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978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In 1780, 177 Mexican recruits arrived in the Philippines onboard the *Naos de la China*, or Manila galleons, the small fleet of Spanish trading vessels that regularly crossed the Pacific Ocean between Acapulco and Manila from 1571 until 1815. These men were the annual replacements for the Regiment of the King (*Regimiento del Rey*), Manila's premier military unit composed largely of veteran soldiers. The new cohort of 1780 turned out to be a very disruptive squad who caused tremendous headaches over the following four years. As the governor of the Philippines, José Basco y Vargas, discovered later, most of these recruits had been drawn "from their regimental prisons [and] quite a few were charged with capital crimes, [so] it is unimaginable how much work they have given us with their actions and bad example."¹ The governor reported to Viceroy Martín de Mayorga in Mexico City that all but a third were "totally worthless and extremely despicable, without question worse than the natives of these islands, who at least are healthy."² Through their incarcerations for drunkenness, unexcused absences, desertion, and a variety of excesses, the recruits generated significant costs and damaged the service in "multiple ways."³ In 1784, Basco y Vargas was finally compelled to return forty of these men to New Spain and

¹ Governor José Basco y Vargas to Viceroy Matías de Gálvez, Manila, June 18, 1784, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter cited as AGN), Filipinas, vol. 61, exp. 5, fol. 210.

² Governor Basco y Vargas to Viceroy Martín de Mayorga, Manila, May 26, 1782, AGN, Filipinas, vol. 61, exp. 5, fol. 186.

³ Ibid.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

to announce the departure of the rest the following year. The Philippine governor also requested that the viceroy in New Spain stop sending such questionable individuals, preferring a smaller number of less troublesome replacements: “even if only 50 arrive, or even less, we will be contented here as long as they are good.”⁴

Most immediately, this episode illustrates the military, financial, and social repercussions of the presence of these Mexicans in the Philippines. They disrupted the discipline of local regiments, burdened the administration with additional costs because of their repeated hospital stays and imprisonments, lacked motivation and commitment, and, most importantly, proved useless for their primary task, military service. From a broader perspective, the incident brings to light the existence of regular connections between colonial Mexico and the Philippines that were wider and more diverse than the lucrative commercial exchange of Mexican silver for Chinese silk and porcelain and other Asian luxuries. Along with merchants, missionaries, bureaucrats, clergy, and multiethnic ships’ crews, Mexican recruits and convicts created and maintained cross-cultural trans-Pacific connections that have received surprisingly little attention from scholars. This book follows these men from recruiting centers and jails in central Mexico to Spanish outposts in the Philippines, and it traces relationships of power between the imperial authorities in Madrid and the colonial governments and populations of New Spain and the Philippines.

Between 1765 and 1811, Manila Bay received 3,999⁵ Mexican and Spanish troops and convicts. The majority were veterans and recruits (3,219, or 80.5 percent)⁶; at least 336 (8.4 percent) were victims of vagrancy campaigns or were convicted criminals, of whom 62 (1.5 percent of the total) had been turned in by their own relatives. Additionally, 254 of the total (6.3 percent) were deserters who had been sentenced to the Philippines, and 190 (4.8 percent) were convicts shipped to the Philippines from Spain.⁷ Because Mexican authorities dropped the charge of

⁴ Governor Basco y Vargas to Viceroy Matías de Gálvez, Manila, June 18, 1784, AGN, Filipinas, vol. 61, exp. 5, fol. 210.

⁵ An alternative total is 3,703 because for the year 1772 my sources are at odds about the number of recruits shipped to Manila, with 451 or 155 as two possible figures. See Appendix.

⁶ An alternative number, for the reason stated in the previous note, is 2,923 or 78.9 percent.

⁷ These figures are neither definite nor free of problems. Data for some years come from the reports of governors in the Philippines on the soldiers and convicts who actually arrived in the archipelago. For other years, these numbers are derived from a panoply of sources produced in New Spain: lists of Mexico City’s prisons and judicial authorities, official

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

vagrancy if the individual voluntarily signed up for military service in Manila, an uncertain but presumably large number of “recruits” were actually “vagrants.” All these men were part of the major military overhaul imposed on the Philippines by the Spanish Crown in the wake of the British capture of Manila in October 1762 and the city’s occupation until 1764. The disaster was a devastating blow to Spanish prestige and morale, especially because it happened almost simultaneously with the fall of Havana, also taken by the British, in August 1762. After 1764, governors of Manila pressed for Mexico to send healthy, honorable men to work in the reconstruction of the fortifications and serve in regular military units. In 1783, the viceregal office approved the execution of levies of vagrants to complement the manpower shipped to Manila.

The available archival material related to this military effort is mostly judicial files, with a wealth of information in the form of personal stories, and official correspondence that circulated among officials of Mexico, the Philippines, and Spain. The number of recruits and convicts might seem small in the larger context of migration within the Spanish empire, but the historical importance of the process of transportation is not simply one of the numbers. Indeed, the documentation raises interesting, important questions. Why did authorities in Mexico City deliver troublesome men to the colonial government of the Philippines when improving the islands’ defenses clearly required younger, healthier, and more obedient soldiers and workers? What does the intensified attention that Mexican authorities gave to vagrancy tell us about the values of late colonial Mexican society? How did the questionable quality of the incoming human resources affect the ability of colonial officials to implement the new imperial policies in Manila? Exploring these themes offers a pathway into the thoughts and practices that underlay the Spanish empire in the late eighteenth century and into the transoceanic breadth of said empire as signified by processes of convict transportation and military recruitment that linked the Pacific to the Atlantic and vice versa.

Two clarifications are in order. One is that due to the nature of the available archival sources, this book generally adopts the perspective of the imperial authorities in Madrid and the colonial states of New Spain and the Philippines. With the assistance of secondary sources, however, it also moves beyond the perspective of the state to illuminate some of the

correspondence of viceroys with Madrid and Manila, reports from officials in charge of anti-vagrancy patrols in Mexico City, and passenger manifests created by Acapulco’s authorities and ships’ masters.

Cambridge University Press

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Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

intricate and changing patterns of political, social, and ethnic forces that Mexican soldiers and convicts encountered in the archipelago. Second, I am aware that the Philippines was not a unified political entity during the period under study but was in fact a highly atomized territory. Furthermore, because only the area surrounding Manila was under effective Spanish control, the colony is best conceived as a frontier of the Spanish empire with its own internal frontiers.⁸ My descriptions, analyses, and conclusions thus pertain chiefly to the political-religious nerve center of the archipelago and might not be directly applicable to the entirety of the Philippines.

In this book I use “New Spain” and “Mexico” as if they were interchangeable terms because New Spain is often referred to as Mexico, or “Mejico,” in the records, even though I am aware that they are not synonymous and that the geographical limits of the larger administrative structure of the viceroyalty do not coincide with the territory of modern Mexico.

Toward a Historical Narrative of the Spanish Pacific World

Knowledge in the US about the Philippines and the Spanish Pacific world at large is a work in progress, but the historical narratives of colonial Mexico and the Spanish Philippines have not been completely separated. Some early works of Latin American scholars who brought into focus the history of the Philippines include John Leddy Phelan and his *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959). In this influential study Phelan analyzes the transformations of the Philippine society under Spanish colonization, specifically changes in the spheres of labor, agriculture, ecology, political organization, culture, and religion. In doing so, he highlighted the creativity of Filipino people in adapting their social, political, and cultural structures to Hispanic culture and civilization. In *Spain in the Philippines: From Conquest to Revolution* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1971), Nicholas P. Cushner also studied the Spanish colonial program in the archipelago – especially missionary work, tribute, and labor – with the purpose of tracing the roots of attitudes and social conventions that in his opinion remain part of the fabric of Philippine society today.⁹ Cushner further explored his interests on land

⁸ I thank Ruth De Llobet for her illuminating insights on this matter.

⁹ Cushner, *Spain in the Philippines*, 229.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

tenure patterns, labor, agriculture, and other ecological circumstances in *Landed States in the Colonial Philippines* (New Haven: Yale University 1976). Besides delving into the role of friar estates in the lives of Filipino tenants, Dennis Roth's *The Friar States of the Philippines* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1977) is further testimony to the interest of the historiography in the 1970s in the origin and development of latifundia in the Philippines and Spanish America from a comparative perspective. Later in the 1980s, works like Vicente Rafael's book *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) spiced up the research on land tenure, tribute, and labor by addressing the role of language and communication in the processes of religious conversion and colonization.

Some Latin American historians in the twentieth century drew attention to the importance of the trans-Pacific link. By scooping the Philippines in their analyses of Spanish America in general and New Spain in particular they were able to answer old questions and raise new ones. Published in 1939, William Lytle Schurz's pioneer study on the Spanish trade monopoly between Acapulco and Manila, *The Manila Galleon* (New York: EP Dutton and Company, 1939), remains to this day an obligatory reference. Other seminal works have also focused on the trans-Pacific link as one of a flow of commodities. French historian Pierre Chaunu produced the fullest collection of statistical data on Spanish trans-Pacific commerce and exposed the existence of a remarkable overall correlation between Pacific and Atlantic traffic, prices, and economic activity.¹⁰ "Spanish world" survey texts such as J. H. Parry's *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (New York: Knopf, 1966), Geoffrey J. Walker's *Spanish Politics and Imperial Trade, 1700–1789* (London: MacMillan, 1979), and Lyle N. McAlister's *Spain and Portugal in the New World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) also included the Philippines in their research on imperial commercial circuits. In particular, Walker and McAlister underscored the Mexican connection with Southeast Asia through Manila as an overlooked piece of the imperial puzzle, a piece that had repercussions not only on the trade of the viceroyalty of New Spain but also on the Atlantic fleet system. Walker argued that a

¹⁰ Pierre Chaunu, *Les Philippines et le Pacifique des Ibériques, XVIe, XVIIe, XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1960). Chaunu's conclusions, based on official Spanish tax receipts on legal imports and exports, have been criticized because his numbers misrepresented trade volumes, did not factor in contraband and fraud, and understated the vitality of the trade in the seventeenth century.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World*

serious obstacle to the success of the system of navigation and commerce between Spain and its American possessions was Mexico's trade for cottons and silks with the Far East. A viceroyalty plentifully supplied with high quality and reasonably priced cottons, silks, and other material via the Manila–Acapulco trade did not require the goods brought from the Peninsula. Walker also pointed at the fact that the merchants of Mexico came to look upon their trade with the Philippines as their principal commercial interest.¹¹ McAlister discussed seventeenth-century economic trends in New Spain in the context of the outflow and inflow of revenues to and from the Pacific. Contrary to the assumption that trans-Pacific trade had decreased in the 1600s, McAlister explained that a thriving trade of oriental merchandise from New Spain to Peru drained bullion from Mexico and circumvented the interests of the Sevillian monopolists.¹²

These studies put in sharp relief that the trans-Pacific link could shed light beyond the Pacific basin and on the commercial relationship between Spain and Spanish America. From the 1980s onwards, an extensive body of scholarship on the Manila galleons has built on these questions and has continued to focus on the Manila–Acapulco trade mostly from an economic perspective. Mexican historian Carmen Yuste has researched for decades on the Mexico City large-scale merchants or *almaceneros*, the most dynamic and powerful economic group in eighteenth-century New Spain.¹³ Yuste aimed at displacing the center of gravity of the Spanish trade with Asia from the Iberian Peninsula to New Spain by persuasively establishing the importance that the mercantile traffic in the Pacific had for the *almaceneros*. In Yuste's interpretation, Mexico was not a mere transit point in this connection but a direct actor. The trans-Pacific axis was a colonial alternative of great benefit to Mexico City traders given that significant constraints characterized the Atlantic commercial link – namely the presence of intermediaries, stricter fiscal supervision, and the risk of cargos being sequestered. Yuste argues that Mexican merchants used extensive panoply of legal and illegal mechanisms to introduce themselves into the Manila trade, not only as buyers but also as investors, and

¹¹ Walker, *Spanish Politics*, 76, 105, 116–17, 131.

¹² McAlister, *Spain and Portugal*, 372–73, 379–80.

¹³ See Carmen Yuste, *El comercio de la Nueva España con Filipinas, 1590–1785* (Mexico City: INAH, 1984), the monograph Yuste completed for her doctoral degree. A revised version of this work that includes an analysis of the activities of Mexican merchants in the Philippines appeared in 2007: *Emporios transpacificos. Comerciantes mexicanos en Manila, 1710–1815* (Mexico City: UNAM).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

dominate with their economic power the trans-Pacific transactions. Yuste refers to *emporios* (principal centers of commerce) that went beyond the territories, the legal restrictions, and the nationalities of those involved in the trade. Of great consequence for subsequent scholarship including my work is that Yuste opened the possibility to study inter-colonial relationships and how trans-Pacific dynamics were more prevalent in shaping imperial commercial networks than colonial subordination to Madrid.

Further elaborating on Yuste's premises, Katherine Bjork has contended that the interests of Mexican merchants and colonial officials were central to Madrid's decision to keep Spain's only colony in Asia, and this in spite of considerable cost to the Crown and the opposition of metropolitan commercial interests.¹⁴ The "California School" has paid attention to the Chinese side of the Manila galleon trade and has placed the Manila–Acapulco connection in a Sino-centered world economy where half of the world's silver extracted between 1600 and 1800 ended up in China with important economic and social consequences for the Asiatic nation.¹⁵ One of the most recent installments in the historiography of the trans-Pacific commercial connection is the fine and thoroughly documented book of Mariano Ardash Bonialian, *El Pacífico hispanoamericano: Política y comercio asiático en el Imperio español, 1680–1784* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2012), where the author concentrates on the commercial exchanges that occurred in the Spanish Pacific in the period 1680–1784. Bonialian conceives of a multi-part trans-Pacific system where the Manila galleon route and the trade between Acapulco and Peru were connected to each other. Notwithstanding that the Spanish legislation imposed geographical barriers – the transshipment of merchandise from Acapulco to Peru coastwise had been prohibited in the early seventeenth century – Bonialian posits that commerce in the Pacific prospered due to

¹⁴ Katharine Bjork, "The Link that Kept the Philippines Spanish: Mexican Merchant Interests and the Manila Trade, 1571–1815," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 25–50.

¹⁵ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, "Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 13 (2002): 391–427; Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Han-Sheng Chuan, "The Chinese Silk Trade with Spanish-America from the Late Ming to the Mid-Ch'ing Period," in *European Entry into the Pacific: Spain and the Acapulco-Manila Galleons*, ed. Dennis O. Flynn et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 241–260.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

untamable fraud and contraband to the point that the transatlantic trade system could not escape its effects.

These historiographical forays into the Spanish Pacific world understood the importance of linkages with the Philippines and laid solid foundations to consider the breadth of a European early modern empire that extended across two oceans. But while Latin American scholars have long been peeking at the Pacific and the far remote possessions of Spain, the work of historians of the Philippines has not placed too great an emphasis in enabling the communication between the two historiographical fields. As an object of historical knowledge, the Philippines are considered a part of Asia and have been ascribed to the field of Southeast Asian history. These scholars seem to be more comfortable focusing on the historical relations of the archipelago with other Asiatic peoples than stressing the connections of the Philippines with the Eastern Pacific territories. Southeast Asia as a distinctive field of historical study established itself when J. R. W. Smail proposed in the 1960s the “third way” or autonomous history with the purpose to cleanse the scholarship of the region of Eurocentric dependency theories and debunk the nationalist, topically narrow historiography of the Philippines.¹⁶ The “third way,” however, has not brought the Philippines any closer to Latin America in historiographical terms.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. R. W. Smail, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 72–102. The struggles to come to terms with a Hispanic heritage, a majority of Malay and Chinese ancestry, and a US colonial discourse that demonized the Spanish have noticeably given Philippine historical self-perception a manifestly anticolonial, anti-Spanish, and anti-Latin American stance. A new generation of Filipino Hispanic literati and other scholars are instead reappraising hybridity and vindicating the importance of the Hispanic period and its legacy as an indispensable part of the modern Filipino heritage. Elizabeth Ann Medina, “Hispanic-Filipino Identity: Loss and Recovery,” *Asociación Cultural Galeón de Manila* (1999). Accessed July 2009. www.galeondemanila.org/index.php/es/estudios/126-hispanic-filipino-identity-loss-a-recovery-by-elizabeth-medina; Isaac Donoso, ed., *More Hispanic than We Admit: Insights into Philippine Cultural History* (Quezon City: Vibal Foundation, 2008); Fernando Napkil Zialcita, *Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Starting with John A. Larkin, *The Pampangans: Colonial Society in a Philippine Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), a trend of local history and anti-dependency theory culminated in *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1982), edited by Smail’s students Alfred W. McCoy and Ed C. De Jesus. Vicente Rafael, Filipino with doctoral training at Cornell University uses post-structural textual analysis in his search for Filipino identity. See Vicente Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Techniques of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

Currently, some studies in Spanish imperial history and colonial Mexico encompass both the Atlantic and the Pacific basins. In *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492–1763* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003), Henry Kamen features a lengthy chapter on the Philippines and the relationships of the Spanish with Chinese, Japanese, and native Filipinos, an important piece of his overall theory that the Spanish empire was not the creation of one people but a collaboration of many. In general, however, the stress that the historiographical discourse on Spanish America places on the Atlantic has dwarfed the role of the Philippines as the far western frontier of the Mexican viceroyalty. Surveys of Spanish imperial history and general histories of the Mexican region dispatch the trans-Pacific axis usually with brief mentions to the Manila galleon trade.¹⁸ Furthermore, neither the Philippines nor the Pacific World have made their way into the teaching curricula of history university departments; undergraduate and graduate courses in colonial Latin America or Mexican History do not regularly address this region. Clearly, in the interest of time instructors need to make choices. In deciding about curricular content, though, it is worth mulling over how the incorporation of global perspectives into history courses helps educators drive home the point that today's global connectedness is not an exclusive feature of the modern world.

The amount of scholarly works that approach Latin American history as a complex unit that embraces Asian territories is likely to grow in the near future. This is due to the fact that recent Pacific-centered publications are laying on the table new and fascinating questions. These studies focus on the Pacific world as a coherent and distinct region and underscore the connections that have linked this ocean to other areas and peoples of the world. Some of these titles are *The Pacific World: Lands, Peoples, and History of the Pacific, 1500–1900*, seventeen volumes published by Ashgate between 2001 and 2009; Vanessa Smith's *Intimate Strangers* (2010) and *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders* (1997), both

¹⁸ See, for instance: Stanley J. Stein and Barbara H. Stein's *Apogee of Empire. Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759–1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); William S. Maltby's *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); John H. Elliott's *Spain, Europe and the Wider World, 1500–1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). Sean McEnroe, *From Colony to Nationhood in Mexico: Laying the Foundations, 1560–1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Brian R. Hamnett's *A Concise History of Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-13679-3 - Forced Migration in the Spanish Pacific World: From Mexico to the Philippines, 1765–1811

Eva Maria Mehl

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by Cambridge University Press; Mercedes Maroto Camino's *Exploring the Explorers: Spaniards in Oceania, 1519–1794* (Manchester University Press, 2009); and John Gascoigne's *Encountering the Pacific in the Age of the Enlightenment* (University of Cambridge Press, 2014). While these scholars largely concentrate on cross-cultural encounters between Pacific Islanders and Europeans, in *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* (University of Cambridge Press, 2012) Matt Matsuda presents the Pacific region as an interconnected whole where the histories of Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the American Pacific coast are pieced together in what he calls "translocalism." Refreshing as well is Kristie Flannery's research on the Philippines in the broader context of the Spanish empire in the age of revolutions.¹⁹

Moreover, recent historiography is transforming the historical narrative of the Spanish Pacific with suggestive alternatives to the economically driven interpretations that have long dominated studies on Spain's historical relationship with the Pacific. From this perspective, my book can be placed alongside the efforts of scholars who have become increasingly aware of how the commercial activity of the Manila galleons created intellectual, cultural, and social linkages that affected the inhabitants of both ends of the route and even subjects in Spain. The works of these historians further exemplify the many interpretive possibilities that the inclusion of the Philippines opens up for historical enquiry in a heavily connected Pacific world.

It is not an easy task to enumerate the scholarly works that analyze exchanges across the Pacific that ran parallel to the well-known commercial ties. Here I refer to those that have influenced my research the most. Several authors have inspired me to think in terms of a global Spanish empire whose inhabitants developed a world conception that transcended geographical and administrative boundaries. For instance, Luke Clossey has proposed that the movements of people, ideas, money, and information across the Pacific in the seventeenth century displayed enough similarities with modern globalization to warrant the use of terms such as "global exchange" and "global awareness." Clossey finds that "a sense of geographical closeness" to China shaped the thoughts and actions of the administrators, missionaries, and explorers of the Americas, historical actors to whom he attributes a "global consciousness."²⁰ In a study

¹⁹ She is a graduate student at the History Department of the University of Austin, Texas.

²⁰ Luke Clossey, "Merchants, Migrants, Missionaries, and Globalization in the Early-Modern Pacific," *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 1 (2006): 57.