

American Metropolis

Mexico City was America's largest city in the seventeenth century – a genuine metropolis. In this deeply researched book, Tatiana Seijas reveals a rich tapestry of stories about essential workers who remade and transformed the city during this period. Her narrative style carries readers to a unique place and time with residents from around the world who sold food, facilitated transportation, provided care, and valued the city's silver. Free and enslaved people from Africa and Asia, immigrants, and Native Americans pursued opportunities in a wealthy, yet deeply unequal environment, where working people claimed parts of the city for themselves. They carved out spaces to create new businesses and protect their livelihoods, altering the cityscape itself in the process. *American Metropolis* brings Mexico City to life from the perspective of the working people who transformed this early modern metropolis.

Tatiana Seijas is Associate Professor of History at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* and coeditor of *As If She Were Free: A Collective Biography of Women and Emancipation in the Americas*.

American Metropolis

The Making of Mexico City

TATIANA SEIJAS

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Para mi mamá, María del Pilar Alicia Parra Cabrera.

Contents

<i>List of Color Plates and Figures</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Note on Orthography and Measures</i>	<i>xix</i>
Introduction	I
1.1 A Tour of the City	2
1.2 Chapters	7
1.3 Residents’ Economy	9
1.4 Residents’ Political Work	10
1.5 The People	13
1.6 Periodization and Methodology	16
1 Feeding the City	19
1.1 Visualizing Market Spaces	23
1.2 Sixteenth-century Precedents: How Native Americans Gained Fruits of the Earth Privileges	27
1.3 The Rise of the Central Market Complex	33
1.4 The Ordinances That Recognized Food Vendors’ Work	36
1.5 Native Americans at the Central Complex	40
1.6 Selling Produce	43
1.7 Carving a Place for Selling Birds	45
1.8 Selling Convenience at the Food Court	49
1.9 Reclaiming Spaces after the Fire	52
1.10 Conclusion	56
2 Transporting the City	58
2.1 Visualizing Transporters’ Terrestrial Byways	63
2.2 Sixteenth-century Precedents: Protecting and Cleaning the City’s Streets	68

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
2.3	Sustaining Public Order	74
2.4	Creating a Parking District during the 1600s–1630s: How Carters Linked Long-Distance and Local Transport to Deliver Goods across the City	78
2.5	Claiming Spaces: How Coachmen Created Networks for Community, Economy, and Political Engagement	85
2.6	Conclusion	94
3	Caring for the City	98
3.1	Visualizing Healing Spaces	100
3.2	Sixteenth-century Precedents: Changes in the Barbering Trade	102
3.3	The First Decade: The Path to Becoming a Barber	109
3.4	The Rise of a Distinct Sort of Barbering in the 1620s: The Founding Generation	115
3.5	The Formalization of the Business	118
3.6	The Hair-Barbering Business at Mid Century	123
3.7	The Resolution	127
3.8	The Fight Was Not Over	129
3.9	Conclusion	131
4	Valuing the City	133
4.1	Visualizing Silver	135
4.2	Sixteenth-century Precedents: How Silversmiths Established a Pattern of Needed Expertise	138
4.3	Valuing and Measuring Silver during the 1600s–1620s: How Silversmiths Helped Residents Invest in Silver and Understand Money	150
4.4	1620s–1650s: How Silversmiths Helped Residents Protect and Confirm the Value of their Silver Objects	159
4.5	Alchemizing Silver into Social Power	168
4.6	Valuing Freedom with Silver at Mid Century	170
4.7	Generations of Power	173
4.8	Conclusion	175
	Conclusion	177
	Essay on Sources	186
	List of Archives, Libraries, and Repositories	192
	List of Archives and Libraries by Country	192
	Museums	193
	List of Archives with Collection Abbreviations	193

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Tatiana Seijas
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

<i>Contents</i>	ix
<i>Notes</i>	195
<i>Bibliography</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	293
<i>The plates will be found between pages 97 and 98.</i>	

Color Plates and Figures

COLOR PLATES

- 1 Mexico City in 1628
- 2 Everyday life on the Main Square and the Alameda
- 3 Mexico City’s byways
- 4 The Main Square and Volador Square
- 5 The city’s center
- 6 A view of the city at century’s end
- 7 Commemorating Maundy Thursday
- 8 Silver coin
- 9 Candlesticks fashioned by Diego Mota

FIGURES

I.1	Mexico City in 1628	<i>page 3</i>
I.2	The cityscape	5
I.3	The residents’ city	6
I.1	Food vendors in the forefront	20
I.2	Food vendors in the central market complex	21
I.3	Mexico City’s footprint	25
I.4	The city’s markets	26
I.5	The central market complex on the Main Square and Volador Square	50
I.6	The central market complex at the end of the century	55
2.1	On the move: Scenes from the Alameda Park and Main Square	60
2.2	The city’s coachmen	61

xii *List of Color Plates and Figures*

2.3	The city’s carters	62
2.4	Places and byways	65
2.5	Streets and causeways	67
2.6	The streets of working people	95
3.1	Styling hair	99
3.2	Finding care in Mexico City	102
3.3	Preparing for the phlebotomy examination	106
3.4	Commemorating Maundy Thursday	130
4.1	Fashioning silver	134
4.2	Silvering spaces	136
4.3	Silver at the Main Square	147
4.4	Silver coin	148
4.5	Units of values used in Mexico City, early 1600s	152
4.6	Valuing silver	155
4.7	Diego Mota’s hallmark on a candlestick	164
C.1	Valuing cacao as money	180

Acknowledgments

Books have histories. This one involved people who helped me think, research, write, research, rewrite, and rewrite again. Thank you.

American Metropolis began as an idea in Spring 2016 when I was at the National Humanities Center. A fellow asked for book recommendations on the history of Mexico City, and I shared my favorite. I began a bibliography.

Fast forward to Fall 2018 when I was at the Newberry Library, which, like the Humanities Center, gifted me with time and sources. I had been writing another book for years, and it was time for a change; I paused the writing, if not the researching, and reoriented my attention to a familiar place and time. I wrote the introduction to a book framed as a global history of Mexico City. Keelin Burke and Brad Hunt organized a workshop with fellows, and they all gave me feedback, including Jodi Bilinkoff, pushing me to define my terms, explain the periodization, distinguish my historiographical contributions, assert my claim about the significance of showing what was possible in a diverse city, and “write with joy” – I wrote that down in my notes. Thank you.

I continued writing, and in Spring 2019, Steve Pincus at the University of Chicago invited me to share a work in progress. Once again, I had the privilege of sharing my ideas with scholars who encouraged me and confirmed that readers would be interested in reading about my wondrous city. I can close my eyes and see everyone who was in the room. Thank you for being there, for joining me in conversations and inspiring me to be Braudelian in my reconstruction of space, and to pay attention to upward and downward mobility, think comparatively, and, most importantly, to keep writing. Thank you.

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Participants in the conference “Archival Lives,” organized by Adriana Chira at Emory University in December 2019, helped me clarify my arguments about coachmen operating in a context that afforded economic possibilities.

I was writing when the COVID pandemic hit my home city – New York City. The streets emptied; everyone was scared. I was awed by hospital workers and so very grateful for the people who sold me food at the supermarkets and kept the subway running. Neighbors in Brooklyn put up signs thanking nurses and doctors. What would I do, I wondered, without all these people? I was obviously not the only one; the term essential workers appeared in *The New York Times*. In retrospect, I see that this experience formalized what I intended to do: to write the history of people who did this hard work in the past.

At this point, I had the privilege of being a fellow at the William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies at Southern Methodist University. I moved to Dallas for the 2020–2021 academic year, where Ruth Ann Elmore, Neil Foley, and Andrew R. Graybill welcomed me and encouraged my work. It was a joy to be at SMU. I had an office with a view and access to one of the best and underutilized university libraries for Mexican history in the United States. Librarians from the Bridwell, DeGolyer, Fondren, and Hamon collections helped me continue researching my other monograph on New Mexico and write this one. Adam Jasienski gave me fellowship, shared my enthusiasm for the seventeenth century, and read and commented on the first draft of the manuscript. Martin A. Nesvig read that draft as well as subsequent iterations – thank you.

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Acknowledgments

xv

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Attendees of the Global Philippine Studies Forum hosted by NYU in February 2022 read the chapter on barbers; thank you Erica Field, Leo Garofalo, Kristie Flannery, and Marcella McGee Hayes for giving me written comments.

Attendees of the Seminar on the History of Early America at Providence College in October 2022 read a revised introduction, and we agreed that it is the most important section of any book. Thank you to Edward E. Andrews, Elise Bartosik-Vélez, Patrick H. Breen, and David Orique for giving me written feedback that helped me rewrite it again.

In January 2023, I decided to ignore the first draft of the book and write the chapters from scratch. The first draft read like a thesis, and I wanted to articulate a different history, so I set it aside. The same thing happened while writing my first monograph, and I am now grateful for that decision. I wrote this new manuscript at the Vartan Gregorian Center for Research in the Humanities at the New York Public Library. My thanks for the space and to the librarians. I am proud to be among the authors of Books Made at the NYPL.

James Woodard and Marc A. Hertzman read the introduction in February 2023, and their thoughtful feedback encouraged me to continue writing a new book.

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That same October, I shared the book as a lecture at the John Carter Brown Library, one of my favorite places, and questions from the audience

pressed me to articulate some of my historical claims more forcefully. Thank you José Montelongo and Karin Wulf for the invitation.

In the summer of 2024, I walked across Mexico City, some five hours a day for two weeks. The streets are longer and the squares larger than they appear on the maps that helped me locate historical actors. It takes ten minutes to walk around the Main Square, the *Plaza de la Constitución*. I met working people who are doing the same tasks as their predecessors. Barbers from Haiti have stands on *Avenida México-Tenochtitlán*. Carters pushing dollies stacked with boxes sprint down *Calle Mesones*. I bought fresh fruit juice from vendors at street corners. I remembered stories about their counterparts narrated in the following chapters, who, like today, are the hum and drive of the city.

My publisher Cecelia A. Cancellaro came to my rescue in October 2024. Thank you for being kind and expressing interest in my work. My thanks to David Greenberg for helping me at this juncture as well.

Five generous scholars wrote reader reports. Thank you for your time and suggestions.

In January 2025, I asked Christopher Heaney, Andrew Konove, Jacqueline Ly, Stuart B. Schwartz, and Max J. Pfeffer to read the introduction, the umpteenth version, and I am thankful for their suggestions. Konove – thank you for commenting on Chapter 4 as well, and for years of sharing documents and understanding my fascination with Mexico City. Ayesha Ramachandran and Louise Walker have been my dear friends and intellectual interlocutors since graduate school. I am indebted for the last push and comments on the introduction and conclusion.

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That is the end of this history – the book is done. But I have more thank-yous and recognitions.

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xvii

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I am a very fortunate person.

Note on Orthography and Measures

American Metropolis draws from sources in various languages, but mainly Spanish – the lingua franca in Mexico City. It was the language of the royal government and spoken by most residents. Nahua residents used their own language for their own government affairs, yet they too understood Spanish to varying degrees, especially as the century wore on. Residents from other nations had to adopt Spanish as well. Writing this rendering of their history in English required orthographical choices in terms of place names, people's names, and untranslatable words.

All place names are in English. But the Spanish names are in the notes at first mention to orient readers familiar with the locations. Silversmiths had their shops along Saint Francis Street rather than *Calle de San Francisco*, for example. There are places, however, that have no true equivalent, such as the city's public park, the *Alameda* – a name that means park, so it reads Alameda in the text.

Residents' first and last names follow the modern spelling for consistency, including diacritical marks. The Spanish last name García, for example, was not accented in the seventeenth century and had various spellings, including Garçia; it is spelled here according to modern conventions. The same is true for Portuguese and other European language last names. The spellings also vary in the documentation in terms of pronouns and prepositions. For example, people used the preposition from (*de*) in their names, such as Joseph de Tobar, in some instances but excluded it on other occasions. Someone might say their name was María de la Cruz, and the scribes would render it Maria Crus – a practice that requires careful investigation to ascertain if documents are related to the same person. Due to this variance and for clarity, the

preposition is omitted in the text, rendering their names José Tovar and María Cruz. The original orthography is sometimes noted for archival identification. African, Asian, and Indigenous names and ethnonyms are in the original. Scribes noted the first and last names of free residents; enslaved people, however, often appear under their first names only. Slaveowners gave them these names; their family names are lost in the historical record unless noted in the text. Narrating the experiences of historical actors requires referencing them repeatedly, done here by last name after the first mention, unless the person appeared in the records with one name only.