

Book Review: *Global Indios: The Indigenous Struggle for Justice in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, Nancy E. van Deusen, Duke University Press: 2016

“I [the india Isabel] am from a village called El Charco [in New Spain] and brought to Spain by way of Veracruz and Havana when I was about fifteen years old, still a child, a young girl...”

This quotation is one of several that Nancy E. van Deusen uses as an epigram to the chapters of her fascinating book *Global Indios: The Indigenous Struggle for Justice in Sixteenth-Century Spain*. In an attempt to make the realities of the American Indian slave trade in early modern Spain comprehensible, she focuses on particular court cases from those involved. The realities of this time present a mindboggling fluctuation of legal and cultural constructs. But by viewing the individual stories of those affected by this trade, van Deusen gives the reader a window into this oft forgotten era of history.

In her introduction, van Deusen presents a methodological roadmap for the sometimes-confusing terrain this topic presents to the reader. The goal of this work is to answer two questions, according to van Deusen. “First, what happened to the hundreds of thousands of native people who were enslaved and transported to foreign places in the Americas and Europe? Second, would it be possible [...] to trace the pathways of [the] several thousand who went to Castile [...]?” (2).

Matching her focus on individual narratives to attention to historical and demographic answers, van Deusen provides answers to both of these questions. The term *indio* was constantly mutating in its referent. As van Deusen notes, “from its inception, *indio* was a homogenizing label that constituted difference based on unequal power relations.” (11). Indeed, as the book shows, *indio* was used to refer to people originating from places as disparate as the Andes, the Caribbean and Sri Lanka. It was, as she calls it, “a floating construct.” (36). Van Deusen focuses on matching individual narratives against the broader background of early modern colonialism. She notes that she “aspire[s] to offer more [in this work] than a collective biography or a compilation of interesting stories [... Rather what she has] written about is the local, transatlantic, and global dimensions of indigenous slavery.” (19).

A crucial bit of background she provides to her work frames the particulars of this history. Before the time of the cases profiled here, the Pope banned certain types of slavery for *indios*. Many enslaved people were then freed. In attempt to staunch this alteration, slaveowners attempted to circumvent the new laws. However, in reaction, many *indios* responded by filing cases in local courts. The richest parts of this work focus on these stories. In order to win their freedom, *indios* were required to explain to a court *why* they were the type of person covered by the Papal bull. They did so by telling their life stories and by bringing in witnesses to corroborate the details. At the same time, their masters tried to poke holes in the narratives the enslaved persons told and used intimidation to keep them and their witnesses from coming to trial.

Van Deusen notes that it is clear from the testimonies that there were certain narratives that the plaintiffs considered useful whether it matched the person’s actual lived biography. In many of the stories, the plaintiffs perhaps had no clear memories of their origins, having been bought and sold many times. One of the profiled persons – a certain Beatriz – consistently claimed to be Portuguese until she pled that she was from New Spain, a narrative that others in her community seemed to have supplied to her. She, naturally, lost her petition.

On the other hand, there are narratives where the petitioner leaned on testimony from peers that was clearly erroneous, claiming for example that the two had known each other long before being in Spain together. But many of these petitions actually succeeded. This aspect of the work has resonances for current issues in migration studies. By focusing on individual stories, van Deusen sheds light on the various rhetorical devices that slaves used in their court appearances. As the definition of Indio changed with legal developments, the narratives that those seeking freedom used in court likewise changed. We can see in these historical cases the same pressures that refugees and other migrants face today. Giving testimony to one's life, then as now, is determined almost as much by the form of the narrative and the social pressures that frame the testimony than by the veracity of the narrative itself.

In this regard, van Deusen's book is especially timely. As we struggle through a period of heightened scrutiny on migration and personhood, it is helpful to look back on similar episodes from the past to see how we might act differently. Van Deusen's work, then, not only provides fascinating insights into a turbulent and formative period in Western history, but provides a lens through which we can critically consider our current situation as well.

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