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Invisible Warriors

The Myth of the White Conquistador

The Indian empire was in a manner conquered by Indians.

—William H. Prescott (1843)

The conquistadors say that the Tlaxcaltecs deserve that His Majesty grant them much favor, and that if it had not been for them, they [the Spaniards] would all have been dead, when the Mexica repulsed the Christians from Mexico, and that the Tlaxcaltecs offered them a haven.

—Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía (1540)

Napot Canche was governor of the *cah* [Maya town] here in Calkini; it was on his palace patio that the tribute was delivered to the captain, Montejo, when he and his soldiers arrived here. . . . Their swine and their Culhuas [Mexica] arrived first; the captain of the Culhuas was [a Mexica named] Gonzalo.

—The Title of Calkini (1579)

I . . . black resident [*de color negro vecino*] of this city . . . was present at all the invasions and conquests and pacifications which were carried out.

—Juan Garrido (1538)

About eight years ago . . . having in my possession as my slave one Juan Valiente, a Black, and wishing to treat him kindly and being confident that he would conduct himself properly, I granted him permission . . . to go to Guatemala and Peru and wherever else he might wish to go and earn . . . whatever might be his share, providing that he keep an accounting of it and bring it all back to me within four years.

—Alonso Valiente (1541)

The image is a familiar one. Thousands of native warriors swarm like bees upon the vastly outnumbered conquistadors, who against all odds fend them off and survive to fight another day. This familiarity is rooted in part in the larger context of the Western colonial experience, whose mythology is punctuated by tales of barbarian hordes miraculously repulsed (even if tempo-

rarily) or crushed—the Capture of Atahualpa, the Siege of Vienna, the Alamo, Custer’s Last Stand, Rorke’s Drift.

But the image is also familiar specifically with respect to the Spanish Conquest. This is because it is so ubiquitous in the most widely read accounts of the invasion, particularly those of the Conquest of Mexico, from Bernal Díaz and Cortés to Prescott—the last a best-seller in the days when history still taught “that Europeans will triumph over natives, however formidable the apparent odds.”¹ It is, of course, a corollary to the handful-of-adventurers image, and is thus equally central to the conquistadors’ own portrait of the Conquest.²

This image tells us much about the Spaniards, but it leaves out critical aspects of the story. There is no doubt that the Spaniards were consistently outnumbered by native enemies on the battlefield. But what has so often been ignored or forgotten is the fact that Spaniards tended also to be outnumbered by their own native allies. Furthermore, the “invisible warriors” of this myth took an additional form, that of the Africans, free and enslaved, who accompanied Spanish invaders and in later campaigns equaled or exceeded them in number.³

In the 1760s an Italian friar of the Capuchin order named Ilarione da Bergamo traveled through Mexico, later writing up an account of his journey. Ilarione’s brief references to the Conquest, based on his conversations with Spaniards in Mexico and his reading of the popular histories of the time, give us some sense of the state of Conquest myths in the late eighteenth century. Ilarione’s understanding is that the greatly outnumbered conquistadors could only pull off their remarkable feat owing to their superior weaponry, the handicapping superstitions of the “wretched Indians,” and the interventions of providence. The Capuchin friar’s perspective reflects that of colonial Spaniards, a view encapsulated by Bernal Díaz’s pithy explanation of one typical encounter—“The Indians were charging us in such numbers that only by a miracle of swordplay were we able to drive them back and reform our ranks.” Notably still absent in Ilarione’s day, as in Díaz’s, are natives or Africans fighting alongside the Spaniards.⁴

Yet a careful search through the many sources on the Spanish invasion of Mexico reveals numerous casual references to the participation of native allies. For example, during his 1524 invasion of highland Guatemala, Alvarado wrote two letters to Cortés, the first making no reference to native allies, the second mentioning just once, in parentheses, that his force comprised 250 Spaniards “and about five or six thousand friendly Indians.”⁵ Even Prescott, influenced in so many ways by the sixteenth-century Spaniards upon whose accounts he relied, realized that “it would be unjust to the Aztecs [Mexico] themselves, at least to their military prowess, to regard the Conquest as directly achieved by the Spaniards alone.”⁶



“You have arrived here in Tenochtitlan! Be strong, Tlaxcalans and Huejotzincans!” Thus begins one of the sixteenth-century songs written in the central Mexican language of Nahuatl and known as the *Cantares Mexicanos* or *Songs of the Aztecs*. It is an ambiguous celebration of the role played by warriors from Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo in the siege and capture of the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlán. In the first two cantos, these natives are aided by the Spaniards and their weapons in “destroying the city, destroying the Mexica.” In the third canto the Mexica temporarily turn the tide of battle. But in the fourth, although they seize a captive for sacrifice, the Mexica “are surrounded,” and in the fifth and final canto the Mexica ruler Cuauhtémoc is captured and cuckolded by Cortés.⁷

The disposition of the song is thus unclear. The historical fact of Tlaxcalan victory is certainly not avoided, but the Mexica seem to claim some kind of covert victory through the perpetuation of high status, as symbolized by Cuauhtémoc’s former child bride, doña Isabel, “who sits beside you, Captain General [Cortés],” and her half-Spanish child. As the Mexica, Tlaxcalans, and Huejotzincans were all Nahuas, the song’s lyrics present the war as a kind of civil or local conflict, between rival city-states within the same ethnic and linguistic area. The Spaniards play important roles, but secondary ones as agents of native ambition whose eventual triumph really isn’t a triumph—a “victory” whose flawed and partial nature is ripe for parody because the Spaniards seem unaware of its incompleteness. Symbolically, at the point of apparent Mexica defeat in canto four of the song, the Mexica capture and sacrifice a Spaniard named Guzmán “as much-valued tribute to Tenochtitlán.”⁸

This spin on the Conquest as a native civil war resulting in an incomplete Spanish domination offers an alternative to the predictably hispanocentric perspective of the Spaniards, and is one that is readily found in native sources. It also reveals a dimension of the Spanish invasions so central to their outcome that without it the Conquest cannot be sensibly understood. The *Song of the Aztecs* evokes both aspects of this native dimension—the insertion of Spaniards into a native civil war, and the use by Spaniards of native allies in further expeditions outside the homeland of those natives.

The first of these is most obviously illustrated by the role of the Tlaxcalans. As the Mexica (or Aztec) empire expanded across central Mexico in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the small city-state of Tlaxcala managed to maintain a precarious independence, even after it became surrounded by towns subjugated to the Mexica. Located roughly halfway between the Gulf coast and Tenochtitlán, Tlaxcala represented both a major hurdle and a crucial opportunity for the Cortés-led expedition of 1519. At first the Tlaxcalan political faction hostile to the Spaniards dominated the response to the arrival of the foreigners, who suffered a series of violent confrontations. Had such hostilities persisted, Cortés would have been forced to retreat east and seek an alternative route or strategy.⁹

But Spanish survival and the impression made by their weapons allowed the Tlaxcalan faction in favor of making an anti-Mexica alliance with Cortés to come to the fore. As these Tlaxcalans rightly judged, with Spanish assistance they would be able to destroy the Mexica empire and its capital city (see Figure 7). As Prescott deftly puts it: “The first terrible encounter of the Spaniards with the Tlascalans, which had nearly proved their ruin, did in fact insure their success. It secured them a strong native support on which to retreat in the hour of trouble, and round which they could rally the kindred races of the land for one great and overwhelming assault.” We cannot be sure how many native allies Cortés had, but by any estimate they outnumbered Spaniards many times over. Gómara stated that Cortés first arrived in Tenochtitlán with 6,000 such allies. According to prominent Conquest historian Ross Hassig, the final siege and assault on the Mexica capital was carried out with 200,000 native allies, “even though they went virtually unacknowledged and certainly unrewarded.”¹⁰



Fig. 7. Spaniards with Tlaxcalan allies battle Mexicas, who are throwing stones; from fray Bernardino de Sahagún's General History of the Things of New Spain or Florentine Codex (1579).

Cortés, not surprisingly, claimed that the Tlaxcalan role resulted from a strategy of his own devising. Seeing the animosity between the Tlaxcalans and the Mexica, Cortés saw “the opportunity to subdue them more quickly, for, as the saying goes, ‘divided they fall.’”¹¹ Historians of various kinds have followed Cortés’s cue, up to the present. The semiotician Tzvetan Todorov, for example, characterizes the divide-and-conquer strategy as an “endeavor” in which the Spaniard “succeeds very well.”¹² The point, of course, is not that Cortés did not attempt to exploit native rivalries and divisions—clearly he did—but that his endeavor must be properly contextualized.

Two contexts are particularly important. One is that of native politics. The Tlaxcalans and other Nahuas and native Mesoamericans endeavored as much as Cortés and often with equal success to exploit the situation in the pursuit of immediate political goals. Tlaxcala’s neighbor, Huejotzingo, had long resisted incorporation into the Mexica empire and likewise assisted the Spaniards in the Conquest. Indeed the Huejotzincans later wrote to the king of Spain that they had never opposed the Spaniards and had been better allies than the Tlaxcalans, who “in many places ran away, and often fought badly.” In contrast, they asserted “we helped not only in warfare, but also we gave them [the Spaniards] everything they needed.”¹³ The Huejotzincans, in other words, were not passive tools of Cortés’s strategy; rather they sought to use the Spanish presence to promote their interests and pursue rivalries first against the Mexica and later against the Tlaxcalans.

The other context is that of Spanish actions elsewhere. The search for native allies was one of the standard procedures or routines of Spanish conquest activity throughout the Americas. Pedro de Alvarado entered highland Guatemala in 1524 not only with thousands of Nahua allies but also expecting to be able to take advantage of a Mexica-Tlaxcala type rivalry; the two major Maya groups of the region, the Cakchiquel and the Quiché, had both sent ambassadors to Mexico City a year or two earlier. As a result, for the rest of the decade, a brutal civil war ravaged the highlands as the Spaniards used these groups against each other and against smaller Maya groups, while periodically turning with violence upon these native “allies.”¹⁴ Conversely, Spaniards under the Montejos sought desperately to make sense of regional politics in Yucatan in order to exploit or establish a similar division, being forced in the end to make a series of often unreliable alliances with local dynasties such as the Pech and Xiu. These Maya noble families controlled relatively small portions of Yucatan, and the Spaniards never achieved control over the whole peninsula.¹⁵

The most obvious example of how Spaniards sought native allies, looked for native divisions, and benefited enormously from them is the Inca civil war. Smallpox spread into South America faster than Europeans did, so the disease had preceded Pizarro into the Andes, killing the Inca ruler Huayna Capac and his heir before Spaniards entered their empire. Two brothers,

Atahualpa and Huascar, then took control of the northern and southern halves of the empire, respectively, in an uneasy peace that collapsed into civil war after two years. Had Pizarro arrived in northern Peru just a few months later, he most likely would have found a united Inca empire under Atahualpa's rule. But Pizarro's timing was accidentally perfect, and he was able to insinuate himself into the conflict. Although seized by Pizarro, Atahualpa sought to turn his captivity to his advantage by using the Spaniards against his brother Huascar. Alliances and betrayals proliferated and soon both Inca rulers were dead.¹⁶

Their successor, Manco Inca, was supposed to be a Spanish puppet, but he soon rebelled. However, four years of Inca disunity during the Pizarro-Almagro invasion had given the Spaniards a steady enough supply of native allies to permit Spanish survival in the region. Manco's great siege of Cuzco in 1536 would probably have resulted in the elimination of Pizarro's forces were it not for his Andean allies. These were initially less than 1,000 but grew to over 4,000 later in the siege as two of Manco's brothers and other nobles of the same Inca faction came over to Pizarro's side. These allies saved the Spaniards from starvation, rescued individual Spaniards, acted as spies, and fought along with Spanish horsemen in sorties against the besiegers.¹⁷ Their assistance enabled Pizarro and his company to survive until Almagro's relief force arrived. Native support not only saved Pizarro in 1536, it also allowed the Spaniards to survive long enough to establish a permanent foothold in the Andes and to begin to build colonies.

As the Andean conquests fanned out from centers of the former Inca empire to the southern and northern regions of South America, native warriors and servants proved equally invaluable. The taking of native allies from one zone of conquest to the next was a practice established at the very onset of Spanish activity in the Americas. Caribbean islanders were routinely carried between islands as support personnel on conquest expeditions, and then brought to the mainland in the campaigns into Panama and Mexico. For example, Cortés brought 200 native Cubans with him to Mexico in 1519.¹⁸

When the Spaniards under Cortés left the Gulf coast and headed toward central Mexico, native Cempoalan warriors and porters accompanied them, and Tlaxcalans, Huejotzincans, and others later became part of a vast support force that greatly outnumbered the Spaniards. The Huejotzincans continued to fight alongside Spaniards and provide other services as the Conquest stretched out over the 1520s and 1530s. As Huejotzingo's rulers would inform the king in 1560, "we never abandoned or left them. And as they went to conquer Michoacan, Jalisco, and Colhuacan, and at Pánuco and Oaxaca and Tehuantepec and Guatemala, we were the only ones who went along while they conquered and made war here in New Spain until they had finished the conquest; we never abandoned them, in no way did we hold back their warmaking, though some of us were destroyed in it."¹⁹

In fact, the Huejotzincans were not the only Nahuas to fight in other regions of what became New Spain. Montejo brought hundreds of warriors from Azcapotzalco, in the Valley of Mexico, to Yucatan. One Maya account of the Spanish invasion offers a revealing commentary on their use as a vanguard force. Following a series of military encounters in the region, the Spaniards entered the important town of Calkini in 1541 to accept the nominal submission of the local Maya rulers. The description of that ritual by the rulers of Calkini remarks pointedly that the Nahuas—called Culhuas by the Maya after Culhuacan, the town that had once dominated the Valley of Mexico—arrived first. The Maya account also noted that the leader of the Culhuas had been baptized Gonzalo, that their force brought along a herd of pigs (an animal introduced by the Spaniards), and that they were the ones who gathered up the tribute goods offered to the Spaniards.²⁰

There is no hint of racial solidarity between Nahuas and Mayas in this account, nor should any be expected. Spaniards lumped different native groups together as “Indians,” but to the Mayas of Calkini, the Culhuas were as foreign as the Spaniards. They were invaders to be repulsed or accommodated, as circumstances allowed, just as if they had come alone as part of the Mexica imperial expansion into Yucatan that never happened but may have eventually occurred had the Spaniards not appeared.

Nor was there a sense of Maya ethnic solidarity in the sixteenth century. In time, Mayas from the Calkini region and other parts of Yucatan would accompany Spaniards into unconquered regions of the peninsula as porters, warriors, and auxiliaries of various kinds. Companies of archers were under permanent commission in the Maya towns of Tekax and Oxkutzcab, regularly called upon to man or assist in raids into the unconquered regions south of the colony of Yucatan. As late as the 1690s Mayas from over a dozen Yucatec towns—organized into companies under their own officers and armed with muskets, axes, machetes, and bows and arrows—fought other Mayas in support of Spanish Conquest endeavors in the Petén region that is now northern Guatemala.²¹

Ideally, these auxiliaries came more or less voluntarily (that is, they were not enslaved) and in large numbers, as was the case with Montejo’s “Culhuas” in Yucatan. However, native groups who were not accustomed to providing tribute or organized labor services to lords, such as the semisedentary peoples of the Caribbean and southern Central America, resisted these arrangements. The Spanish response was to enslave such peoples. The enslaving of Native Americans was soon banned by the Spanish crown, who viewed native slavery as contributing to the extinction of most Caribbean native groups, as being made redundant by African slavery, and as being unnecessary among mainland sedentary societies (where organized labor systems already existed). But in the early decades of the Conquest, natives routinely accompanied Spaniards as slaves on expeditions to other regions, mostly, but not solely, in

the Caribbean. Native slaves from Nicaragua participated in the Conquest of Peru, for example. They fought and provided other services alongside other natives and Africans, both slaves and free servants. Natives tended to outnumber Africans, as most of the latter were costly slaves purchased from transatlantic traders. While the men fought and transported supplies, there were also native women who cooked and acted as female company and lovers for the Spaniards, had children by the Europeans, and settled with them as servants in their new colonial residences.

That Spaniards expected to have several native or black auxiliaries, and that they considered it a great hardship to go without them, is evidence enough of their important role in the Conquest. “Two years is long enough to go about begging without servants,” wrote one conquistador, a member of the Pizarro company who almost starved on Gallo Island, off Ecuador, while awaiting reinforcements and supplies. “I will need [someone] for the practice of my trade, and also someone to serve me,” he told his brother, “that is, a Black or a good Indian man and woman, because if I should buy them here it would cost a great deal.”²²

Whether as squads of Huejotzincan warriors helping to topple the Mexica empire, a Nahua from Azcapotzalco leading his men into a Maya village, or an enslaved native Nicaraguan woman serving a conquistador in Peru, native peoples are everywhere in the Conquest alongside the Spaniards. One symbolic illustration of their omnipresence is found in the first couple of conquest festivals performed in Mexico. The first took place in Coatzacoalcos, on the Gulf coast, late in 1524. The occasion was the entry into the town of the Cortés-led expedition en route to Honduras, and the festival was a welcome in the form of (in Bernal Díaz’s words) “triumphal arches, and certain [mock] ambushes of Christians and Moors, and other grand entertainments and dramatized games.” As an anticipatory celebration of Cortés’s Honduran triumph, the festival was full of irony, as not only were almost all the celebrants natives, but in reality Cortés was leading an overwhelmingly native army against rebellious Spaniards under one of his old captains, Cristóbal de Olid.

The return of Cortés to Mexico City in 1526 occasioned the second such festival on record. Again the dances, games, and mock battles all featured native celebrants, supposedly commemorating Spanish triumphs but very clearly also representing their own complex roles in the incomplete Conquest. As Díaz dryly observed, during the festival the lake that then still surrounded Mexico City was “full of canoes and Indian warriors in them, according to the manner in which they were accustomed to fight against us in the time of Guatemuz [Cuauhtémoc].”²³



Festivals of conquest and reconquest not only offer insights into the roles placed by native warriors on both sides of the Conquest wars, but also depict other oft-ignored participants—such as Africans. For example, the performance of the “Conquest of Rhodes” was staged in Mexico City in 1539, in response to news of an anti-Ottoman truce signed the year before by the Spanish and French monarchs. The play was an elaborate affair whose vast sets were constructed by “more than fifty thousand workmen” (Africans and local natives), according to Bernal Díaz. It anticipated imminent Mediterranean victories (that remained wishful thinking), but portrayed local historical events too—thousands of native Nahuas and possibly other Mesoamericans played both the attackers and defenders during the siege of Rhodes, with “Cortés” the leader of the Christian forces.

For the Spanish audience, this was the main event, but the native and black participants and audience must have seen the play that preceded the siege as equally significant. This opening spectacle featured three artificial forests stocked with real animals, who were “hunted” by bands of native warriors. The native actors reflected both the medieval European “wild men” tradition and the Mesoamerican tradition that juxtaposed “civilized” central Mexican Nahuas with “barbarous” Mesoamericans (the Chichimecs and others of the frontiers of the Mexica empire and then New Spain). The hunt soon became a battle between these two groups, a conflict that was made more complex but then resolved by the arrival of a cavalry of “more than fifty black men and women” (Díaz again), led by a black king and queen.

The presence and role of Africans was surely open to interpretation by the diverse population of early Mexico City. For Spaniards, African and native roles underscored the Conquest’s reduction of non-Spaniards to armed agents of colonialism or to mere playactors in military conflict. For natives, the black role was bittersweet, being both a reminder of African military roles in the Spanish invasion and a parody of that invasion through its representation as entirely African—monarchy included. For Africans, their entrance into the play on horseback must have been a proud celebration of their military prowess, of a conquistador status so seldom permitted public recognition. All those present must also have been reminded that barely 18 months earlier, in the autumn of 1537, an unknown number of the 10,000 Africans already resident in Mexico City had allegedly plotted a slave revolt and crowned a rebel black king. This slave monarch, along with other black leaders, had then been publicly executed—and was surely resurrected, in the minds of the city’s blacks, in the form of the festival’s African king.²⁴

Whatever their identity or perspective, none of the inhabitants of Mexico City in 1539 would have viewed a black presence in that year’s festival of conquest as incongruous. All took for granted the fact that Africans too had participated in the real Conquest. Indeed, Africans were ubiquitous not only to the Conquest of Mexico but also to the entire endeavor of Spanish inva-

sion and colonization in the Americas. Because the majority of such Africans arrived as slaves, and because of their subordinate status in the increasingly ethnocentric Castilian worldview, the widespread and central role of blacks was consistently ignored by Spaniards writing about the Conquest. As with so much else in the evolution of the Conquest into a collage of myths, subsequent historians and others consolidated this marginalization. Evidence of black roles is thus scattered and often opaque, but when the pieces are put together, it is incontrovertible.

Among the evidence that can be pieced together is the life story of one seemingly extraordinary black conquistador, Juan Valiente.²⁵ Although we have no direct information on Valiente's youth, he was almost certainly born in West Africa around 1505 and purchased as a very young man by Portuguese traders from African slavers on the coast. He then became part of the great wave of people and supplies that entered Mexico in the wake of the Spanish invasion and the fall of the Mexica empire. After being purchased by a Spaniard named Alonso Valiente, the young African was baptized and brought to his new master's house in the newly founded city of Puebla around 1530. Not surprisingly, Juan Valiente grew restless in his position as an enslaved domestic servant. Whether he pursued various strategies to stretch the bounds of his servitude we do not know, but in 1533 he was able to convince his owner to let him go and seek opportunity as a conquistador for a period of four years, "providing that he keep an account of [his earnings] and bring it all back me [his owner]." The African would have kept a notarized record of this agreement on his person at all times to avoid being arrested as a slave in flight.

Valiente arrived in Guatemala in time to join Pedro de Alvarado's expedition to Peru. Alvarado's extensive company of Spaniards, natives, and Africans was stopped in northern Peru by Diego de Almagro, then still Pizarro's partner, in 1534. Almagro bought out Alvarado, but those who had followed the latter had the option of joining the former. Valiente chose to switch companies, and by 1535 he was fighting down in Chile with Almagro. Mortality rates were high in the Conquest, but those who survived often saw their fortunes improve dramatically. This was true for Valiente, despite his technical status as a slave. By 1540 he was again (or still) in Chile, but now as a captain, a horseman, and a vested partner in Juan de Valdivia's company. Ongoing campaigns against Chile's native Araucanians during the 1540s brought further rewards—an estate outside Santiago, which city he helped Valdivia found, in 1546, and four years later an *encomienda*, a grant of tribute-paying natives. Meanwhile, Valiente had married a Juana de Valdivia, possibly a native servant but more likely a former African slave of the governor's.²⁶

During these decades the black conquistador's owner, Alonso Valiente, still 4,000 miles away in the Mexican city of Puebla, had not given up on his

investment. Although Juan Valiente's permit of travel required him to return and turn over the spoils of conquest to his master after four years, an updated version was dispatched upon the expiration of the original agreement. It probably never reached the slave, as four more years later, in 1541, Alonso had yet to hear from or of Valiente. In that year he sent his nephew on a wild goose chase to find the slave and bring him back or negotiate a good price on his manumission.²⁷ Interestingly, Valiente had not forgotten the agreement with Alonso either. Despite his success as a conquistador and his ability to live as a free man in Chile, his technical status as a slave troubled him enough that he commissioned a royal official in 1550 to purchase for Valiente his legal freedom either in Lima or in Puebla. But the official absconded to Spain with the funds. Finally, five years later, Alonso Valiente received news of his slave's career, and made yet another attempt to recover a return on his investment. But by then the black conquistador and *encomendero* had been killed by Araucanians at the 1553 battle of Tucapel.



The life of Juan Valiente certainly seems extraordinary—the stuff, even, of fiction. But every aspect of it can be related to the larger patterns either of Spanish conquistador activity or of the African experience in early Spanish America. As a black West African brought against his will to the Americas in the sixteenth century, Valiente was hardly unique. The transportation of West Africans as slaves out of their homeland, which had been a part of trans-Saharan trade for centuries, became an increasingly important part of the new Atlantic economy in the late fifteenth century. The Discovery would take the slave trade in a new direction and serve to magnify it considerably, so that over the four centuries ending in 1850 some 12 million men and women from West and Central Africa would be loaded onto transatlantic slave ships. Although the Portuguese, and later the British, dominated this trade, Castilians were involved as early as the fifteenth century. The first black Africans brought to the Americas probably arrived by 1502, and in 1510 the king of Spain authorized the first large shipment of African slaves—250 destined for Hispaniola. By century's end, roughly 100,000 Africans had been shipped to the Spanish-American colonies.²⁸

The obvious purpose of the Atlantic slave trade was to meet labor demands, and the most infamous of slave occupations in the New World was that of plantation worker. But while Spaniards did set up sugar and other plantations worked by African slaves, their colonies were primarily built in areas of heavy native settlement and relied upon native labor. Thus the black slaves of Spaniards in the colonies tended to function more as personal auxiliaries—as domestic servants, as assistants in commercial enterprises, as

symbols of social status—just as in the Conquest they were personal auxiliaries of individual Spanish conquistadors. They were servants who were, by necessity, armed; by fighting and surviving they usually earned their freedom and became conquistadors in their own right.

Juan Valiente arrived in the New World too late to be a part of this pattern in the Caribbean and Mexico, but other Africans were there alongside the first Spaniards. Juan Garrido, for example, born in West Africa about 1480, was in Lisbon and Seville in the late 1490s and arrived in the Caribbean in 1502 or 1503 (see Table 2). He later claimed to have crossed the Atlantic as a

Table 2: The Life of Juan Garrido, a Black Conquistador

ca. 1480?	Born in West Africa and probably sold as a slave to Portuguese traders
ca. 1495?	Becomes a Christian in Lisbon; later moves to Seville (may have gained freedom in Lisbon or Seville)
ca. 1503	Crosses Atlantic to Santo Domingo, probably as a servant or slave of a Spaniard named Pedro Garrido
1508–19	Participates in the Conquests of Puerto Rico and Cuba, in the supposed Conquests of Guadalupe and Dominica, and in the Discovery of Florida; is otherwise resident in Puerto Rico
1519–21	Member of the Conquest expedition into central Mexico, probably as a servant of Pedro Garrido and later Hernán Cortés (or, less likely, in the retinues of Juan Núñez Sedeño [1519] or Pánfilo de Narváez [1520])
1521	Builds a commemorative chapel on the Tacuba causeway near the site of the heavy Spanish and allied losses of 1520
1521–23	Resident, adjacent to his chapel, on the outskirts of Mexico City; plants the first three seeds of wheat to be grown in New Spain
1523–24	Member of the Antonio de Caravajal expedition to Michoacán and Zacatula
1524–28	Resident in Mexico City; on 10 February 1525, he is granted a house-plot within the rebuilt city; 1524–26 holds post of doorkeeper (<i>portero</i>) and for a time is also crier (<i>pregonero</i>) and guardian of the Chapultepec aqueduct
1528	Heads a gold mining expedition, complete with black slave gang, to Zacatula
1528–33	Resident in Mexico City
ca. 1533–36	Member of the Cortés expedition to Baja California, in charge of and co-owner of a squad of black and native slaves intended for mining
1536–ca. 47	Resident in Mexico City, where he dies; leaves a wife and three children (one of whom may have been the Juan Garrido resident in Cuernavaca in 1552)

Sources: AGI, *México* 204, fs. 1–9; Icaza, *Diccionario*, 1923, I: 98; Gerhard, “A Black Conquistador,” 1978; Alegría, *Juan Garrido*, 1990; Altman, “Spanish Society,” 1991: 439. Note: A version of this table first appeared in Restall, “Black Conquistadors,” 2000: 177.

free man, although he more likely acquired his freedom in the Caribbean. Between 1508 and 1519 he fought in the Conquests of Puerto Rico and Cuba, in raids on other islands, and in the Discovery of Florida. Back in 1502 the governor of Hispaniola, Nicolás de Ovando, had brought Africans to act as auxiliary conquerors, but when they did the opposite and joined the native resistance on the island, he banned further importation of black slaves. The ban had little effect; Spaniards took as many Africans on expeditions as they could afford.²⁹ Garrido was by no means the only black conquistador to accompany Ponce de León into Puerto Rico, nor was he the only one to invade Cuba with Diego Velázquez—who in 1515 wrote to the king that “many black slaves” had participated in the Conquest there.³⁰

Valiente and Garrido were typical of black conquistadors in a number of ways. They both appear to have been African born. Only a minority of blacks in the Conquest were born in Spain or Portugal (examples are Juan García and Miguel Ruíz—see Tables 3 and 4), and only much later in the Conquest were there American-born black soldiers. Both acquired freedom as a result of their military experiences, Garrido legally granted the status, Valiente effectively taking it and only denied its legal confirmation by the exigencies of long-distance communication in sixteenth-century Spanish America. Both were about 28 years old when their conquistador careers began, perhaps closer to 30 when they first actually fought in the New World. While Spanish conquistadors were on average in their late twenties, their black counterparts tended to be a few years older, probably because less Hispanized younger Africans were less likely to be trusted with armed roles by Spaniards and more likely to be placed in danger as “arrow fodder.” Finally, both men were baptized Juan, the Christian name of more than half the black conquistadors on record, highlighting the Spaniards’ lack of imagination in baptizing slaves.³¹

Where Valiente and Garrido differed was primarily in the timing of their arrival in the New World. Garrido’s early arrival meant he participated in the major Caribbean and Mexican conquests. A generation later, Valiente reached Mexico and Peru right after the initial phases of conquest, and thus ended up fighting in a more peripheral region.

In 1519 Juan Garrido joined the Cortés expedition to the mainland, and in the 1520s was one of the founding residents of Mexico City. Garrido later wrote to the king that he “was the first to have the inspiration to sow wheat here in New Spain and to see if it took; I did this and experimented at my own expense.”³² Another first attributed to an African in Mexico was the bringing of smallpox to the mainland. Francisco de Eguía, one of the black slaves on the Narváez expedition of 1520, allegedly died of the disease soon after landing on the Mexican coast.³³

Unlike later expeditions, Africans did not participate in the Conquest of Mexico in the hundreds, for as Bernal Díaz observed, “at that time Blacks and horses were worth their weight in gold.”³⁴ But Garrido and Eguía were

probably among dozens of blacks among the Spaniards who invaded the Mexica empire. One was Juan Cortés, a slave named after his owner. Juan Sedeño also had his own African servant. The Ramírez brothers, who later followed Alvarado to Guatemala, each brought a horse and a black slave to Mexico.³⁵ Both Spanish and native sources make references to the black presence, albeit typically without providing specifics. The Dominican chronicler, Diego Durán, for example, mentions various “servants and blacks,” while the native account compiled by Sahagún (known to us as the *Florentine Codex*) simply notes that with the Spaniards “came some blacks, who had crisply curled dark hair.”³⁶ Two of the illustrations in Durán’s account depict a black African beside Cortés (see Figure 8).³⁷ Such drawings are probably intended not to represent specific individuals but rather the presence of a number of black servants and slaves on the expedition, all of whom would have fought and, if they survived, emerged as veteran conquistadors like Garrido.

As the first major conquest on the mainland, the Conquest of Mexico helped to inspire and finance a flurry of Spanish expeditions through the Americas. All included African slaves and servants, many of whom, like Juan Garrido and Juan Valiente, became or continued to fight as conquistadors (see Table 3). These expeditions can be placed in two groups, one part of the chain or relay system of conquest that radiated out from central Mexico, the other part of the chain of conquest that ran into South America.

Illustrative of the first chain—that ran up into the Mexican far north and down into southern Mesoamerica as far as Honduras—is Garrido’s continued



Fig. 8. Cortés, accompanied by a black servant or slave and various Spaniards, being received by Moctezuma, accompanied by two Mexica lords; Plate 58 in fray Diego de Durán’s *The History of the Indies of New Spain* (1581).

experience of exploration and conquest in New Spain after the fall of Tenochtitlán. He participated in expeditions to the Mexican regions of Michoacán and Zacatula in the 1520s, and to Baja California with Cortés in the 1530s. By this time blacks on such expeditions had begun to number in the hundreds, sometimes outnumbering Spanish company members; Cortés took over 300 to Baja California.³⁸

While Garrido periodically left central Mexico for the north, Valiente chose to go south, to Guatemala. Alvarado had taken Africans into the Maya highlands in 1524, and they continued to arrive steadily in the years that followed, most as slaves, many to join the sizeable black underclass in the Guatemalan capital, some to seek Conquest opportunity as did Valiente.³⁹ In 1533 the buzz in the colonies was all about Peru and the much-heralded Montejó expedition into Yucatan was in ruins. Had the timing of Spanish discoveries and fortunes been different, or had Valiente arrived in Guatemala before Peru's discovery or as late as 1540, he may have chosen to go to Yucatan instead. There he would have found dozens of Africans on the early Montejó campaigns, and perhaps over a hundred on the final invasion of the 1540s. These included an African baptized as Sebastián Toral, who won freedom for his efforts and raised a family as one of the first settlers of the colonial Yucatec capital of Mérida—whose black and Spanish populations were almost equal in number around 1550.⁴⁰

When Juan Valiente joined Alvarado's vast but short-lived expedition to Peru in 1534, he traveled with 200 other African slaves, servants, and a small number of voluntary members like himself. In opting to stay in South America, he effectively jumped from one chain of conquest to another. The latter chain had begun in the Caribbean and the southern regions of Central America in the 1510s (see Table 3),⁴¹ extended down into greater Peru in the 1530s, and then out into the margins of South America—as illustrated by Valiente's career in Chile from the late 1530s into the 1550s.

Juan Valiente's movements and motives thus made him an unexceptional member of the African diaspora that was part of Spanish expansion in the sixteenth century. This was as true of the South American portion of his life as it was of his earlier years in the Americas. Just as Garrido was not the only black conquistador of Mexico, nor was Valiente the only African in Peru and Chile in the 1530s. There were two blacks with Pizarro's company at Cajamarca, Juan García and Miguel Ruíz, both of whose biographies can be reconstructed in modest detail (see Tables 3 and 4). These two, however, were free mulattos who had voluntarily joined the expedition. There were unknown numbers of other blacks, mostly African-born slaves, who accompanied this and subsequent expeditions into the Andes. Indeed, the only casualty on the Spanish side during the capture of Atahualpa was a black slave of Jerónimo de Aliaga's.⁴²

Table 3: Life Patterns of Some Black Conquistadors

Name	Birth Place and Status	Places of Conquest Activity	Recompense for Fighting
Juan Garrido	Africa or Portugal, black slave	Mexico, Zacatula, and Baja California	Manumission; various minor posts; house site in Mexico City
Sebastián Toral	Africa(?), black slave	Yucatan	Manumission; tax exemption
Pedro Fulupo	Africa(?), black slave	Costa Rica	Unknown
Juan Bardales	Africa, black slave	Honduras and Panama	Manumission; 50-peso pension
Antonio Pérez	North Africa, free black	Venezuela	Horseman; made captain
Juan Portugués	Africa or Portugal, black	Venezuela	Unknown
Juan García	Spain, free mulatto	Peru	Footman's share of gold and silver at Cajamarca; a share at Cuzco
Miguel Ruíz	Spain, free mulatto	Peru	Horseman's share of gold and silver at Cajamarca, a posthumous share at Cuzco
Juan Valiente	Africa(?), black slave	Peru, Chile	Treated as free; horseman; made captain; an estate and <i>encomienda</i>
Juan Beltrán	Spanish America, free mulatto (black-native)	Chile	Confirmed as fort captain at Villarica; an <i>encomienda</i>

Sources: AGI, *México* 204, fs. 1–9; Icaza, *Diccionario*, 1923, I: 98; Gerhard, “A Black Conquistador,” 1978; Alegría, *Juan Garrido*, 1990; AGI, *México* 2999, 2, f. 180; Meléndez and Duncan, *El Negro*, 1972: 25; Herrera, “People of Santiago,” 1997: 254; Oviedo y Baños, *Historia*, 1967 [1723]: 347, 390, 394, 438–39; Cieza de León, *Peru*, 1998 [1550]: 243; Lockhart, *Cajamarca*, 1972: 6–15, 380–84, 421–22; Boyd-Bowman, “Negro Slaves,” 1969: 150–51; Sater, “Black Experience,” 1974: 16–17; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Compendium*, 1942 [1620]: 743–44.

Note: A version of this table originally appeared in Restall, “Black Conquistadors,” 2000: 174.

The Conquest account by Pedro de Cieza de León, a young Spaniard who spent 15 years (1535–50) as a conquistador-chronicler in South America, is typical of how Spanish sources both ignore and reveal black roles. Cieza de León never provides the total number of blacks in any one company, nor does he name any of the Africans who fought or traveled with him, but on 19 occasions he mentions their presence. Thirteen of these references are to blacks in Peruvian expeditions; six in Chilean ones; seven are to Africans starving or freezing to death in the northern Andes or Chile. Valiente would certainly have been on at least one of these journeys and must have been lucky to survive.⁴³ The remainder of Cieza de León's references are to notable incidents that reveal the black presence, despite the chronicler's failure to otherwise record it. An African discovered fresh water for a company led by Alvarado's cousin, Diego, in the Ecuadorian interior; an African saved Almagro's life; native Andeans attempted to wash the color off a black slave; a mulatto messenger had a finger cut off by Manco Inca, the Inca ruler who succeeded Atahualpa.

Other sources produce a similar litany of incidents that add up to overwhelming evidence of the black presence in the Peruvian Conquest. The first four non-natives to see the Inca capital of Cuzco in 1533 included a black man (he returned to Cajamarca leading a train of Andean porters carrying precious metals). During Manco Inca's 1536 siege of Cuzco, blacks labored to extinguish the fires on the roof of the royal palace as fast as attacking Andeans set them. A force sent from Hispaniola to relieve the defenders included 200 Africans with military experience—a veritable squadron of black conquistadors.⁴⁴

Cieza de León also recorded the presence of blacks on a disastrous expedition into Colombia in the 1530s that the chronicler barely survived. Conquistadors eventually did manage to establish a colony there, which they named New Granada; one of their number was Pedro de Lerma, a mulatto who achieved full-fledged conquistador status. Scores of other blacks, most of them slaves, played various roles in all the Conquest expeditions into New Granada. When a group of them rebelled during one expedition, the governor, Luis de Lugo, ordered their genitals to be cut off. One died. Likewise there were Africans with the infamous Lope de Aguirre, with Diego de Ordaz on the Orinoco, and with Diego de Losada on the Conquest of Caracas (one of whom, Antonio Pérez, was a veteran captain).⁴⁵

Just as Juan Garrido has been called Mexico's only black conquistador, so has Juan Valiente been called "the lone Negro conqueror of Chile."⁴⁶ Yet the evidence for Mexico, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and elsewhere shows that these men were by no means alone. And if the number of Africans on earlier expeditions was in the dozens or hundreds, there were soon thousands of black men and women in core colonies such as Peru—even while the Conquest continued. Between 1529 and 1537 the Pizarro brothers were granted 258 licenses to import African slaves to Peru, and in 1534 Alvarado

brought 200 more Africans (many of whom, like Valiente, remained). But many more blacks arrived illegally, including 400 slaves shipped from Panama to Peru in just one six-month period in 1535. As the Conquest wars of the 1530s slid into the Spanish Peruvian civil war of the 1540s, the total number of blacks in Peru grew to some 2,000, and by the early 1550s to 3,000.⁴⁷

In addition to there being so many other Africans in Peru and Chile, Valiente's experience in the military was shared by other blacks. The names of some of the many other blacks who fought in Chile have survived—an African named Felipe fought at Marihueni, a Juan Fernández fought at Cañete, and Juan Beltrán played so vital a role in the Conquest of Villarica that he was appointed its garrison commander.⁴⁸ Elsewhere in the Americas the written record offers brief insights into the hard years of frequent combat that must have characterized the lives of black conquistadors. Juan Bardales, for example, claimed that he took 106 arrow wounds in Honduras and saved the life of his Spanish captain (see Table 3).⁴⁹

The king eventually granted Bardales a pension, as he did Toral, black conqueror in Yucatan, remarking that “he helped place that province under our command.”⁵⁰ This seems like grudging recognition of services rendered, and Spaniards seldom acknowledged the importance of African combat roles; yet it is also clear that Spaniards tended to view Africans as “very good at fighting,” as one official put it.⁵¹ There are several reasons why this perception rose. Black slaves had served for centuries in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Iberian peninsula. Most black Africans were enslaved through warfare, and thus many already had combat experience. Finally, Africans in the Americas were motivated to develop martial skills not only to survive but also as a means to acquire freedom, which was a black conquistador's standard reward.⁵²

Spaniards thought that two categories of Africans were especially pugnacious, Muslims in general and Wolofs in particular, who were consequently feared and distrusted on the one hand, and respected and valued on the other. For example, in royal legislation of 1532 Wolofs (who came from the Sénégal river region of West Africa) were called “arrogant, disobedient, rebellious, and incorrigible.” Juan de Castellanos, a sixteenth-century Spanish poet who lived for a while in Puerto Rico, wrote that “The Wolofs are skillful and very warlike / With vain presumptions to be knights.”⁵³ Black conquistadors who were deemed by Spaniards to be both militarily skillful and loyal were lauded as paragons. One such conqueror was Juan Beltrán, a mulatto of African and Native American descent, whose career in sixteenth-century Chile had become legendary by the time Vázquez de Espinosa wrote of him in 1620. This “valiant captain,” wrote the Spanish traveler, “is worthy of eternal memory for his great deeds among those savages. He was very deferential toward the Spaniards, and very obedient and loyal to them. With the Indians he was fearless; they stood in awe of him and respected him, to such

a degree that the mere mention of his name was often enough to intimidate the Indians and put their forces to flight.”⁵⁴

Beltrán fought for many years in Chile until his Araucanian enemies managed to kill him, and Valiente likewise died in battle against the same Native Americans when in his late forties. Beltrán and Valiente were not typical of black conquistadors, in that they continued to play active roles in combat, whereas most black conquerors fought and then settled into positions in the new Mesoamerican and Andean colonies.

Spaniards associated a limited number of occupations with Africans and mulattos, stereotypical roles reinforced by repeated Spanish placing of blacks in these positions. The most common was that of street or town crier (*pregonero*), a post held by both Juan García (Table 4) and Juan Garrido; Lima’s crier in the 1540s, Pedro de la Peña, was black too. Other functions typically assigned to blacks were those of constable, auctioneer (Pedro de la Peña was one too), executioner, piper (Juan García again), and master of weights and measures (García yet again). Perhaps the most typical position of all was that of doorkeeper or guard (*portero*), a position held by Garrido in Mexico City and Sebastián Toral, one of Yucatan’s black conquistadors, in Mérida. The *portero* summoned the Spanish city councilors, set out tables and chairs, and stood guard at the door during meetings.⁵⁵

It is not clear if Valiente ever held these positions, although it is likely that he would have, had he stayed in Peru or arrived early enough in Mexico or Guatemala to fight there. Because such posts were usually assigned in the wake of initial Conquest wars, and Chile’s Conquest was an interminable affair, Valiente probably remained a conquistador, rather than a post-Conquest *pregonero* or *portero*. Furthermore, Valiente’s survival on the frontier allowed him to rise to a social level denied men of African descent in core colonies such as Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru. Buying a horse and becoming a captain was not common for an African, but not unheard of. Being granted an estate and then an *encomienda* was rare on the frontier and simply never happened in core areas. Indeed, the only solid evidence of blacks being given *encomiendas* that I have found is from Chile, where in addition to Valiente, Juan Beltrán and two mulattos named Gómez de León and Leonor Galiano received them.⁵⁶

More often, blacks were expected to live on the margins of the new Spanish towns and to fill marginal posts. Less common was the decision of Juan García, who took his share of the early spoils of the Conquest of Peru and returned to Spain, where he lived to be an old man. As a free Spanish-born mulatto and a member of the exceptionally profitable company that acquired gold and silver at Cajamarca in 1532–33 and at Cuzco in 1534, he had the luxury of that option. Yet as a black man, he was also escaping the murmurs of resentment that had begun to circulate in Lima over his parvenu status.⁵⁷ Certainly, Africans were valued in the Spanish Conquest, but only if they settled after the Conquest for

Table 4: The Life of Juan García, Black Conquistador

ca. 1495?	Born free, near Jaraicejo (near Trujillo, Extremadura, Spain), probably of mixed black-Spanish parentage though later referred to by other Spaniards as “black”
1530	Recruited in Trujillo to join the Pizarro expedition to Peru; leaves behind his wife and two daughters
1531–34	Footman member of the Pizarro Conquest expedition that leaves Panama in January 1531; holds the posts of crier (<i>pregonero</i>) and piper (<i>gaitero</i>) and is made responsible for weighing gold and silver at Cajamarca; present at the division of gold and silver at Coaque in 1531, at Cajamarca in 1533 (where he buys an enslaved native Nicaraguan woman from a fellow conquistador), and at Cuzco in 1534
1534–35	One of the founding citizens of Spanish Cuzco, where he then resides
1535–36	Travels to Lima, where he spends time preparing his return to Spain, then to Nombre de Dios (Panama) and back to Extremadura; takes with him his share of gold and silver and probably his illegitimate daughter and her native Andean mother, one of his servants
1536–45	Lives in the Jaraicejo-Trujillo area to at least 1545, calling himself Juan García Pizarro; date of death unknown

Sources: Lockhart, *Cajamarca*, 1972: 6–15, 380–84; Cieza de León, *Peru*, 1998 [1550]: 243.
 Note: A version of this table first appeared in Restall, “Black Conquistadors,” 2000: 186.

free but subordinate lives as gatekeepers, like Garrido and Toral, or fought willingly until their deaths, like Beltrán and Valiente.



The final chapter of Juan Beltrán’s life serves to illustrate most evocatively the role played by black and native combatants in the Spanish Conquest. For “his sterling character and his bravery” in the conquest and founding of a Spanish town at Villarica, according to the colonial chronicler Vázquez de Espinosa, the new governor assigned Beltrán to oversee the construction of a fort outside the town and then named him its captain. He also “presented him with five hundred Indians,” for whom “he was a valiant governor and captain . . . and they were very obedient to him. He made himself respected and feared in all the neighboring provinces, into which he made long *malocas* or raids, bringing back great prizes.”⁵⁸ Vázquez de Espinosa’s purpose was to eulogize Beltrán, but in doing so he revealed a “Spanish” Conquest in which a black captain led native warriors against other Native Americans. Whether in the heart of the Mexica empire or down on the Chilean frontier, the Spaniards were by no means the sole conquistadors.