CHAPTER ONE

"SE LLAMAN GENTE DE RAZÓN"

Afro-Descendants in Early Spanish California, 1769–1821

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SCHOLARS READILY accept that Afro-descendants populated early Spanish California. Though little work has been done on the topic, often cited is the census of 1790, which includes California's four presidios, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco, along with its two struggling towns, San Jose and Los Angeles, that identify roughly 19 percent of their populations as being of African descent.[1] The extent of the impact of Afro-descendants in early California, however, has been little understood and little examined. This is because many Spanish Californians of African descent hid their origins in church and state records, often just referring to themselves as "gente de razón" or people of reason. This ethnic designation was prevalent among frontier areas in Northern Mexico (now the Southwest of the United States) and generally meant people who lived in or near the missions that spoke Spanish, were Catholics, but not subject to the missionaries.

Furthermore, resistance to understanding the racial makeup of early Californian settlers has come from local traditional narratives in the nineteenth, twentieth, and even into the twenty-first centuries that perpetuate popular racist notions. Local histories tend to portray populations of color in a negative light without any evidence for their allegations except their race, for example, calling the forty-four inhabitants of Los Angeles, who were mostly of color, "half-criminals," or the "off-scourings of colonial Mexico." People's own internalized racism also tends to cause an obsession with the few actual Spaniards living in early California. Some go as far as searching archives for spurious claims of nobility when in reality only the highest, nonpermanent government officials held such titles. The more public manifestation of these Eurocentric historical revisions remains in things like Santa Barbara's "Old Spanish Days," where Spanish tradition and history are emphasized rather than the Mexican (or even African) traditions of its settlers.[2]

This chapter will look both at the number of Afro-descendants and the challenges they faced as soldiers and colonists in California. It will argue that the known estimates of Afro-descendants in California are low at best, given the incentive that hiding one's identity brought. Just as in the case of María Faustina Trejo (chapter 4) and Africans in Rio de la Plata region (chapter 10), Afro-descendants in California used the ambiguities created by their distance from colonial centers of power and Spain's desire for Catholic, Spanish-speaking settlers as a vehicle for social advancement. This, of course, did not come without its challenges as the racial hierarchy ran deep within Spanish colonial society. In the case of Afro-descendants, however, at least some did overcome such structural racism to form part of the early California elite and had an important impact on the development of the mission and rancho systems.

Identifying the African Presence in California

The presence of Afro-descendants in California is unsurprising given the larger trends in race demographics in Spanish America. Africans had been present in Mexico since Cortez in 1519. In the early eighteenth century, however, the number of Africans arriving in Mexico exploded, due principally to the British receiving the *asiento* (or monopoly) over the slave trade to Spanish America. As compared to British and French colonies, a larger percentage of these Africans were manumitted. These higher rates of manumission were due to Spain's long legal tradition with slavery, which unlike their northern European counterparts had been continuously practiced in the Iberian Peninsula through the medieval period. The Spanish medieval law code, *Las Siete Partidas*, established the principal that all slaves had a right to manumission if they could pay their enslavers the cost of buying another enslaved person of a similar age and sex to replace them. Courts regulated this process forcing enslavers to accept fair market value no matter if the enslaved person possessed specialized skills valuable to their enslavers. Such high rates of manumission led to growing and economically viable communities of free Blacks and people of mixed African ancestry throughout Latin America. Enforcement of the laws regarding manumission were, of course, inconsistent, prone to corruption, and more carefully adhered to in urban areas where civil and ecclesiastic authorities had more sway over enslavers. Furthermore, while legally free, these Afro-descendants were still subject to both the legal restrictions and limitations imposed by the socioracial hierarchy of Hispanic society. Many moved to frontier regions where social distinctions were more blurred, and people of color could hope to achieve a higher socioeconomic status. Indeed, it was probably for this reason that many Afro-descendants in frontier areas, such as California, chose to conceal their racial heritage. They hoped that the Crown's desire for Hispanicized settlers could overcome their perceived inferior origin that elsewhere barred them from passing in the higher echelons of society.[3]

Identifying Afro-descendants in the colonial Spanish context, even in the colonial center, can be difficult. The language used to describe different racial groups reflected in many ways the complicated relationship colonial Spanish society had with race. While this is not to say that a racial hierarchy did not exist, racial categories could be more fluid, reflecting the chaotic formation of colonial Latin America itself. As three racial groups came together, European, Native, and African, identifying one's race became almost impossible. By the late eighteen century, Spanish intellectuals had drawn up complicated lists of how certain racial categories were created, such as specifying that the union of a Mestizo and a Spaniard begat a *castizo* (someone who is one quarter indigenous and three-fourths Spaniard). While such terms were used in colonial documents, such a care to determine the exact racial makeup were rarely taken. Race, as a social construct, was determined by appearance both physical and social. Race, therefore, could change depending on the perception of one's social standing. For example, even a person's style of dress or clear Spanish diction could allow them to pass as a supposedly superior racial category, or *casta*.[4]

In referring to people of African descent, several words were commonly used. While English generally uses *Black* to describe someone of mostly or completely African descent and *mulatto* to describe any one of mixed African ancestry, colonial Spanish used several words. Documents used *Negro* to describe Blacks and *Mulato* to describe mulattos, but also used interchangeably *Moreno* and *Pardo*, respectfully, to mean the same thing. Afro-descendants seemed to have preferred the latter terms rather than the former in referring to themselves and they seem to have had a more positive connotation particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though less common, however, terms like *color quebrado* (broken color) and *morizco* (Moor) were used to describe people of African descent. In California, no fewer than eleven designations are used to describe race in the historical record. To further complicate the matter, at least in California's colonial documents, there is no category for a person of mixed mestizo and mulatto heritage. Generally, they are just called mestizos, further downplaying the African influence in early California.[5]

In California's historical documents, not surprisingly, the description of people's race changed over time. The reasons for this could be multiple: from the social standing of an individual affecting how their race was perceived by the community to simply the judgement of the census taker on the color of their skin. William Marvin Mason in his study of the 1790 California census has identified dozens of examples of people's race changing over time. José María Pico, for example, is listed in 1790 as being a Spaniard, even though his four brothers and mother, María Jacinta de la Bastida, are listed as being mulattos. Pico was from a large family who later gained prominence in California and generally the family is acknowledged to be of African descent. Máximo Alanís had no less than four racial designations over his lifetime including mulatto, Indian, mestizo, and Spaniard. By the end of the colonial period, many of the colonists just began to use the title *gente de razón*,

especially among the soldiers who by 1790 made up 73 percent of the non-indigenous adult male population.[6] Therefore, looking at census and church records gives an incomplete picture of the racial and ethnic makeup of early California.

Afro-descendants and the Military

The fact that many of the soldiers that came to California were of African descent also is in line with changes in the Spanish Colonial military during the late eighteenth century. Free people of color in Latin America had a long history of serving in colonial militias. While such service offered little or no pay, it did bestow social prestige, which many Afro-descendants desired. Furthermore, military legal exemptions, or *fueros*, not only gave Afro-descendants special legal protections but also allowed them to avoid many of the taxes typically imposed on nonwhite populations. Soldiers of color served in segregated militias, which, while giving them prestige in their own communities, did in more settled areas prevent them from being accepted into the highest socioeconomic circles that were generally reserved for people of principally European descent (or those who could pass as such).[7] Service in the regular army, however, was prohibited, as it was for all American-born Spanish subjects, for fear that it would create a force that could rebel against the Crown. This prohibition was lifted in 1763, after a humiliating defeat at the hands of the British a year before as part of the Seven Years' War, which resulted in the temporary loss of Havana. Crown authorities began to recruit American-born subjects into the army. Ideally, they sought Creoles or Pennisulars, but given the long tradition of militia service among Afro-descendants, and Spain's desperation, many soldiers of color filled the regular army ranks.[8]

The military presence in California was part of a push to take influence out of the hands of the missionaries while emphasizing cultural assimilation of indigenous populations. By the mid-eighteenth century, many in the Spanish government believed that while attempting to make converts dependent on the missions, frontier missionaries had failed to make them good Spanish subjects, occupied in "useful" European-style trades and taxable commerce. Starting in 1749 in the frontier region of Nuevo Santander, colonial officials enacted what they called the "New Method of Evangelization," a colonization effort led by the military rather than the Church. Soldiers were to escort settlers to frontier areas where they were to mix with the native population and thereby convert and acculturate them to Spanish Catholicism.

In California the New Method met with fierce resistance from the missionaries who had a free hand in administering the missions. In 1772, the viceroy tried to limit the missionaries' activities to just preaching and saying mass, to which Friar Francisco Palóu responded, "If it must be that way, better that we retire to the College." Knowing that the colony would not survive without the friars' support, the Crown acquiesced and allowed the missions to continue to be administered by the friars. The problem was attracting colonists to far off California. With the exception of the

Juan Batista de Anza and the Fernando Rivera y Moncada expeditions (1775–1777), very few Hispanicized peoples wanted to come. As a result, the nonnative population never exceeded two thousand during the entire Spanish period with most of that coming from the natural increase of these early colonists. Most of those who did not already come as soldiers incorporated into the presidial force anyway as their few numbers necessitated a strong military presence to repel rebellion and gave those who joined social prestige in the new colony. Most of the labor for agricultural production and building came from the indigenous population attached to the missions, making the nonnative population beholden to the native, and by extension the influence of the friars. Of course, it was a symbiotic relationship since the missionaries had to depend on the soldiers for protection against rebellions, of which there were several.[9]

Of the military companies that entered California during the initial expansion, only one was an all-European unit, the Catalan Volunteers. They, however, numbered only twenty-five, and twelve of them died even before they reached San Diego. Furthermore, only five stayed after the initial Portolá expedition that was the first to colonize California (1768–1770). Ninety-five Catalans did then return in 1796, sent there out of fear of a British invasion, but their presence was temporary and most were withdrawn by 1804–1805. Due to the deployment of the companies, the Catalans were mainly concentrated in the northern regions of Alta California around the presidio of San Francisco.[10]

The other companies mentioned in the historical record, the Company of Loreto and Company of Cuera (the leatherjacket company), as well as the colonists of the Anza and Rivera expeditions, were drawn from frontier areas, such as Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California, which all had sizable Afro-descendant populations. Records from third-party observers suggest that indeed while most of the commissioned officers in these units were Creoles, noncommissioned officers, and private soldiers who were mostly mulattos and mestizos. Soldiers were distributed throughout the mission system with a squad of six in each mission under the command of a corporal. Larger numbers of troops were of course stationed at the five California presidios at San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterrey, San Francisco, and later Sonoma. Many of these soldiers and settlers also brought their families, suggesting they had always considered service in California to be permanent.[11] For example, after the Portolá expedition fifty of the men in these companies decided to stay (as opposed to just five Catalans).[12] As many of these soldiers in early California sought to hide their race, uncovering it from census records has proved difficult, but other records remain that help to show the extent of the African influence in California.

The Cádiz Questionnaire

One of the most revealing sources of the racial make of the *gente de razón* in California was a result of conflicts on the other side of the globe. After the Napoleonic invasion

of the Iberian Peninsula in 1808, many of Spain's most liberal-minded politicians gathered in one of the few remaining Spanish strongholds, Cádiz. In 1812, this rump of Spain's political elite, under the watchful eye of the British, promulgated probably one of the most liberal constitutions of the nineteenth century. The Spanish Constitution of 1812 created a limited monarchy, which shared power with a unicameral legislative body, the Cortes. What is remarkable about this document was that it extended nearly universal male suffrage to all of Spain's possessions. The one exception was those of African or mixed African origins. The constitution did not, for example, abolish slavery, and enslaved individuals were, of course, barred from voting. Furthermore, voting rights for people of African descent were, according to the Constitution, only given to those who had proven themselves in military service.[13] Keeping the need to understand these demographics in mind, Dr. Ciniaro Gonzales Carvajal, internal overseas secretary for the Cadiz government, issued a questionnaire in October 1812 aimed at inventorying the cultural and ethnic makeup of the California missions. While most of the questions regarded specifically the native inhabitants, who had been given voting rights, much to the terror of the Creoles, the first two questions sought to understand the nonnative population: "1. Express how many castes the people are divided into, that is American, Europeans, Indians, Mestizos, Blacks, etc. without omission." The second question then focused on the Black populations: "2. What is the origin of these castes with exception of the first two (American, which probably assumes creoles, and Europeans)." "This [you] will relate," the question continued, "with respects to (the fact that) Blacks are not of the same origin everywhere, while in general it is Africans that have come to America, in the Philippines there are [Blacks] that are natural to that land, hiding in the jungle since the Malaysians dominated that island" (which is referring to the so-called Moros of the Southern Philippines). The questionnaire was first sent to the Bishop of Sonora, who remitted it to the Franciscan College of San Fernando, which administered the California missions. Finally, in late 1813, just a few months before the restoration of the Spanish monarchy and consequently the fall of the Cádiz government, it was distributed to the California missions for the friars stationed there to respond.[14]

As alluded to earlier, most of the priests identified the inhabitants that were not themselves or the indigenous Californians as *gente de razón*, using the phrase precisely in fourteen of the nineteen responses. Most of these were the soldiers stationed at the missions and their families. Several friars struggled to define what they meant by *gente de razón*. Friar Juan Amerés of Monterrey stated, "[They] call themselves *gente de Razón* without distinction of class or caste; and with passable Spanish, they think of themselves as the heroes of these new lands; so thus I will be excused from making a distinction between caste or class of these people, because they do not understand themselves that way, just as *gente de razón*."[15] As Friar Amerés' quote suggested the *gente de razón* did not want to be given racial labels, probably because they fell short of elite categories. They did want to be known for their participation in the annexation of California into the

sphere of Spanish influence, essentially as conquistadors. Such service could earn them rewards from Crown officials, many of whom were in far off Mexico City, therefore making racial anonymity important for their strategy of social advancement.

Fortunately for modern historians, though perhaps not for the *gente de razón*, some missionaries were more explicit about their racial makeup. Whether the missionaries' openness on this matter was simply an insensitivity to the desire of these people to hide their racial heritage, or a conscious attempt to reinforce racial hierarchy is unclear. The best example were the missionaries of San Luis Obispo who stated: "Of the Gente de Razon there are six men and their families of which five are Mulattos or Mestizos, [or in other words] the offspring of Mulattos and Indians, [and] one is European . . . the offspring of a European and Neophyte woman from Monterrey."[16] Of the nineteen responses to this questionnaire, twelve made reference to people that were neither white Creoles or Peninsulars or Native Californians and six specified that some of these people were of African origin. Treating these responses as a census and simply counting the number of people identified in each category, however, gives a false impression of what was really happening demographically.[17]

Indeed, in many ways the manner in which the missionaries failed to respond to these very specific questions can be just as revealing as those who were more forthright. Some missionaries, for example, simply dodged the questions. The missionaries of San Luis Rey simply said in response to the origin of the soldiers garrisoned there that they were from the Presidio of San Diego.[18] The friars at Santa Cruz waxed more philosophic, stating, "To tell the truth, [we] ministers ignore the diversity of bloods and mixing that there is in the Indies; because until now our attention since we came from Spain has only been the caring of Souls."[19] The mission priest at San Jose gave just as cryptic of an answer but perhaps a more revealing one: "[The soldiers] repute themselves to be all Spaniards, although perhaps there is the same diversity among them as there are in other parts of America."[20] The friar at Santa Barbara, possibly explaining the reluctance of the missionaries to publicly state the race of the soldiers, admitted that while most likely not all of them were Peninsular or Creole Spaniards, "it would seem to give them great offense to suggest that they were not and thus we cannot respond any other way."[21] Certainly one can understand the reluctance of this missionary to out the racial identity in a way that may be prejudicial to the socioeconomic advancement of the only men in the mission with guns.

José and Juan José

The probability that many of the private soldiers were of African descent sheds light on events that occurred in Santa Cruz in 1824. One evening in late August, Juan José, a native living in the mission , was at home with his wife when a "*negro*," or Black man, named José seemingly burst into his home. José's status of servitude is unclear,

given that he was identified as a "*negro*," as opposed to a *moreno*, suggests that he might currently or had at one time been enslaved. He was accompanied by sixteen-year-old Francisco Rochin, the son of a soldier stationed at the mission, Miguel Rochin. Both father and son are listed in church records as gente de razón. After entering the abode, "*el negro*" José then demanded that Juan José give them meat. When he refused, José called the indigenous man a "whore's wart" and then emitted flatus at him in an insulting manner (he farted in his general direction). Such rudeness so enraged Juan José that he threw a stick at "el negro" José who retreated outside. Juan José then pursued José, but by the time he got outside, José had grabbed the stick just thrown at him and beat Juan José "until his head split open." The indigenous man, Juan José, later claimed that he had not previously known his assailant.[22] The corporal commanding the mission detail put José in a cell and almost immediately had him punished, most likely publicly flogged, without first getting authorization, because he feared that if the natives in the mission saw that "no one does anything for them, and they being vengeful, it will come upon all of us."[23]

While certainly the corporal would want to dissuade indigenous rebellion and punish anybody associated with the mission for such a crime, the urgency with which he punished José suggests deeper concerns. Colonial officials could and were often punished themselves for overstepping their authority in matters of justice even in frontier areas. The corporal, therefore, was taking some risk in his expediency. Perhaps the fact that the "*negro*" José looked like many of the soldiers under his command made it essential that he act quickly. Further evidence of the association between José, and the Corporal's men lies in the fact that the assailant was accompanied by Francisco Rochin, a *gente de razón*, and the son of one of his soldiers. Even in the socially ambiguous setting of frontier California, a peninsular or even Creole so freely associating with a Black man, especially during such a nefarious act, would have been in itself scandalous. The fact that no comment was made about this suggests that the corporal understood that the socioracial standing, and perhaps the appearance, of the two men was not so different. The indigenous people of the village, therefore, would make little distinction between the *gente de razón* and this Black man.

The Limits of Racial Ambiguities

While racial ambiguities in some parts of California allowed for at least some form of informal racial passing, race and one's status in society did matter. Take the story of an enslaved twelve-year-old African boy named Máximo in the Presidio of San Francisco. The fort was garrisoned by the only all Spanish company in California, the Catalan volunteers. San Francisco had just been reinforced in 1796 by ninety-five new troops. Spanish officials feared a British invasion after the Spanish switched sides in the French Revolutionary War enveloping all of Europe. Spain's flipflop occurred as a result of their humiliating defeat in the War of the Pyrenees a year before. Included

in that reinforcement was a new commandant of the presidio, Lieutenant Colonel Pedro Alberni. In June 1798, Alberni claimed that he noticed the chest that held the garrison's funds was open. Swearing that he had last seen it locked, he counted the money to find seventy-seven pesos missing. He immediately focused his inquiry on his personal servant, an enslaved "11 or 12-year-old" boy named Máximo. The boy admitted that he had seen one of the soldiers of the garrison, Faustino Hoseguera, taking coins from the box during prayers a few evenings earlier. Alberni commanded that Sargent Joaquin Tico arrest Hosequera and search his house where he found six pesos in the thatch of his roof above his bed. Having been the victim of the crime, Alberni ordered his second-in-command, Captain Josef Aguellos to judge the case. During the testimonies, Máximo, held to his story that he had seen Hosequera enter the room where the chest was held and, seeing that it was open, grabbed two large handfuls of pesos. While other witnesses could collaborate that they saw Máximo and Hosequera together, they could not substantiate the boy's claim. When Hosequera was finally interrogated, he claimed that Máximo had actually come to him with thirty pesos and gave them to him. He claimed that he did not know they were from the garrison's chest but still spent most of the money.[24]

Given this clear contradiction in the story, Aguellos questioned Máximo again. During the interrogation, however, Aguellos had his enslaver, Alberni, removed because he felt the boy was being timid in his responses. Nonetheless, Máximo stuck to his story, saying that Hosequera had taken the pesos. When asked whether Máximo had a good relationship with his enslaver, he responded that he did. Captain Aguellos ultimately seemed to side with Hosequera, placing the majority of the blame on Máximo. Since the boy was so young, the captain felt that capital punishment was too extreme and sentenced the twelve-year-old to eight years' service on a Spanish warship, mercifully "with rations," but of course without pay. Hosequera did not escape all punishment either since he had taken and spent the money. He was also sentenced to five years' service on a warship. Despite the contradiction, Aguellos felt that his conclusions were just and considered the case settled in his report to the governor of California who was required to ratify the sentences.[25]

One of the company sergeants, Josef Roca, however, sent along a differing account. Roca pointed out that there was no other evidence that Hosequera had stolen the money other than Máximo's story. He also questioned whether such a young boy would have had the wherewithal to steal the money himself. Furthermore only fourteen of the supposed seventy-seven pesos had been recovered from Hosequera (counting both money in his possession and the cost of the goods he had just bought) and nothing had been recovered from Máximo. Roca's alternative explanation was that the new comandante himself, Lieutenant Colonel Alberni, had stolen the money and forced the enslaved boy to take the blame, knowing that his age would mitigate any punishment. Such corruption was typical of Spanish officials, particularly far away from the prying eyes of high-ranking colonial officials such as in California, but

perhaps Alberni feared that such an accusation would ruin his chances for advancement and ordered Máximo to take the fall. This story seems more plausible given the contradicting testimonies and Máximo's apparent timid behavior while Alberni was present during his interrogation. Máximo would have been an easy patsy, since the word of an enslaved Black boy would have carried little weight against his European officer enslaver. Though the final resolution of the case is unclear, Alberni wanted to expedite the ratification of the sentence since a ship waited in the bay that would allow Hosequera and Máximo to immediately start their sentences.[26]

As the story of Máximo demonstrates, race, and to a certain extent status, did matter in Alta California. The more powerful Alberni was able to blame his own crimes on his enslaved servant. While imperial needs allowed Afro-descendant soldiers and settlers that came to California opportunities for social mobility, a young, enslaved boy like Máximo had no such chance. The social and racial hierarchies were still deeply entrenched in the Spanish imperial system. Even a Spaniard like Hosequera was swept up in the affair and potentially served time. Hosequera was only a foot soldier and, judging by the fact that he could only sign his name with a crude cross, was most likely illiterate, and his arrest and prosecution on seemingly false charges caused little scandal.

Even Afro-descendant soldiers who achieved a measure of prominence had limitations in their ability to climb the social hierarchy during the Spanish period. A survey of the 1814 service reviews of the cavalry officers serving in Alta California bears out these disparities. Most of the commissioned officers list their *quality*, a term sometimes used as an approximation of race that incorporated someone's perceived social standing, as either being "Spanish" or "*noble*." The term *noble* here is seemingly used to describe someone of Spanish or European descent rather than connotate a rank of nobility given that no other evidence for such status is given. Many of the noncommissioned officers, mainly sergeants, have their "quality" listed as "honored," including a well-known soldier of African descent, José María Pico. Though it is not a perfect stand-in for race, it does have a connotation that this person had earned his position rather than being born to it. In colonial Latin America two terms were used to describe the English word *honor*. The first was *honor*, which was a quality that was passed through birth rather than earned. A person with honor generally was of legitimate birth and of European descent. *Honra*, however, was used to describe the type of honor that is earned by one's actions. In the service reviews, the word used to describe these sergeants' "quality" is *honrrado*, the past participle of *honra*.[27] These were men that had earned their positions and despite their racial background not being of pure European descent, they were granted rank due to their service. There, however, seemed to be a limit to the honrrados rise in the ranks, with only two of them being listed as a lieutenant (a commissioned officer), while the rest were sergeants (noncommissioned officers). Also, those officers listed as honrrados were much older than their "Spanish" or "noble" counterparts. The ages of the honrrado

commissioned officers was forty-nine and sixty, while most of the other lieutenants were in their thirties. Furthermore these honrrado officers had to rise through the ranks starting as a private soldier and work their way up to become an officer, while the noble officers started their careers as cadets. There were some nobles that did work their way up, including the inspector himself, Captain José Aguellos. However, it seems clear that nepotism was at play in receiving advancement since many of the youngest cadets shared the same last name as Aguellos.[28]

The Afro-descendent Population and the Native Californians: Godparents, Marriages, and Rebellions

While tracking the influence Afro-descendants had on the native populations is difficult at best, not just because Afro-descendants tended to not want to be identified but also because neither group left many records, there are windows into this relation if one looks at the ethnicity of gente de razón. Again, this is not a perfect stand-in for Afro-descendants, but probably most in this category were at least people of color (or those who could not pass as being of primarily European descent). Probably the three best ways to demonstrate this relationship is by looking at god-parentage of indigenous baptisms, marriages between gente de razón and natives, and the gente de razón's suppression of native rebellions.

Throughout the Hispanic world, ties of *padrinazgo* (or godparentage) were essential relationships that bound communities together. Godparents are assigned to all Catholic converts at the time of their baptism, whether adults or children. Godparents share the responsibility for both the temporal and spiritual wellbeing of their godchildren and, in the case of legal minors, take responsibility for the children in case of the parents' untimely deaths. This was not to say that a godchild was equal to one of the godparents' own biological children, the status of the godchild within society would be taken into consideration. In many cases, parents sought to tie their children (or in the case of their own baptism themselves) to a more powerful figure who could watch out for their interest or at the very least prevent them from starving to death by giving them employment. Godparents and their godchildren were therefore not matched haphazardly and taking on such a responsibility usually assumed a preexisting relationship. In the Early California Population Project (ECPP) database, which is a survey of most of the known sacramental records in California from 1768 to 1848, the godparents' ethnicity is listed 1,314 times, of which 827 are categorized as gente de razón. This represents 62 percent of the total godparents where ethnicity is listed. Only 56 Spaniards or Europeans are listed as godparents where the rest were listed as *Indios* (most likely native Californians). While ethnicity is only listed in a faction of the 101,000 baptisms in the database, if these ratios are a good sample, then they demonstrate the gente de razón's important contribution to the colony. The numbers get even more substantial when you look at the numbers of soldiers

and noncommissioned officers, the group that most consistently identified as gente de razón. These servicemen served as godparents for 5,235 of the 6,016 baptisms where military status is listed. This is proportional to the number of soldiers and noncommissioned officers to that of commissioned officers, if not favoring commissioned officers given that there were so few in comparison to the former group, but still demonstrates the importance of this group serving as godparents.[29]

Another way in which the gente de razón population could have influenced native Californians is through marriage. Again, though the ethnicity of gente de razón is not a perfect stand-in for race, given the evidence previously stated, it can be assumed that at least a few were Afro-descendants. There was a long-standing tradition of Africans and Afro-descendants marrying native women. In his work on Africans in the Yucatán, an area not well-known for its African or Afro-descendant population, Mathew Restall demonstrates that marriages between Africans and native Mayan women were not only frequent but outnumbered those of African or Afro-descendant men choosing women of African descent. This may of course be due to the sex-ratios among enslaved Africans brought over from Africa that tended to favor men two to one, but it certainly shows a pattern to watch. In the frontier this pattern was probably even more pronounced as few women of African or even European ancestry were available for coupling.[30]

This does not seem to have been the case in California, but probably more for the reason that the missionaries resented the Spanish military presence, of which most gente de razón belonged, rather than any sort of racist logic. Further impeding such marriages were changes in the late-eighteenth-century environment of the Spanish empire that at least tried to crack down on the wide-spread practice of miscegenation. The 1776 Royal Pragmatic on Marriage forced couples to get their parents' permission to wed if they were considered minors (age twenty-five for men and twenty-three for women). Parents could reject these marriages if they, and by extension the courts, judged the marriage to be an unequal match, which was often cited in cases when one member of the couple was of an "inferior" race, among other "undesirable" traits.[31] This was further reinforced by royal orders in 1803 and 1812, though the reissuing of the Pragmatic does suggest that it was not necessarily being followed. By the early nineteenth century in California, the enforcement of "unequal" marriage fell to an ecclesiastical tribunal popularly known as the *Diligencias Matrimoniales*. Probably for this reason, it seems very few marriages were recorded between gente de razón and natives (27 out of approximately 28,000 in the ECPP). No marriages, however, between a person of Spanish and mestizo descent and a native Californian are listed at all. In fact, the only other native/nonnative marriage in the ECPP is between a mulatto man and an indigenous woman. This is not to say that they did not occur, but that there was perhaps an incentive to hide them. In the early years (1768–1800), marriages between gente de razón appear to be more frequent, with the vast majority of these 27 occurring within this range. This is

logical given that at least some of the private soldiers that came to California were young, unwed males. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that relationships with native women were quite desirable.

One of the most compelling examples of the desirability of native brides (or at least sexual partners) is found in the 1779 murder case of Corporal Alexo Antonio Duarte. Corporal Duarte was married to Gertrudis María, a native of "la cañada de Robles" (most likely modern-day Paso Robles, California). She was baptized at Mission San Antonio de Padua. Given her origin she was most likely from the Salinan Tribe, though it is not stated in the records.[32] Alexo Antonio Duarte is listed as a "Razón" in only one of the records in which he appears, though the record extractor noted that it seems that "Razón" was written sometime after the initial record. By 1779 they had at least two living daughters, though they had lost another shortly after her birth in 1778.[33]

On September 3, 1779, Corporal Duarte entered the courtyard of the barracks of the Presidio of Monterrey and, according to several witnesses, approached from behind a soldier named Antonio Espinosa, a native of Sinaloa and a gente de razón. After yelling "there's the dog," Duarte stabbed Espinosa in the back on the right side, sliding his knife two inches beneath the ribs, possibly penetrating Espinoza's liver and/or kidneys. According to Espinoza, at this he turned and ran from Duarte, who was now wielding his sword. Duarte, however, eventually cornered Espinosa, and in the struggle that ensued, Espinosa, though mortally wounded, was able to pry the sword out of Duarte's hands and stab him on his left side through the ribs, lacerating both Duarte's heart and lungs. Though his death record would later state that Duarte "died a violent death but gave signs of repentance" according to the presidio surgeon, he most likely was killed instantly by the wound. As the commandant questioned Espinosa on his deathbed whether there was a motive behind the initial attack, Espinosa at first said recently there had not been a problem between them, but finally admitted that three or four months previous he had had an argument with Duarte regarding his wife, Geturdis María. Though he does not state the nature of the conflict, Duarte had ordered Espinosa to have no contact with his wife, which Espinoza claimed to have observed. Such a defense was unnecessary, however, since Espinoza joined Duarte in death, succumbing to his wounds at four in the morning the next day. Gertrudis María, of course, was not consulted on the matter, though perhaps the shock of her husband's death affected her in other ways. She gave birth to two twin girls four months later, both of whom died shortly after their births. Mother would follow her daughters four years later, dying at Mission San Antonio in 1784.[34]

While the case of Duarte and Espinoza may seem on the surface as a petty conflict between soldiers that turned fatal, it demonstrates the ways in which native women were important sexual and marriage partners. The soldiers had little choice in the matter. There were few nonnative women in California particularly in those

early years. If these men wanted to start a family, native Californian women were in most cases their only option. The case, however, also shows how jealously Duarte guarded this relationship. He was willing to kill (and ultimately be killed) to protect the exclusivity of his relationship with his wife. Though historical records may never give a complete insight into their relationship, at the very least it is clear that Duarte valued it, or at least the honor he would lose at not protecting it. What affect these relationships ultimately had on the native population is still relatively unclear, but given the intimacy they created, it must have been significant.

Finally, probably one of the most common ways gente de razón interacted with the native population is through suppressing rebellions and otherwise maintaining order in the missions. Since most of these individuals were soldiers their mandate was to maintain order in the colony. Though it challenges the romantic (or perhaps not so romantic) image of relationships such as Alexo Duerte and Gertrudis María's as described above, the hard truth is that many of these soldiers, even those of color, were there to subdue the native population.

One of the most famous examples of an Afro-descendant soldier aiding the suppression of a native revolt is that of José María Pico's role in Toypurina's Revolt. Fed up by the harsh work requirements put upon them, the Tongva of Mission San Gabriel plotted an uprising against the friars. Led by a runaway convert named Nicolas José, the rebels claimed that a woman named Toypurina had magical power sufficient to lull the mission guards to sleep, so that the Tongva could slaughter soldier and friar alike. Pico, who seemingly understood the Tongva language, overheard their plans and informed the garrison who suppressed the rebellion by arresting its leaders.[35] The story of the revolt underlines both the connection Afro-descendent soldiers had with the native population and their defense of the empire. Pico had had enough contact with the Tongva to have learned their language, but ultimately decided to inform his superiors in the Spanish army rather than aid the revolt. While Afro-descendants used their service in California as a vehicle of social prestige, it was still within the context of an oppressive empire.

Social Climbing

Despite the preexisting socioracial hierarchy, many Afro-descendants, particularly soldiers, were able to rise to great prominence in the chaotic transition from Spanish to Mexican control. They were able to get large land grants in the process of secularizing the California missions after Mexico declared independence (1821). These land grants formed the now famous ranchos that came to dominate the economic life of California up until the transfer of power to the United States after 1848. Prominent Afro-descendants include Manuel Nieto, a soldier from the Portola expedition. He later acquired 158,000 acres in Southern California, which included the area encompassing the modern cities of Long Beach, Huntington Beach, Norwalk,

and Downey. At his death in 1804, he was the wealthiest man in California. Tiburcio Tapia, a soldier stationed at Santa Barbara who later commanded the military detail at Lompoc, acquired Rancho Cucamonga, became a judge, served in the California provincial legislature, and was three-time mayor of Los Angeles.[36]

One of the most prominent Afro-descendant families in early California was the Pico family. The patriarch of the family, Santiago Pico, was a mestizo soldier who accompanied the Juan Bautista de Anza expedition in 1775. Pico's wife, however, was a mulatta. Their five sons, including José María Pico, rose to great prominence in and around Los Angeles. José María's son, Pío Pico became one of the most important players in Mexican- and later US- controlled California. In 1831, Pío led a rebellion against the Mexico City appointed governor of California, Manual Victoria. After defeating the governor, he was briefly elected territorial governor in 1832. Though his tenure was short, Pico oversaw the transition of mission lands to prominent families of California, including many of African descent. When the Mexican American War broke out (1845–1848), he was again governor and favored an independent California but later became involved in Republican politics during the 1850s and 1860s. Pío Pico continued to push for the rights of the Californios until his death at ninety-three years old in 1894.[37]

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Afro-descendants played an important role in the establishment of California as a colony during the Spanish period. They were the settlers and soldiers that helped to extend Spanish hegemony into this new territory. They also used the ambiguities of the frontier to socially advance in ways that they could not in the colonial center. While it is still unclear what exact impact the fact that they were African had on their influence in California, their presence was significant, as many rose to prominence throughout the Spanish and Mexican periods.

The presence of Afro-descendants in California also challenges two narratives within the larger discussion of westward expansion and the California missions. The first is a white nationalist, Eurocentric narrative of the development of the American West that sees the establishment of "civilization" by white settlers of European descent over the native peoples. While this narrative is problematic for many reasons, it assumes that settlers were indeed white and of European descent. This chapter joins a growing body of scholarship that demonstrates that settlers in the American West were from multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic backgrounds.

Perhaps on the other end of the spectrum, the presence of Afro-descendants pushes back against another popular and scholarly narrative of the California missions. Many have portrayed the missions as one-dimensional spaces that only existed for Europeans to enforce their racial, ethnic, and cultural superiority on the native population. While the presence of Afro-descendants does not refute or

diminish the suffering that native Californians experienced, it does complicate the mission space as a multiethnic, multiracial space where groups and individuals vied to survive and even thrive under the socioracial hegemony of the Spanish imperial system. By moving away from such facile arguments, scholars, and hopefully the public at large, can begin to understand the actual factors, political, social, and ecological, that led to the native demographic collapse. The story of the California missions was certainly one of imperialism but also of unintended consequences as different groups vied to raise their respective social standings in a frontier colonial society.

Notes

1. Goode, *California's Black Pioneers*, 11.

2. Mason, *The Census of 1790*, 45–47.

3. *Ibid.*, 10.

4. For an excellent discussion of these ambiguities see Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje*, 1–17.

5. Mason, *The Census of 1790*, 47–73.

6. *Ibid.*, 73.

7. Vinson III, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*, 7–45.

8. Kuethe and Andrien, *The Spanish Atlantic World in the Eighteenth Century*, 236–47.

9. Weber, *Bárbaros Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment*, 122–23.

10. Mason, *Census of 1790*, 40–44.

11. Wheeler, *Black California*, 19–31.

12. Mason, *Census of 1790*, 22.

13. Reid-Vazquez, *The Year of the Lash*, 117–45.

14. Dr. Don Ciniaro Gonzales Carvajal, Secratario interino de la gobierno del Reyno de Ultramar, "Preguntas y Respuestas," October 6, 1812, Cádiz, SBMAL.

15. Friar Juan Amerés, "Preguntas y Respuestas," February 3, 1814, San Carlos Borromeo (Monterrey), SBMAL.

16. Friars Antonio Rodriquez and Antonio Muñoz, "Preguntas y Respuestas," February 20, 1814, San Luis Obispo, SBMAL.

17. This survey was done of all nineteen responses in "Preguntas y Respuestas," SBMAL.

18. Friars Francisco Suñer and Antonio Peyri, "Preguntas y Respuestas," December 12, 1814, San Luis Rey, SBMAL.

19. Friars Marcelino Marquinez and Jayme Escudi, "Preguntas y Respuestas," June 30, 1814, Santa Cruz, SBMAL.

20. Friars Narciso Duran and Buenaventurada Fortuni, "Preguntas y Respuestas," November

7, 1814, San José, SBMAL.

21. Friar Ramon Olber, "Preguntas y Respuestas," December 31, 1813, Santa Barbara, SBMAL.

22. CMD 2643 Santa Cruz, August 23, 1824, SBMAL.

23. CMD 2645 Santa Cruz, August 27, 1824, SBMAL.

24. Causa criminal contra del soldado Faustino Orsequera y del menor Máximo, 1798, AGN-Mexico, Instituciones coloniales, Californias, Vol. 73, 689/5, Exp. 5, 86r–120v.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 121r–130v.

27. Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera, eds., *The Faces of Honor*, 3–6.

28. Hojas de Servicio de Oficiales de las Compañías de California, 1814, AGN-Mexico, Instituciones Coloniales, Indiferente de Guerra, 1747, Vol. 216ª, s/f.

29. The Early California Population Project (from now on ECPP). Also see Hackle, "Early California Population Project Report," 73–76.

30. Restall, *The Black Middle*, 257–65.

31. For more on the Pragmatic see Shumway, *The Case of the Ugly Suitor & Other Histories of Love, Gender, & Nation in Buenos Aires, 1776–1870*.

32. This information is found in Alexo Antonio Duerte's death record, September 4, 1779, ECPP, record # 00129.

33. ECPP records # 00174, 00272, 00488.

34. Causa criminal que comprueba la violente muerte que se dieron al cabo Alexo Antonio Duerte, el soldado José Antonio Espinosa, ambos de la compañía de presidio de Monterrey, AGN-Mexico, Institutiones coloniales, Californias, vol. I, 2ª parte, 611/14, exp. 14, ff. 328r–369v; Alexo Antonio Duerte's death record, September 4, 1779, ECPP, record # 00129; the birth and death of the twins on January 6, 1780, is recorded in ECPP record # 606 and 607; Record Gertrudis María's death November 19, 1784, ECPP record # 00324.

35. Sandos, "Toypurina's Revolt Religious Conflict at Mission San Gabriel In 1785," 4–7.

36. Fisher, *Discovering Early California Afro-Latino Presence*, 1.

37. Wheeler, *Black California*, 31–36; Salomon, *Pío Pico*.