

*Review Essay:*  
*Migration and Mobility in the*  
*Sixteenth-Century Hispanic World*

by IDA ALTMAN

In 1540 a man named Luis de la Serna, identifying himself as the grandfather and legal guardian of a five-year-old girl named doña María de la Cerda, went before royal officials in Seville. He had arrived there recently from New Spain (Mexico) with his granddaughter, accompanied by an Indian slave woman named Elena. He claimed that the little girl was the daughter of a well-known, even notorious, figure in the early history of the Caribbean and Mexico, Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa, and a woman named doña Leonor de Zúñiga. Serna did not refer to them as husband and wife, nor did he explain his relationship with either of the girl's parents. He had failed to secure the proper license to bring an Indian slave with him from Mexico, as a result of which Elena had been taken into custody by authorities in Seville. He pleaded that the Indian woman had raised his granddaughter and that the two should not be separated. He agreed that if Elena chose not to remain with his granddaughter, she would be free to go wherever she wished.

Luis de la Serna's brief petition to keep his granddaughter's enslaved caregiver with her is a reminder of the complicated movements and relocations that became commonplace in the early modern Spanish empire in the decades following the arrival of Europeans in American territories. Serna himself probably was born in Spain, made his way to Mexico (in this era, very possibly by way of one of the Caribbean islands), and then returned to Spain with his granddaughter and her Mexican nanny. Little doña María's father, Vasco Porcallo, had spent years in Cuba, then participated in the conquest of central Mexico and lived there for some time, apparently fathering doña María. He returned to Cuba and, with one of his mestizo sons, joined Hernando de Soto's expedition to Florida, but soon went back to Cuba yet again. Doña María's mother very likely was a native Mexican. There is no indication as to why she was in the custody of her grandfather, although the practice of acquiring guardianship of mestizo children and taking them to Spain to be raised was not uncommon. Thus in contrast to the preponderantly westward movement of people from Europe

across the Atlantic to the Americas, doña María and Elena ended up in Spain, far from their native Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

My work on immigration in the Spanish empire has focused less on the mechanics of movement than on the consequences of mobility and migration for both the new societies that came into existence after Europeans reached the Americas, or the Indies, in the late fifteenth century and for local society in Spain itself. Much of the earlier scholarship that considered the connections between early modern Spain and Spanish America concerned institutions and policies. These topics, however, did not provide a framework in which to examine the transference and transformation of early modern Spanish sociocultural and economic patterns as they were imposed upon or adapted to the diverse peoples and contexts of Spanish America. Looking at the connections between local society in Spain and emigration to Spanish America afforded the means to illuminate patterns of movement and decision making that showed how Spaniards were able to expand into such a strikingly distinct world. This inquiry revealed that early modern Spaniards were well equipped by historical experience, family and kinship structures, and patterns of mobility linked to the search for economic opportunity to move into the newly acquired American territories while preserving many of their customary practices and their roots in particular localities.

My first book, *Emigrants and Society*, addressed the relationship between two small neighboring cities in southwestern Spain — Cáceres and Trujillo, both in Extremadura — and the enterprise of the Indies. Since its publication in 1989 other scholars have considered similar themes but have moved in significant new directions. Juan Javier Pescador's *The New World Inside a Basque Village* examines the impact of the Indies on a Basque community from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, and Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert's *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea* focuses on Portuguese mercantile and family networks in the Spanish empire. Recent scholarly work on the complexities of the Iberian Atlantic world has shed considerable light on aspects of migration, circulation, and relocation in Europe, Africa, and the Americas, as seen in Richard Kagan and Philip Morgan's edited volume *Atlantic Diasporas*. My second book, *Transatlantic Ties in the Spanish Empire*, considered how immigrants from a small textile-manufacturing town in central Castile integrated into local society in Puebla de los Angeles in Mexico. In this, as in much of the more recent scholarship on these topics, considerations relating to identity and individual and

<sup>1</sup>Luis de la Serna's petition of 1540 is in the Archivo General de Indias, Indiferente 1963, Legajo 7, fol. 217<sup>v</sup>. On Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa, see Marrero, 1:201, 203–10.

collective refashioning, often linked to the socioeconomic and other possibilities offered by relocation, have taken precedence over understanding the actual mechanisms of migration, which by now are established in the historiography.

Although scholars by no means have exhausted the possibilities for examining the substance and significance of migration from Spain to Spanish America, the complex, multiple movements that were taking place in colonial societies are attracting increasing attention. Research on the impact of the Spanish presence on indigenous societies, from the Caribbean and central Mexico to the Andean region, demonstrates that the movements of people following Spanish intrusion into American territories originated in patterns rooted both in the nature of indigenous societies and in the response to Spanish demands for labor and, sometimes, resettlement; see, for example, the articles by George Lovell and William R. Swezey on colonial Guatemala and by Noble David Cook on colonial Peru in David J. Robinson's edited volume, *Migration in Colonial Spanish America*. Just as early modern Spanish society was characterized by much greater mobility at several levels — local, regional, and transnational — than once was recognized, as suggested by David Vassberg's *The Village and the Outside World in Golden Age Castile*, so too indigenous American societies were far from static and immobile prior to European contact, as has been demonstrated by archaeological and related work that reflects patterns of migration, complex trade networks, and the like.

Thus the movements of people that followed European occupation reflected a confluence of forces both related and unrelated to the intrusion of Europeans. Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, for example, not surprisingly were oriented to the sea. For centuries they moved easily from one island to the other and from the surrounding mainland to the islands to pursue trade and other activities. They also maintained significant interisland connections. The dimensions and nature of this movement changed in many ways, some of them drastic, following the arrival of Europeans. Island natives fled to neighboring islands or to relatively inaccessible mountainous interiors to place themselves out of the reach of Spaniards and their demands for labor and sustenance, while the Spaniards themselves set off unprecedented movement by conducting large-scale slave raiding on what they called “useless islands” and in mainland areas bordering the Caribbean, including Mexico and eventually Brazil, relocating their captives to places where they needed labor. Indigenous labor forces in places like Hispaniola and Cuba came to include people brought from the Bahamas; the coastal areas of and islands near to Venezuela, Panama, and Honduras; and Yucatan and Mexico. Forcible

dislocations and relocations continued as Spaniards expanded into the mainland; large numbers of enslaved Nicaraguans, for example, ended up in Peru. At present there is increasing scholarly interest in the complex movements associated with large-scale enslavement of Indians and their consequences; Nancy Van Deusen has been working on this topic, as seen in two recent articles on indigenous slave women and indigenous diasporas. Indigenous manpower, often conscripted under duress, played a significant role in expeditions of conquest and occupation, indeed usually constituting numerically the largest portion of combined forces. The result could be further substantial, permanent relocations, as in the case of the central Mexican Indians who settled in Guatemala following the Spanish invasion. The articles in the volume edited by Laura Matthew and Michel Oudijk, *Indian Conquistadors*, demonstrate the variability of both the nature and the consequences of wholesale deployment of native auxiliaries in Spanish campaigns of conquest.

Compounding and further complicating the ongoing movements of Indians and Europeans — the latter moved around a great deal in the Indies and back and forth across the Atlantic — was the ever expanding transportation of mostly enslaved Africans to the Americas. By the late fifteenth century Iberians were using African labor in the island groups of the Atlantic and near the African coast and indeed in southern Portugal and Spain themselves, so the early importation of Africans to the Spanish Caribbean and later the mainland was in many ways a logical extension of that practice. As the availability of indigenous labor in places like the Caribbean and coastal Brazil diminished and Europeans found Africans to be useful aides and auxiliaries for a range of purposes, from military campaigns to skilled and semi-skilled labor in mines and stock raising, imports of African slaves grew steadily in importance and accounted for the forced movement of thousands of captives from Africa to the Americas. A by-now substantial body of scholarship has documented the Atlantic slave trade in terms of numbers, origins, and destinations, but relatively less attention has been paid to the movements of Africans and African-descended peoples, both voluntary and involuntary, once they reached the Indies. Sale and resale did not account for all the trajectories of Africans. Some slaves escaped, at times making common cause with Indians also fleeing from Spanish control, while others through various means gained their freedom, which often allowed them to move on to places that promised greater opportunity and autonomy. John Thornton's influential study, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, addresses some of these lesser-known movements of Africans. The scholarly work of David Wheat, which has appeared in several articles and book chapters, sheds

additional light on the dimensions and implications of the African slave trade to and settlement in the Americas as well as on overall movement in the Iberian maritime world.

The movements of Europeans, Africans, and Indians to some degree operated in tandem with one another, but they also responded to and embodied the groups' distinct objectives as they vied for geographic space or sought greater autonomy by attempting to distance themselves from one another. Spaniards appropriated indigenous sites for their towns and cities, generating further kinds of movement. Hernando Cortés and his men and allies overcame the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and claimed it for themselves. Spanish settlers then brought in their African slaves and auxiliaries, who were about as numerous as Europeans after the conquest. Yet despite the extensive destruction and mortality that resulted from the siege, many of the city's former inhabitants returned to their old neighborhoods. Thus the demographic and ethnic transformation of Tenochtitlan was far from complete. At the same time, Spanish demands for labor for construction and an array of other activities brought many indigenous newcomers into the reestablished city both temporarily and permanently. Wherever Spaniards appropriated indigenous sites, they claimed the symbolic centers for themselves and their institutions; however, the realities of labor needs meant that they shared these spaces with Indians and Africans.

In other places as well Spaniards failed to win the contest for space, because their numbers were too small, their resolve insufficient, or the strength of concerted native opposition effectively deterred them, although their actions still set off a variety of movements as discussed in my recent book, *The War for Mexico's West*, a study of the conquest and Spanish occupation of western Mexico, or Nueva Galicia. There, major displacements of population were key to shaping or reshaping the region within twenty-five years of the Spaniards' first arrival in the area in 1524. In that year Francisco Cortés, a kinsman of the more famous Cortés who commissioned the expedition, led a small party of perhaps twenty-five Spaniards, accompanied by an unknown number of Indians from the area of Colima, north into western Mexico, stopping short of the Río Grande de Santiago. Although this expedition usually is thought to have been fairly pacific, a year later when two inspectors toured the area compiling information on its communities and peoples, at least some of their informants described violent confrontations with the Spaniards that had forced many people out of their homes. A year after Francisco Cortés's expedition they had not returned; some were reported to be living in the woods.

Thus displacements of population already had begun, if on a smaller scale than occurred soon thereafter, when a much larger expedition organized at the end of 1529 by one of the more notorious figures in early Mexican history, Nuño de Guzmán, pushed into the region. As president of the first high court (*audiencia*) of New Spain, Guzmán was well positioned to recruit, seemingly under duress, thousands of Indians from central Mexico and Michoacan, probably around seven or eight thousand from each of those regions. Virtually none of these conscripts returned home at the end of a grueling year-and-a-half-long campaign, casualties of fighting, disease, drowning, and callous mistreatment, or deliberately left stranded in the north so they would continue to serve their Spanish masters. As this wave of Spanish invaders and native fighters, bearers and auxiliaries streamed into the west and north, it engulfed the diverse communities that long had maintained their autonomy from larger political entities. The local residents fought or fled.

Following this invasion Spaniards attempted to impose their claims to tribute and labor service on the communities that remained. They sent both men and women to work in newly opened mines or commercial agricultural enterprises, and forced men to carry the yields of tribute as far away as Mexico City. Local people resisted Spanish demands that tribute be delivered to places that required them to move through territory that belonged to long-time enemies. As disorder and violence continued, Spaniards who visited local communities ostensibly under their authority often discovered that many of the inhabitants were absent. As was true in the islands, already existing indigenous patterns of movement or flight sometimes paralleled or complicated Spanish-imposed relocations and dislocations. Not surprisingly, toward the end of the decade of the 1530s, when members of indigenous communities in contact with still-independent groups began to fortify and supply strongholds in the countryside, which surely entailed a good deal of movement, Spaniards failed to notice any significant changes in activity.

A major insurrection erupted in western Mexico in late 1540. The reassertion of indigenous control over the countryside with the establishment of fortified strongholds called *peñoles* left the relatively sparse Spanish population marooned in their small towns, islands in a hostile indigenous sea. Spaniards could redress the imbalance only by once again introducing large numbers of indigenous warriors from outside the region. After a year-long stalemate the viceroy of New Spain himself, don Antonio de Mendoza, like Guzmán before him, led thousands of fighting men and auxiliaries from central Mexico and Michoacan into western Mexico. This campaign set off further movement as the strongholds began

to fall and thousands of Indians from many different ethnic groups took refuge elsewhere.

The defeat of the last of the great *peñoles*, Mixton, and final suppression of the rebellion led to even more complex movements of people. Victorious Spaniards and their native allies returned to central Mexico with several thousand captive and enslaved rebels; other rebels took refuge in the mountains or headed home, some to be subsequently relocated to new settlements; native fighters from central Mexico opted to stay on in the region or central Mexican migrants arrived thereafter, along with growing numbers of Spaniards and their African slaves and servants, as efforts to find and exploit silver mines yielded greater successes. By 1550, barely twenty-five years after Francisco Cortés led his expedition into the region Spaniards called Nueva Galicia, it already had changed irrevocably as a result of the vast upheaval caused by war, dislocation, and the arrival of thousands of newcomers.

Such fundamental reordering of spatial arrangements in American territories, beginning with the Caribbean islands and subsequently progressing to the mainland, was the inevitable result of the voluntary and involuntary movements of Europeans, Africans, and Indians; but outcomes could be unpredictable. Large movements of peoples — free and coerced migration across the Atlantic, European-led military and slaving campaigns — reconfigured space and spatial relationships while at the same time smaller and sometimes less perceptible ones also shaped emerging societies in the Americas. Within thirty years of Spaniards' first attempts to establish themselves in the islands, officials began to complain about *despoblación* (depopulation), referring both to the departure of many Spaniards for other more attractive destinations and to the rapid destruction of the indigenous laboring group. At the same time, however, a distinctively American population was filling the countryside, the mixed descendants of Indians, Africans, and Europeans who became the real settlers of the islands, as discussed in my recent *William and Mary Quarterly* article on family and ethnicity in the early Spanish Caribbean.

These movements affected society in Europe as well, as recent and forthcoming work suggests. Nancy Van Deusen considers indigenous American slaves who pursued their freedom in Spanish courts in the sixteenth century, and Jane Mangan's work contextualizes the experiences of mestizo children in both Peru and Spain. Another area of increasing interest is the movement and experiences of women, portrayed in various settings in the recently published volume *Women of the Iberian Atlantic*, edited by Sarah Owens and Jane Mangan. What nearly all the scholarly works mentioned

here have in common is their emphasis on understanding the mechanisms and implications of migration and mobility in fostering situations of interethnic clash and accommodation and laying the groundwork for the distinctive sociocultural forms and developments of early Spanish American societies. Cultural and ethnic identity, I suggest, were inextricably linked with spatial relationships that in turn were determined by the complex and interwoven movements of people across the Atlantic and in the Americas.

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