Antigua y Moderna de Jalapa*, 67. ANX, April 19, 1642, fol. 270r–270v; ANX, January 19, 1655, fols. 66v–67v.; ANX, February 13, 1642, fol. 285r/v; ANX, December 14, 1643, fols. 433r–437r.

83. ANX, December 31, 1655, fol. 95v.

84. ANX, December 22, 1664, fols. 117r–118v. Polonia is cited as his *apoderada*, a woman who has been appointed as a legal proxy by way of a notarial *poder* (power).

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257 pesos, from an inn owner named Joseph Cogollos y Zarate. Pedro de Yrala could have chosen a Spanish man from his network of associates, including the affluent ones in his own family, but he did not. He entrusted a free mulata to do the job for him, to collect a large sum of money from a prominent Spaniard. She was certainly not the only person available, nor did he reluctantly choose her as a substitute legal agent. Nor was it the case that Pedro de Yrala sent Polonia de Ribas on a casual errand to pick up a parcel full of notes from Joseph de Cogollos y Zarate's home. Sometimes legal proxies were unsuccessful at collecting fully on debts, which could lead to costly and lengthy processes of choosing new agents and dispatching them again. Pedro de Yrala either knew with confidence that Polonia de Ribas had some influence over Joseph de Cogollos y Zarate or that she was a resolute mediator and shrewd negotiator who would ensure that the matter would be resolved in one visit. What we can deduce from this case is that Polonia de Ribas, a free mulata, held the regard and trust of one member of Xalapa's elite, marking her as a member of Pedro de Yrala's inner circle.

While we know that Pedro de Yrala trusted Polonia to serve as his legal agent, the archive yields little about her relationship with don Joseph Ceballos de Burgos, with whom she also conducted business. Perhaps she was involved romantically with him. Perhaps the relationship between Polonia and don Joseph was affective but not romantic. For Mexico City, María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez cites the late seventeenth-century case of free African-descended Pascuala Santoyo, wife to Juan Correa, medical surgeon of the Inquisition, and later mother of famed painter Juan Correa.[85] In 1630, the wealthy treasurer of the Order of Santiago, Alonso de Santoyo, gifted to Pascuala, her siblings, and her children the revenues of a 6,000-peso mortgage.[86] Velázquez Gutiérrez posits that Alonso was perhaps the slave owner of Pascuala's parents, or that Alonso had an intimate or affective relationship with Pascuala's mother.[87]

It is also noted that when Pascuala married the surgeon Juan Correa, she brought a dowry of 500 pesos—not the amount seen among the most elite women in Mexico City—but given that some brides had no dowry at all, an indicator that she had access to some means, either through her own industry or a willing benefactor.[88] Much as in the case of Polonia, the notarial documents rarely offer enough personal inferences to attest to the nature of these financially

85. Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano*, 363–365.

86. Velázquez Gutiérrez notes that Pascuala had four children before she married the Inquisition surgeon. Given the date of the gift, the transfer of the revenues likely began before she married and had additional children with her legitimate husband. It was also noted that her family would receive these funds until they had all passed away. Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano*, 363–364.

87. However, Velázquez Gutiérrez states that there is no documentation to confirm that Pascuala's parents were ever enslaved. Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano*, 364.

88. Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano*, 364.

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entangled relationships. What can be discerned from the documents is a realm of possibilities that may communicate Polonia's ingenuity and her ability to secure relative social and financial status in this town of business-centric colonial subjects.

Polonia owned her two brothers for more than two decades, but she also owned at least one unrelated slave for a considerable amount of time. When Polonia later manumitted her slave Diego de Yrala in 1676, she noted that he was a 30-year-old man who had been "born and raised" in her home, which situates her earliest experiences of slave owning to no later than 1646, nearly a decade before she owned her brothers.[89] She also owned the two negros bozales whom she exchanged for her brothers in 1655. The dowry Polonia offered her daughter does not specify the quantity of slaves it included, but their value undoubtedly comprised a significant portion of the 3,000 pesos. It is likely that Polonia previously owned the slaves included in the bridal gift or bought them for that purpose, making her either a more significant slave owner than was recorded or far wealthier than her last will and testament suggests.

BUSINESS SAVVY

How did a single mother of five just one generation removed from slavery have the capital to maintain so many slaves while sustaining herself, likely her aging mother, and any unmarried daughters? Polonia's notarial life provides no explicit record of an income-generating business outside of hiring out her own slaves, but there are a few clues as to how she continued to grow side businesses to support the many people in her life and give at least one daughter a respectable dowry. The first hint is found in the dowry, which included the prized gift of oxen. Xalapa was a business nexus and a way station between the economic centers of Mexico City, Puebla, and Veracruz Port, and its residents took part in commerce, entering into businesses such as *venta* (owning an inn) and *recua* (conducting pack trains).[90] Free women of African descent were among those who worked at, and sometimes owned, these profitable businesses. For example, a free African-descended woman owned Xalapa's Venta del Rio while another managed the Venta de la Rinconada.[91] In addition to revenue from the businesses catering to the various demands

89. ANX, September 2, 1676, fols. 164v–165v.

90. So important were inns along the Camino Royal that the governor of New Spain, Hernán Cortés, ordered their construction at regular intervals and fixed their prices. Guillermina del Valle Pavón "Desarrollo de la economía mercantil y construcción de los caminos México-Veracruz en el siglo XVI," *América Latina en la Historia Económica* 27 (January-June 2007): 9.

91. ANX, June 10, 1609, fols. 149v–150r; ANX, March 16, 1609, fols. 86v–87v.

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of the transportation industry and a transient community flowing in and out of town, Xalapa had long received crown support to foster its agricultural potential. Between 1560 and 1600, Spanish settlers received land grants from New Spain's viceroys to develop pastures for maintenance of both large and small ranch animals, most importantly mules and oxen.[92]

For much of the seventeenth century, Xalapa served as a refueling station for the many muleteers transporting cargo and people from Mexico City, Puebla, Orizaba, and Veracruz Port along the Camino Real.[93] Perhaps Polonia rented out her oxen to one of the many sugar plantations or sugar mills, or even to a pack-train business owner. She would certainly not be the only woman of African descent in the transportation business. In 1712, free mulatto Miguel Jiménez Carralero registered his last will and testament. In it, he recognized his lawful marriage to a free mulata, Mariana Rodríguez, and stated that when the couple married neither had any wealth but that they had grown a business together, netting a "fortune totaling eleven thousand pesos, more or less," mostly through their pack-train business, with a reserve of more than 200 mules.[94] In 1704, a widow and free mulata named Ana de la Cruz declared that in addition to owning several houses, she owned seven oxen, four cows, four calves, eight mares, a sorrel horse, "an old mule," and seven pieces of unspecified cattle.[95] Ana likely owned a farm, and she may have rented out her livestock to supplement the agricultural or transportation needs of the town.

In addition to these options, Polonia de Ribas could have also benefited from the constant supply of cash-strapped colonials in need of patrons who could lend them money. Subjects of colonial Spanish America notoriously found themselves cash-deficient, allowing for the proliferation of loan agreements and debt settlements in notarial record books. And here we return to Polonia's proclamation that her conscience was "free and clear" because she carried no debt. While she had done well not to burden her estate with the possibility of dissolution by eager creditors, Polonia also wanted to remind her estate managers that at least two wealthy Spanish men in Xalapa owed *her* money. One of the debtors was none other than don Joseph Ceballos de Burgos. The other was Capitán don Antonio Orduña Loyando, owner of the sugar mill San Pedro Buenavista, which at one point had more then 100 slaves on site.[96] While

92. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 243.

93. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 147. For the importance of the transportation industry and early New Spain's economy, see Guillermina del Valle Pavón, "Desarrollo de la economía mercantil," 7–49.

94. ANX, February 24, 1712, fols. 504r–509v.

95. ANX, March 11, 1704, fols. 289r–291v. In an earlier notarial entry, Ana de la Cruz is also referred to as a mulata. ANX, September 22, 1694, fols. 39v–40v. However, two months after her March 1704 entry, she is recorded as a parda. ANX, May 18, 1704, fols. 291v–292v.

96. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 329.

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Polonia did not enumerate the amounts owed, she assured the notary that she had papers to document the debt and claimed that all could be corroborated in the personal papers and wills of those involved.[97] Perhaps believing that she was a family friend, Polonia likely trusted that don Joseph would honor the repayment without having it notarized. It is curious though, given that there are no documents that speak to her ties to don Antonio, that Polonia would be confident that he would repay her heirs. Perhaps her reputation as a shrewd businesswoman and debt collector preceded her.

Loaning money to neighbors, friends, and family members remained an in-demand business across Spanish America for the whole of the colonial period. Larger investors and diversified prospectors looked both to other elites and to the Catholic Church, as monasteries and convents became the colonies' de facto financial centers.[98] By the early 1600s, Xalapa's largest land and business owners began to explore financing options that might be offered by elites in Veracruz Port, Puebla, and Mexico City. As the century marched on, credit remained in high demand.[99] Smaller loans were handled locally and between social equals, and also through less equitable patronage systems.[100] Polonia likely charged interest (although it is not specified in the will) or informally agreed to collect other good or services from these two elite clients. She certainly did not consider these monies owed as favors or gifts: she was mindful to make note of them as she lay sick in bed while having her last will and testament drawn up. Her ability to loan money to landowning (but perhaps cash-poor) Spanish men and to serve as the financial proxy for at least one prominent Xalapa power broker speaks to her impeccable fiscal reputation and further establishes her place in late seventeenth-century Xalapa.[101]

97. ANX, March 8, 1679, fols. 486v–489r.

98. For a discussion of the persistent struggles with debt in large colonial industries, see P. J. Bakewell, *Silver Mining and Society in Colonial Mexico, Zacatecas 1546–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); and Heather B. Trigg, "The Ties That Bind: Economic and Social Interactions in Early-Colonial New Mexico, A.D. 1598–1680," *Historical Archaeology* 37:2 (2003): 65–84. For a fascinating examination of debt between communities, see Yanna Yannakakis, "Witnesses, Spatial Practices, and a Land Dispute in Colonial Oaxaca," *The Americas* 65:2 (October 2008): 161–192. For cases of debt peonage in various industries, see François Chevalier, *Land and Society in Colonial Mexico: The Great Hacienda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 277–288; Cheryl English Martin, *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico: Chihuahua in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 56–62; and R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 98–102. For a discussion of money-lending by convents in Spanish America, see Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 41–69.

99. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui notes that Xalapa's principal hacienda owners demonstrated the greatest need for credit between 1620 and 1630. Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, *Historia de Jalapa*, 304.

100. For a discussion of loans among African-descendants in Puebla, see Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, "From Chains to Chiles," 361–384.

101. Tamara J. Walker discusses the importance of asserting one's "reputation" rather than "honor" in colonial Latin America, as the rhetoric of "honor" was often denied to people of African descent and lower-class *castas*. Tamara J. Walker, "'He Outfitted His Family in Notable Decency': Slavery, Honour and Dress in Eighteenth-Century Lima, Peru," *Slavery and Abolition* 30:3 (September 2009): 394–395.

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MANUMISSION

In many ways, Polonia de Ribas was a typical urban slave owner in the region. She owned a few slaves, loaned money to some of her peers, and made business deals with others. And like many slave owners in the Americas, she was open to the idea of manumission.[102] Polonia legally freed at least three of her slaves. In 1675, she freed her half-brother Juan de Yrala after he had labored for 20 years as her slave.[103] In 1676, she freed the unrelated Diego de Yrala, a negro criollo.[104] The documents state that Polonia's love for Juan and his loyal service moved her to free him; this rhetoric is found throughout manumission records. However, it was not until she was on her deathbed in 1679 that Polonia freed her other half-brother, Gerónimo de Yrala. At that point Gerónimo was in his mid-forties, married with children, and living and working at a sugar mill in Xalapa as Polonia's hired-out slave. Although Polonia acknowledged Gerónimo de Yrala as her brother, she declared him as her slave among other goods and property.

The paragraph relating to Gerónimo reads like most other clauses offering freedom to slaves in wills: "I declare that among my belongings is Gerónimo de Yrala, *negro criollo*, my slave, who is the son of Clara López, my deceased mother, for whose respect and for other causes, it is my will, given that he provides 40 pesos as he has promised, that when the time comes . . . my executors provide him with a *carta de libertad*."[105] Even in the notarized carta de libertad that Polonia filed a few days after her will, the language remains tepid.[106] She asked that her executors grant a liberty card to Gerónimo de Yrala, noted that he was her brother, and reiterated the 40-peso agreement. Noticeably, it is devoid of sentimental language.

The instruction to free Diego de Yrala, no relation to Polonia, offers language that might be more likely found in the manumission of Gerónimo. Diego's official manumission document reads, "I grant [a liberty card] to my slave Diego de Yrala, who is a *negro criollo* and approximately 30 years of age; he is the son of my slave Catalina, a *negra* from Guinea. [Diego] was born in and still lives in my house, and has served me with so much purpose and loyalty."[107] The will offers even more sentimental language: I declare that to Diego de Yrala,

102. Frank T. Proctor explores the juridical origins of manumission and examines how the freeing of slaves served as fertile ground for contestation. Frank T. Proctor, *"Damned Notions of Liberty": Slavery, Culture, and Power in Colonial Mexico, 1640–1769* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 152–185.

103. ANX, February 16, 1675, fols. 77v–78v.

104. ANX, September 2, 1676, fols. 164v–165v.

105. ANX, March 8, 1679, fols. 486v–489r.

106. ANX, March 14, 1679, fols. 490v–492r.

107. ANX, September, 2, 1676, fols. 164v–165v.

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my *negro* slave, I have given and granted liberty before the present notary . . . and I declare that he has always aided and supported me with much love and by his own will from [Veracruz Port], where he is presently and has been working to assist me."[108]

While "love" and "free will" were common rhetorical devices in manumission cases in Xalapa, Polonia reserved them for her slave Diego, who lived in Veracruz Port, and withheld from her brother Gerónimo, who lived in the same town as she did. Rather than an expression of affection or intimacy, this notarial "love" seems to express a sense of loyalty on the part of the slave, as experienced by the slave owner.[109] If Polonia believed that Diego had fulfilled his obligation with "much love," his manumission was her expression of the recognition of such loyalty. His manumission entry notes that Diego was "born and raised" in Polonia's house.[110] The distinctions between the declaration of the manumission in her will and in Diego's carta de libertad allude to Polonia de Ribas's understanding of herself as both a generous and grateful slave owner and as a person who owned her family members with noted indifference. The distant tone she uses to refer to her half-brother may also reflect his status as a hired-out slave who did not live with her and thus was not bonded by the intimacy experienced between slave owners and slaves living in closer proximity, those slaves having been "born and raised" in the slave owner's home.[111]

SLAVE-OWNING PRACTICES

That Polonia hired out her slaves is also telling. At least two of her slaves, Gerónimo de Yrala and Diego de Yrala, worked in Xalapa and Veracruz Port, respectively, as Polonia's "hired-out" labor. Both men lived at their work sites and were married with children. James Lockhart describes the particularity of hired-out slaves in colonial Peru: "Many or most of these blacks

108. ANX, March 8, 1679, fols. 486v–489r.

109. For manumission trends and rhetorical devices, see Shawn Cole, "Capitalism and Freedom: Manumissions and the Slave Market in Louisiana, 1725–1820," *Journal of Economic History* 65:4 (December 2005): 1008–1027; Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives; Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769–1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Stuart B. Schwartz, "The Manumission of Slaves in Colonial Brazil: Bahia, 1684–1745," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54:4 (November 1974): 603–635; and Lyman Johnson, "Manumission in Colonial Buenos Aires, 1776–1810," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59:2 (May 1979): 258–279.

110. ANX, September 2, 1676, fols. 164v–165v.

111. Proctor offers an important discussion of manumission trends and affective relationships. See Frank T. Proctor III, "Gender and the Manumission of Slaves in New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 86:2 (2006): 309–336. Kathleen Higgins also highlights the importance of physical proximity to develop the intimacy between slave and slave owner that could lead to manumission. See Higgins, *Licentious Liberty*, 47–48, 52.

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[in the agricultural zones] were without any direct Spanish supervision."[112] Scholarship outside of the Spanish American context argues that hired-out slaves freed slave-owning women from the burden of supervising their slaves' activities, but others assert that women managed their slaves as others did.[113] While it unclear what type of work Gerónimo and Diego performed, or what they thought about their owner, Polonia de Ribas managed to keep them relatively productive for decades without demonstrating differential treatment.

Polonia's case suggests that slave owners of African descent in colonial Mexico likely represented a mixture of slave-owning possibilities—purchasing slaves, keeping the children of their female slaves until adulthood, hiring slaves out, manumitting slaves when they wanted to— but many questions still remain. Did the practice of hiring out slaves allow free African-descended women to enjoy economic and social advantages while simultaneously shielding them from the reality of perpetuating a system that inflicted incalculable atrocities on other people of African descent? Did African-descended women who owned slaves prefer the distance offered by hiring out their slaves to meting out corporal punishment to slaves who lived and worked near them? The practice of slave-owner absenteeism, including hired-out slaves living "nearly free," was commonplace in many slave societies in the Americas.[114] Perhaps this was the case for Diego de Yrala and his family: they may have enjoyed relative freedom while Polonia enjoyed the benefits of absentee slave owning. Where Polonia de Ribas' story complicates the historiography is in the fact of owning family members as slaves.

112. James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560: A Social History*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 210–211.

113. Writing about white women slave owners in the US South, Inge Dornan argues, in "Masterful Women," that "[hiring out] enabled them to receive from their slaves' work at the same time as it extricated them from a great deal of the practical side of slave management. Unlike women who employed their slaves in their own businesses, or female planters who put their slaves to work in their households and fields, urban women slaveholders who hired out their slaves did not have to supervise their slaves' work" (390) . Dornan argues that hiring out slaves also excused women from having to mete out punishment, an option she theorizes was preferred by women who owned adult male slaves (391). Dornan later clarifies that slave owners ruthlessly abused their slaves when they saw fit, regardless of the gender of the owner" (399). She writes, "The evidence suggests that women slaveholders generally conformed to contemporary notions regarding the management of slaves and differed little from their male peers in [disciplining their slaves]" (400). US historian Larry Koger writes, "In many instances, black slave owners were no different from white slave masters. They both exploited the labor of slaves to extract a profit and used their slaves as commodities." Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790–1860* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1985), 94. Evidence from Brazil demonstrates the similarity of behaviors exhibited by Portuguese slave owners and African-descended women. Kathleen Higgins cites a case of a free woman of African descent named Roza de Azevedo who had enough resources to buy "property and thirty slaves valued at twenty thousand *cruzados.*" Higgins, *Licentious Liberty*, 54.

114. Lockhart describes the privileges of slaves who were owned by temporarily absent slave owners in Peru. One shipmaster's female slave had keys to the house, "received visitors and guarded the chest [her slave owner] kept in his bedroom, full of gold, silver, and papers." Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560*, 205. For Brazil, Higgins found that nearly 75 percent of the slaves in the jurisdiction of Sabará "did not live in the town boundaries . . . for many of those living both inside and outside town, personal contact with their masters was limited." Higgins, *Licentious Liberty*, 47.

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Many scholars agree that free people of African descent who owned slaves understood the endeavor as a profitable one. However, this historiographical discussion drastically changes in the case of owning family members.[115] What could have motivated Polonia de Ribas to keep her brothers as slaves for more than 20 years before finally freeing one in 1675 and the other as she lay dying in 1679? Was it possible that Polonia de Ribas understood Juan and Gerónimo as chattel, even though they are cited as her brothers in every single document in which their names appear together? Could status-based considerations undermine acknowledged blood ties? Few scholars have examined this seemingly rare practice in the Spanish dominion. Kimberly Hanger cites a case of a free *pardo* man in Spanish New Orleans who purchased his enslaved son but did not manumit him for another 20 years.[116] Unfortunately, Hanger does not offer any conjectures as to why this father did not provide his son with a freedom card that would have enabled him to enjoy the legal status of a free man. In a later piece, Hanger briefly addresses the topic of African-descended people owning family members and argues, "As long as slave prices remained low, free people of color who could afford bondspersons used them. In addition, free blacks often could afford to purchase their slave relatives and free them with few constraints, and thus they did not need to hold them as slaves."[117] So why did Polonia not free her siblings?

As the historiography of African-descended slave owners has developed, historians working on other American colonies have begun to challenge what might be called the "benevolence" theory. US historian Calvin D. Wilson warns against drawing the conclusion that those who owned their own family members as slaves did so for altruistic reasons, for example, keeping families together when anti-manumission laws spread in the southern United States. While the benevolence theory may apply to their initial purchase of family members, it seems that owners of family members in the US South also

115. For the United States, Koger argues that "after the freed slaves purchased their kinsfolk, they manumitted their loved ones." Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 44. For the United States, Carter G. Woodson argues for what would later be referred to as the "philanthropy" or "benevolence" thesis. Woodson's theory of benevolent slave owning posits that free African Americans purchased family and friends and kept them as slaves to preserve family ties and protect them from the insecurity of "free" life—a supposition taken up by other scholars. David L. Lightner and Alexander M. Ragan provide a succinct summary of scholars who have reasserted Woodson's philanthropy theory. David L. Lightner and Alexander M. Ragan, "Were African Americans Slaveholders Benevolent or Exploitative? A Quantitative Approach," *Journal of Southern History* 71:3 (August 2005): 537. Notably, they include some of the early foundational books on slavery, including Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1967); James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Norton, 1998); and Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Importantly, Woodson's logic rests on the condition that many US states and territories had enacted laws impeding manumission in ways that made freeing an enslaved member of your own family a less desirable option.

116. Hanger, *Bounded Lives; Bounded Places*, 34.

117. Hanger, "Landowners, Shopkeepers, Farmers, and Slaveowners," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *Beyond Bondage*, 225.

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understood the value of leverage that slave ownership offered them in familial disputes. Wilson cites a particularly interesting case of an African American woman named Dilsey Pope, from Georgia, who owned her husband. Her husband had offended her and in retaliation, Pope sold him to another slave owner.[118] In Kentucky, Fanny Canady merely threatened the worst to resolve problems with her husband, as Wilson narrates:

> Aunt Fanny Canady was a colored woman of Louisville, Ky., who bought herself and several members of her family. She also owned her husband, named Jim, a little drunken cobbler. One day Fanny went into her husband's shop with fire in her eyes and finger pointed at her husband. She said, "Jim, if you don't 'have yourself, I'm gwine sell you down river." Jim sat mute and trembling, as to send down the river meant to sell to a negro trader and to be taken to the cotton fields of the far south.[119]

Generational gaps also did not appear to impede the powerful positions occupied by slave owners. In North Carolina, a young free man named Jacob worked with his mother to pull together enough resources to purchase his father, also named Jacob. As punishment for having criticized his son, young Jacob sold his own father to a slave trader, with this farewell: "The old man had gone to the corn fields about New Orleans where they might learn him some manners."[120] This type of exploitative power play may explain how Polonia was able to maintain two adult male siblings as her slaves for approximately 20 years. If they feared that their sister might sell them or their families to a traveling *negrero* (slave merchant), Polonia would have accomplished the slave owner's perennial goal of balancing the threat of retribution for disobedience with the goal of continued productivity. As at least one of her brothers had a wife and children, the cost of being separated from them due to insubordination to his sister-owner likely motivated him to continue what became a long tenure.

Although Polonia de Ribas hired out one of her brothers in a way that allowed him to live with his family, there is no suggestion that she owned his wife or children. However, she did the same for a slave who was no relation to her, Diego de Yrala. This decision implies that economic considerations or other practical reasons, rather than a familial connection, motivated Polonia's actions. Although some scholars do not allow for the possibility that "exploitative" slavery was possible among slave owners who possessed family, Polonia de Ribas' case indicates that for at least one woman of African descent in seventeenth-century Xalapa, there was no intrinsic conflict. It is challenging to

118. Calvin D. Wilson, "Negroes Who Owned Slaves," *Popular Science Monthly* 81 (November 1912): 486–487.

119. Wilson, "Negroes Who Owned Slaves," 488.

120. Wilson, "Negroes Who Owned Slaves," 485.

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determine if Polonia's familial connection to two of her slaves "meant" anything to her other than what she documented. She did "free" them from the Tenampa hacienda, but when Gerónimo was finally manumitted in 1679, he continued to labor on a sugar hacienda.

With no further qualitative evidence to describe the condition of her brothers' enslavement, the documents beg the question: did being a slave owner reconstitute familial considerations in a way that aligned Polonia de Ribas so closely to Spanish elites in Xalapa that not even her own family members "mattered" anymore? Even if she never physically abused Juan and Gerónimo de Yrala, they were nevertheless her slaves for more than two decades. If there were no abuses, did she merely keep them as slaves to secure her place among Xalapa's elites? Did slave owning serve as a social buffer for an upwardly mobile African-descended woman who was herself just one generation removed from slavery? The historiography of colonial Latin America, more broadly, establishes that a constellation of artifacts and artifices was mobilized by the upwardly mobile and more tenuously elite members of society to garner distinction. Herman Bennett asserts, "In Mexico City, [slaves] represented both labor and symbols of the status of their owners."[121] Of the colonial Peruvian context, James Lockhart wrotes, "No *encomendero* felt happy until he owned a large house, land, livestock, and—most to the point here—black servants. Most Spaniards could not hope to achieve this goal in its entirety, but they aimed at least for two essentials, a house (which could be rented) and blacks."[122]

Turning to Brazil, Júnia Ferreira Furtado has found that free African-descended women established much of their wealth through slave owning. Not only that, she argues, but their ownership of slaves also generated a type of "social affirmation."[123] Mariana L. R. Dantas agrees, adding, "Because owning slaves allowed [people of African descent] to avoid the types of labor usually associated with slavery, it marked more publicly their transition from property to property holder, improving the general perception of their quality."[124] Susan Socolow, from the context of Saint-Domingue, echoes their assessments, "To free people of color of Cap Français, as to whites, ownership of slaves was a mark of

121. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial* Mexico, 18.

122. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560*, 205.

123. Regarding transitioning strategies, Júnia Ferreira Furtado notes, "[T]heir only chance of diminishing the social exclusion and stigma of their origins was to avail of precisely the mechanisms the whites used for their survival and promotion. The first of these mechanisms was to purchase a slave, which enabled the owner to remove herself from the world of work. For the freedwomen who registered wills in Tejuco in the eighteenth century, slaves were not only their main source of wealth but also of social affirmation." Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 147.

124. Mariana L. R. Dantas, "Humble Slaves and Loyal Vassals," in *Imperial Subjects: Race and Identity in Colonial Latin America*, Andrew B. Fisher and Matthew O'Hara, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 126.

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prosperity and social distinction."[125] Again from the colonial Brazilian milieu, Kathleen Higgins reiterates the specific gendered concerns highlighted by Ferreira Furtado. Higgins writes, "The best proof to others that one was no longer a slave or enslaveable was surely to become a master."[126] Higgins and Ferreira Furtado's foregrounding of the particular vulnerability experienced by women of African descent sheds light on the possibility that Polonia and other women like her perhaps saw slave owning as one of many strategies to reorient society's perception of them.

We return to Polonia's story. Polonia, a mulata born in the agricultural periphery of central Veracruz to an enslaved African-born mother, perhaps desired status, but she may have actually needed the status as slave owner to safeguard against a certain degree of discrimination and even challenges to her own freedom—including the freedom to live and make choices as the matriarch of a free-born family. If Polonia felt that these freedoms were fragile, perhaps she kept her brothers as a way to claim legitimacy as a public and economic actor. If asserting and maintaining one's position as slave owner offered the possibility for greater social currency and economic stability, it is not surprising then that Polonia de Ribas, as a mulata and the single mother of five children, held fast to her status and refused to relinquish her slaves, even family members, until she lay sick on her deathbed.

The documents do not reveal definitively whether Polonia was a benevolent slave owner or one who had chosen slave owning as a strategy for engaging in the theater of respectability, or whether she saw beyond race and blood ties and primarily understood herself as a slave owner among many others who owned slaves in colonial Xalapa.[127] What the documents do allow us to know is that she was a single woman with a large family to support. Being marked as a mulata did not seem to inhibit her ability to provide for her children and see them to adulthood and eventually to marriage. Polonia existed in a circle of elites who owned slaves and made business transactions with others in the region. She served as the legal proxy for a wealthy member of Xalapa's elite. At the time of her will, at least two Spanish men owed her money. In many regards, she behaved as they did. There is no indication in the available documents that Polonia was ever raised with her siblings: she was a free woman, and they were slaves on a sugar mill until they were about 20 years old. Thus, she may have

125. Socolow, "Economic Roles of Free Women," 286–287.

126. Higgins, Licentious Liberty, 85.

127. In the Brazilian context, Mariana L. R. Dantas discusses the dual benefit of slave owning. She writes, "Because owning slaves allowed [people of African descent] to avoid the types of labor usually associated with slavery, it marked more publicly their transition from property to property holder, improving the general perception of their quality." Mariana L. R. Dantas, "Humble Slaves and Loyal Vassals," 126.

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never identified with them in a familial sense and could have treated them as she did her other slaves.

What can be gleaned from these highly mediated sources is Polonia's relationship to the notarial archive, her role in notarial truth making.[128] The notarial truth that is fashioned by or for Polonia is quite remarkable. According to her notarial history, Polonia de Ribas came from humble beginnings as the daughter of an enslaved African woman. She was a "*mulata libre y soltera*," an unwed free woman with five "natural" children.[129] Her position as a woman of means was aided by her ownership of slaves, including her enslaved siblings. In fact, Polonia appears to have owned slaves during most of her life. At some point, she also became a homeowner. The oxen she gifted her daughter through the generous dowry indicates the possibility that Polonia was involved in Xalapa's active pack-train business. And finally, as she lay on her deathbed, she offered a concluding act as an archetypal "benevolent" slave owner, freeing one of her brothers.

CONCLUSION

Polonia's notarial life was exceptional, whether personally constructed or influenced by the interests of the notarial offices. Much of her narrative follows the same narrative as other slave owners in Xalapa, a correspondence she likely leveraged to establish greater opportunities for herself and her family.[130] While this study focuses on the life of Polonia de Ribas and her family and social network, slave owning accorded free women of African descent in Xalapa, more generally, the opportunity to access a greater cross section of society. As they bought and sold slaves, they interacted with slave traders from the Veracruz Port, sugar mill owners in the agricultural peripheries of the jurisdiction, and elite and more modest slave owners in Xalapa. Some women were first-generation slave owners, while others benefited from multigenerational

128. For an excellent interrogation of "truth" and notarial practices, see Kathryn Burns, "Notaries, Truth, and Consequences," *American Historical Review* 110:2 (April 2015): 350–379.

129. Many children who were cited as "natural" or "illegitimate" had biological fathers (including Spaniards) who were active in their lives and who were willing to be acknowledged publicly in Xalapa's parish records. That is to say that illegitimacy did not necessarily mean that fathers were not involved in their children's lives or that they all wanted to remain anonymous. This is especially evident in my exhaustive review of the seventeenth-century confirmation and baptism records of Xalapa's main parish. Archivo Eclesiástico de la Parroquia del Sagrario Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón, Entierros, Casamientos, Bautizos, caja 1, libros 1 and 3; and caja 2, libro 4.

130. The royal notary public of Xalapa, Alonso de Neira Claver, signed all of Polonia's documents. However, Polonia may have interacted with any number of notarial assistants who often served as the first point of interaction in the drafting process, before the official notary public reviewed the documents for final approval and added his signature. For an in-depth discussion of notarial practices, see Kathryn Burns, *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010).

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involvement in the slave market. Owning slaves formed part of a broader repertoire of privileged activities in which free women engaged, including owning extensive properties, managing their businesses, and demonstrating elite sensibilities, such as offering dowries to their daughters.[131] Being a woman of African descent and being a slave owner in the seventeenth century were not mutually exclusive identities, and the silence from colonial authorities regarding free women who owned slaves suggests that this phenomenon posed little or no threat to accepted normative behavior. Xalapa was home to free women of African descent who had owned slaves since the turn of the seventeenth century. This long history, along with their limited numbers, created an environment in which free women enjoyed significant opportunities in trade, business, and property ownership that enriched their economic standing and social status.

We have not yet established the prevalence of African-descended female slave owners in New Spain. A barrier to such an assessment is that not everyone who held slaves was a lifelong slave owner, and therefore, last and will testaments obscure potentially rich histories.[132] Finally, although many people sought the protection of notarized exchanges of goods, property, and rights, no one was legally bound to document his or her status as a slave owner. As we saw with Polonia de Ribas and the more informal notes she kept regarding debts owed to her, people brokered deals outside of the notarial offices. But even if future research finds that free African-descended women accounted for only a miniscule percentage of slave owners in seventeenth-century New Spain, the exploration of their negotiations and social status during the colonial period enriches our understanding of quotidian choices and life chances, and offers new realms of possibilities and considerations about economic survival, family, status, and even notions of legacy.

Free women who owned slaves made sense of their own unlikely position of power in seventeenth-century Xalapa. They exercised the ability to be self-determining through slave ownership in ways that most subjects could not because of their lack of economic resources and exclusion from certain professions and trades. They also experienced as slave owners the power to determine the life chances of other people. The case of the central protagonist, Polonia de Ribas, brings this to the fore. As a woman of African descent who had neither husband nor legitimate family ties to claim, Polonia may have found social legitimacy through slave owning.

131. For further discussion on well-connected free women who owned businesses, land, and slaves in seventeenth-century Xalapa, see Danielle Terrazas Williams, "Capitalizing Subjects."

132. Xalapa's notarial archive documents cases in which people owned slaves for as little as a few weeks.

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The activities she conducted in the notarial offices highlight questions of status perceived to be the domain of the Spanish elite, such as documenting her concerns and intentions in regard to finances, family, and her own reputation. More than just a financial consideration, slave owning allowed free African-descendants, by virtue of their participation in the institution to position themselves as loyal subjects of the crown, an opportunity that might explain why Polonia de Ribas engaged in slave owning practices rarely documented in colonial Spanish America. While her conscience was "free and clear," her notarial life challenges us to reconsider familial slave ownership and other strategies of social acceptance and economic survival employed by free African-descended women in the mid-colonial period.

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