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"People, Places and Gossip: The Flow of Information in Colonial Mexico"

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People, Places, and Gossip: The Flow of Information in Colonial Mexico[1]

City and countryside are normally viewed as polarities. The former dominates the latter because cities concentrate individuals and institutions which have the power to affect remote hinterlands. Fernand Braudel captures this relationship when he calls great cities "planetary systems",[2] a term that also connotes the symbiosis between larger and smaller centers and between urban and rural in a region. That unity must be stressed because of the tendency to posit too sharp a division between city and country, one not experienced by people who moved indifferently from one to the other. In terms of the flow of information and the movement of people, city and country were complementary more than polar, the boundary between them blurred as people crossed back and forth according to need and inclination.

How did this work? Let us view New Spain and its outposts as an irregular grid consisting of roads and nodes, the second ranging in nature from the sleepy pace of isolated estancias to the cosmopolitan bustle of the viceregal capital itself. Traffic on the roads ebbed and flowed with the seasons, the rhythm of commerce, the feast days of the church calendar, and the size and importance of the places linked. Information was around--all around--but because it was carried mostly in the memories of men and women, it had an organic and random quality. To search out a particular piece of information could be difficult if one were at the wrong place at the wrong time. Moreover, information could be contradictory, garbled, vague, and incomplete, because the human vehicles of it inevitably revised, reinterpreted, forgot, added to, or emphasized one or another aspect of a topic. With ever-changing nuances to savor, information was endlessly fascinating because it never reached a final, definitive form.[3] And because knowers could err, distort, forget, move, or die, to get "correct" information surely was a hit and miss affair, just as systematic deception could be prolonged for long periods without detection.

What kind of information are we talking about? Below are detailed some examples. First, however, it is useful to remember François Chevalier's observation that people in early modern times were interested far more in other people than in "the relations between men and things".[4] We must not, therefore, overstress interpretive categories--class, caste, and race, for example--as if they were inherent in the data itself,[5] as if they had been primary organizing ideas in the minds of those whose past we seek to recover. On the contrary,

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[2] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. by Sian Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York, 1972 [1949, 1966]), vol. I, p. 327.

[3] In her fascinating account of the case of Martin Guerre, Natalie Zemon Davis implies that knowledge of "the imposture" existed at three levels: firstly, the "news of the imposture [that] began to circulate like other 'terrible' and 'marvelous' cases of murder, adultery, fire, and flood"; secondly, Jean de Coras's *Arrest Memorable*, the written account of a jurist; thirdly, the version held by the villagers of Artigat. Davis suggests that the written version was never taken as 'true'by the villagers. For outsiders without access to the oral tradition of the village, on the other hand, the written version, simply because it was written, pre-empted others that were not; Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 104, 125, 152n.

[4] François Chevalier, "New Perspectives and New Focuses on Latin American Research", Conference on Latin American History, *Newsletter*, 21 (Apr., 1985), p. 14.

[5] Unless, of course, they are.

analysis of the content of information as it was passed around and sought is a way to subordinate such categories to experience instead of imposing them on it in advance. In a larger study presently under way, I shall deal with the movement and accessibility of information by exploring in some detail four aspects: the grid, the carriers, the content, and the inquirers. Here, however, I should like to limit myself to some preliminary discussion of the grid.

Roads linking cities and towns formed the structure of a kind of informational grid. Information available in a given palce was roughly proportional to the size of its population and the rate at which people circulated in and through it. Novelties from the outside must have been welcome, especially if they could be attached in some way to people already known or known about. Because the monopoly system of commerce limited the number and significance of portals to the outside, Vera Cruz was obviously the prime place to seek out information from Spain. Don Juan Gómez Franco (born about 1694 in Barrameda, Spain) knew this but failed to take advantage of it.[6] For eighteen years he lived in New Spain without ever receiving news of his wife and daughter in Castile. Presuming but not verifying that his wife was dead, Gómez remarried. But at the same time he realized that she could be alive, became uneasy, and admitted his recklessness in the confessional. The priest orderd him to Vera Cruz "to investigate whether she were dead or alive". Later he claimed that from his home in Córdoba, very close to the port, he had made such trips both before and after the second marriage "whenever ships were in ...to ask after his wife and daughter". If he had in fact done this before his second marriage, apparently he did it more energetically afterward, when he heard two conflicting reports, both from men of San Lúcar. One said that his wife had married a farmer (*hombre de campo*), the other that she was dead. The resulting uncertainty created considerable anxiety for Gómez, "causing so much internal disquiet" that he was distant and transported to the point that "on ocassions his present wife would ask 'whats's with you?' or 'what's come over you?'" Before this, when Gómez had presumed that his first wife was dead, he may have believed what he *wanted* to believe.[7] The judges, in any case, did not excuse him, citing his presumption as a "frivolous excuse... when to investigate the truth... in Vera Cruz, where so many people arrive from his home region (*patria*), was a simple matter, while for his wife it was more difficult, because she did not know where her husband was after so many years without news".

The Inquisitors recognized here a well-established network and insisted that information was available at Vera Cruz. No excuses on the part of Gómez could justify the failure to secure it. What is more, in Córdoba Gómez was on one of the main routes between Vera Cruz and Mexico City. Not only did he have access to Vera Cruz itself, but also to virtually all recent arrivals from Spain. Because Vera Cruz was so highly regarded as a source of information, affidavits taken there automatically carried an extra measure of authority. At least Juan Antonio Chacón Gayon (born about 1661 in San Vizente de la Barquera, Burgos) thought so.[8] He travelled from Puebla to Vera Cruz to obtain forged testimony from an alleged eyewitness of the death and burial of his wife in Spain. Juan came up with a document that was easily dismissed by the judges. "It is not presumable or credible that a priest from the town of Laredo would write so awkwardly and with such poor orthography", they said, and besides" there are so many errors in the certification itself ...[which] is not even written on stamped paper". If Chacón's attempt to manufacture the evidence that he was free to marry failed, it was because he executed it clumsily, not because he misjudged the force that such an affidavit normally carried. There was, after all, a similar logic at work when

[6]Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico (hereafter AGN), Inquisición, vol. 972, exp. 1.

[7]Dolores Enciso Rojas deals with this aspect of the Inquisition case files in her "Perversión de la memoria: las mentiras de los bígamos", in *La memoria y el olvido: Segundo Simposio de Historia de las Mentalidades* (Mexico City, 1985), pp. 153-163. Bartolomé Bennassar says that those accused of bigamy routinely used the defense that a spouse was dead; see his, *The Spanish Character: Attitudes and Mentalities from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Benjamín Keen (Berkeley, 1979), p. 291n.

[8]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 699.

the Inquisitors found fault with Lorenzo de Otalora Carvajal (born about 1626 in Antequera) for not verifying properly his wife's death.[9] That Lorenzo was a slave did not make him any less respnsible for obtaining necessary information. "With Guatemala [where his wife was] so close to Oaxaca", they asked, "and with the two cities having so much communication between them", why had he not made more effort to "know if it were true that the said mulatto Blas had killed... his wife?" Even to trust the word of a notary, as Lorenzo had done, was no excuse.

A node could be any place where people within some sort of community could pool their individual knowledge and perceptions. The process was a constant set of interactions focused primarily on the fierce curiosity to know about one another. Much to his dismay, Gerónimo de Rivera (born about 1570 in Seville) found that information that his wife was alive and well found its way to the small mining camp of Cuencamé all the way from Seville.[10] In fact, mining camps could be alive with information because transients of many types arrived regularly with news of the outside world. Juan Joseph de Ortega (born about 1715 in Guadalcázar?), resident in the mining camp of Guadalcázar virtually all of his life, noted that in his lifetime "many bonanzas" had brought to the district "many people from every corner of the kingdom with every possible trade".[11] As a miner and (probably more importantly) as majordomo of the *cofradía* of San Joseph, a post which entailed travelling the district and collecting contributions, Ortega said he knew "most of the people" who had resided in the area. When the time came, the Inquisiton called upon Ortega's intimate knowledge of the people of his district, a knowledge that encompassed even an obscure '*coyote*' resident only a few years on an outlying ranch.

People acquired information about each other because they were curious. What they gleaned remained as a curiosity to chat about as long as nothing suspicious emerged to pass on to authorities. Residents took particular interest in new arrivals, even familiar types such as the itinerant trader coming with his goods on muleback. Manuel Ángel Domínguez (born about 1718 in Villa de Trigueros), for example, had been engaged in this petty commerce for seven months ("siete meses de viandantes") when late one afternoon he entered the mining camp of Mesquital (district of Cuencamé).[12] That same night a notary, at the priest's behest, summoned him. The priest wanted to know about Domínguez's marital status and the whereabouts of his wife, this in spite of the trader's claim to be single. Although the monitoring of the morals of his community by the priest was more or less standard, it is important to stress that it was not a one-man job. Those with authority relied on the network of curious residents that made it impossible for strangers and transients to be anonymous as they stopped at isolated settlements. Indeed even when strangers were personally not considered suspicious they were nevertheless objects of considerable attention to be probed for news of people and events. Don Pedro Joseph Calzido of the mining camp of Cosalá, also a priest, ilustrates the process. As two strangers conversed one day, he stood by listening.[13] The circumstances were as ordinary as the people. Don Clemente, a carpenter, was talking in the anteroom of a private house to a man named Rivera, probably his helper, about an obscure vagabond named Juan Esteban Pacheco. Don Pedro perked up his ears on hearing that Pacheco's wife had been 'stolen' (*hurtado*) by some robbers shortly after she married him. Making a mental note of this tidbit, he carefully recalled it later for the Inquisition when Pacheco was investigated for bigamy.

[9]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 610, exp. 11, f. 233-384. I discuss this case in more detail in "Slavery and the Inquisition in New Spain: A Note on the 'Closed System' Thesis of Stanley Elkins", in Jeffrey Cole, ed., *The Church and Society in Latin American History* (New Orleans, 1984), pp. 125-137.

[10]Huntington Library - 12 - HM 35106 - Pt. 2. The date of Rivera's trial was 1603, only two years after the mining camp was settled. He may have been among the first to arrive at a time of rapid settlement of the area, for Vázquez de Espinosa reports 120 vecinos and many transients there in 1604; Peter Gerhard, *The North Frontier of New Spain* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 192-195.

[11]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1180, fols. 14-98.

[12]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1066, exp. 4.

[13]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1088, fols. 211-274. Br. don Pedro's testimony was recorded by a notary on 11 December 1761.

People in small, out-of-the-way places with few distractions and a slow pace (such as Cosalá) eagerly snatched at scraps of information, whether generated locally or from afar. Those with something to hide kept their secrets in these outposts with difficulty. San Miguel de Panzacola, a distant presidio on the very edge of the viceroyalty, is another example. Francisco Xavier Ponce de León, in charge of a squad (*escuadra*) there for ten years, injured a vertebra and returned to central Mexico.[14] At the presidio, he had known Joseph Miguel Reyes (born about 1730 in Calpulalpan) for four years. Disabled with a broken bone, Reyes, a former soldier,had become a storekeeper. He was married, the father ot two, and compadre of Ponce de León. All of this was normal enough and no cause for suspicion as long as details of Reyes' other marriage remained hidden. However, while Ponce de León was stopping over in the village of Calpulalpan (jurisdiction of Tezcuco), he conversed with the village storekeeper and found out that his surname was Reyes. Ponce de León picked up on this and mentioned Joseph Miguel, his compadre and the man's namesake in Panzacola. The at first happy coincidence that the men were brothers followed. But as they chatted Ponce de León shocked the storekeeper with news that Joseph Miguel had remarried in Panzacola, and the storekeeper Ponce de León with word that his absent brother already had a wife here in Calpulalpan. Ponce de León verified the information by speaking to the alleged wife, and then proceeded to Mexico City where he denounced his compadre to the Inquisition.

They way that apparently innocuous information about Joseph Miguel moved from a small presidio in the north to an insignificant village in the center of New Spain indicates that nodes--places where information was transmitted--d'd not have to be important centers or even places on well-travelled roads. On the contrary, the intensity with which available information was worked over by people in smaller centers was inversely proportional to their size and the amount of traffic passing through them--rough indicators, in turn, as noted above, of how much information was introduced and circulated through the system of a local center. A resident of Calpulalpan or Panzacola was far more likely than a resident of Mexico City, for example, to have complete knowledge of the people of his district. Catalina Rodríguez, resident most of her life in Dominican haciendas around Las Amilpas, told Inquisitors that a free mulatto, Juan Luis, could not possibly be married "because if he were she would have known it, having always been in contact with him, with his pueblo of Yguala, and with other places where he goes..."[15] Seventy-year-old Miguel de Montoya used exactly the same negative inference: "if [María Hernández] were dead it would have been public knowledge in the said village of Cantillana where her father and brothers live".[16] Within sub-regions, especially isolated ones with a brisk regional traffic, knowledge of the people of a small network of towns circulated rapidly and efficiently. Juan Antonio Mascareñas (born about 1700 in, or on the road to, Santa Fe) married a second time thinking that his first wife was dead.[17] After about a year, a Joseph Flores, native of Querétaro and fellow soldier, told Juan that he had been in Sinaloa and had seen his wife. Juan, stationed in Cerro Gordo, got a twelve-day pass with the intention not to return but to go to Guadalajara and turn himself in to the Inquisition. His actual movements, however, reveal that he wanted to double check what Joseph had told him. He went to Indé and then to the mining camp of Canelas near Guadiana, asking in each place for news of his wife. Then, in Guapuquilla, his father-in-law, Leonisio Nuñez, told him that in a mail run he had just made, he had heard in Chihuahua that the first wife was alive. This seemed to be the final link that convinced Juan that he had indeed committed bigamy.

[14]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1013. Ponce de León's first appearance before the Inquisitors is dated 3 October 1760.
[15]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 310, exp. 3. Catalina's deposition is dated December, 1614.
[16]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 23, exp. 10, fols. 166-266 (24 July 1553).
[17]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 824, exp. 12, fols. 74-197.

The mastery of local information was so complete that however distant from his town, a resident was, at least for a time, in possession of virtually all of it, even as he was collecting more to be added later to the common pool of his circle of contacts. Felipe Rodríguez (born about 1725 in Chinconautla), after about 25 years of residence in the village of Zumpango, took off with his team of mules, apparently not intending to return.[18] After some seven or eight years away, while on the road to San Juan del Río, he ran into Alexandro Leonardo, a vezino of Zumpango. With Alexandro he sent back the cheerful message: "tell everyone in Zumpango that I am well and have suffered no setbacks" (avía seguido ninguna vejación). In fact, this passing meeting on the road allowed Felipe to control the information that was to go back to his home village. Had Alexandro seen Felipe in his new home, however, he would have seen that he had remarried, information that would have led to his prosecution had it got back to Zumpango.

Any gathering of people, however temporary, *ipso facto* formed an expanded pool of information. Such a gathering later worked to Felipe's disadvantage one Thursday at the plaza of Guadalupe. A cousin of Felipe's first wife (also from Zumpango) spotted Felipe while selling maize in the plaza and was curious about his companion. He activated the network around him and from "one and another" discovered that canon Malpica of Valladolid employed both men and that Felipe was married there. Thus Felipe was discovered, and the relative took the information to Mexico City where he denounced Felipe to the Inquisition.

The contrast in Felipe's fortunes at the hands of his wife's cousin and his *paisano* Alexandro points to two crucial aspects of information transfer. One had to have enough, and one had to have the context or interest to attach significance to it. The quantity could vary from very little indeed, say a mere fragment of an overheard conversation, to detailed reports from eyewitnesses. Moreover, information sufficient for one to assign significance was not for another because the crucial factor was not information as such, but the connecting of new information with old. In the case above the cousin of an abandoned woman was not collecting information disinterestedly, but rather was probing for some explanation for Felipe's behavior toward his cousin.[19] Thus nodes were the reservoirs of information but people were the contact points whose questions and sensibilities activated bits of it into *significant* information.

Mexico City was the ultimate node, housing temporarily and sometimes permanently individuals and clusters of people who themselves were fragments of other *patrias chicas*. People from even the smallest villages could find others there with current news from home. Take Juan Antonio Ramírez (born about 1716 in Puebla), who spent most of his early life in the fishing village of Alvarado.[20] Ramírez left Alvarado after surprising his wife in the act of adultery. Thrusting his knife violently but, as it turned out, inaccurately, into the mantled lovers huddled on the bed, he thought that he had killed her. His inference seemed confirmed when a letter from his sister-in-law reached him in Mexico City. The letter, he said, reported that "he had wounded [his wife] so severely in the breast that she had died". He claimed that it had been delivered by the brother of the woman's husband, Pasqual Bravo, traveling to Mexico City in the service of an employer based in Vera Cruz. Pasqual handed it to him "at the corner of San Bernardo", and because Ramírez couldn't read he went to a store in front of the monastery and asked a young man there to read it.[21] Another relative of his wife, Manuel

[18]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1156.

[19]This point will be analyzed further in a larger study when I consider in more detail the carriers of information and variations of categories for assessing significance.

[20]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1341. Gerhard, after Bishop Mota y Escobar, characterizes the port early in the seventeenth century as "a colony of Greek fishermen intermarried with Negroes", and in the eighteenth as populated mostly by mulattoes; Peter Gerhard, *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 361-62.

[21]Although one street does not make a 'corner', the text reads "en la esquina de San Bernardo". Nor does it help that the convent was located in the middle of a block of the Calle de la celada, called calle de San Bernardo from the middle of the seventeenth century after San Bernardo was founded. The nearest corner was with Bajos de San Agustín and in a loose way the reference might be to that corner; see maps in Antonio García Cubas, *El Libro de mis Recuerdos*, sixth ed. (Mexico City, 1969), p. 173, and in Richard Boyer, "La ciudad de México en 1628: la visión de Juan Gómez de Trasmonte", *Historia Mexicana*, 115 (Enero-Marzo 1980), facing p. 452. Additional details can be found in José María Marroqui, *La ciudad de México*, 3 vols., second ed. (fascimile) (Mexico City, 1969), I, pp. 615ff.

Bravo, came to Mexico City about a month later to claim his share of his father's estate. Ramírez bumped into Manuel at the corner of San Felipe Neri[22] and again received confirmation that his wife was dead. A third confirmation came from Joachín, a mestizo native of Mexico City but resident for most of his life in Alvarado. Somehow, probably as a small merchant, Joachín continued to keep a foot in both places, "living part of the time in the port", according to Ramírez, "and part in this city". Ramírez ran into Joachín in Mexico City's second-hand market (*baratillo*) "a year before the epidemic" and they discussed news of Alvarado. Joachín told him that his wife had died of "fevers".[23] Two years later, the two men met again in the same market, where Joachín was selling black trousers. Ramírez took a pair on credit and as they chatted found that Joachín had travelled from Alvarado with Gregorio Zamudio, a *vecino* of the port. Ramírez then looked up Gregorio to confirm for a fourth time the certainty of his wife's death.

Although Ramírez seemed to suffer from a nagging uncertainty, he surely had good reason to believe his wife dead. From Mexico City one could contact good informants in order to keep surprisingly close tabs on a small, isolated, and distant village, and *vice versa*. Towns and villages received news of their native sons through periodic contact with the information pool of the metropolis. Joseph Antonio Rozete (born about 1733 in Tepetlapa) was the subject of such a reserve flow of information back to the provinces.[24] At the church of San Francisco, Joseph ran into María de los Dolores, whom he had not seen for five years. At one time both had been vecinos of the town of Chiautla, but María had moved to Piatla. Now each was in Mexico City to celebrate the festival of Guadalupe. María asked Joseph about his trip and Joseph, among other bits of information that María was to recall later, replied that he had come by foot and that he was married to an Antonia Navarro. María perked up at this because she had known Joseph as married in Chiautla. Back in Piatla she recounted the story of her trip to friends and neighbors, no doubt with particular attention to the significant bit she had learned about Joseph. Pablo Marcelino, a vecino of Tehuacán, was in her house on that ocasion. He corroborated her suspicion, for he had seen Joseph living as a married man in Tehuacán for some four years. As soon as he returned, he denounced Joseph to agents of the Inquisition.

In this way, through direct contact with the person involved, information worked its way from Mexico City out to the towns. More indirectly, Ana Niño, a mestiza from Valle de Barranca but now living in Los Reyes, kept getting reports from Mexico City that her husband Diego was married there.[25] Perhaps because the information was somewhat uncertain, or perhaps because she did not know what to do if it were true, Ana did not act. However, the son of the *padrino* of her marriage, still resident in Valle de Barranca, was travelling through Los Reyes, which provided the ocassion to see Ana. As he talked with her she mentioned the disquieting news from Mexico City, which he then reported to agents of the Inquisition. But what happened exactly in Mexico City that such news was picked up and brought to people such as Ana? We have already seen long-separated acquaintances meeting at the festival of Guadalupe. We have also seen a long-absent muleteer noticed when he showed up at the plaza of Zumpango on market day. Another variant that exemplifies behavior typical of many can be seen in the actions of Christóval Hernández (born about 1555 in Medina del Campo).[26] Hernández, a vecino and resident of Mexico City, had also resided for five years or so in the mining camp of Sombrerete.

[22]Again the wording here is "encontró en la esquina de San Felipe Neri". San Felipe gives onto a plaza that becomes a direct, if narrow, passageway to the Cathedral three blocks or so to the east. The reference here could be to that plaza or it might refer to a nearby corner.

[23]There is no indication that Ramírez saw this as a discrepancy from his earlier assumption that she had died of his stab wounds. His original presumption, of course, could encompass the notion that death was not instantaneous but delayed and accompanied by infection and "fevers".

[24]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1062, exp. 2.

[25]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 134, exp. 9.

[26]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 308, fols. 110-111.

On Tuesday, 18 August 1615, he entered the Cathedral and noticed two letters on a small box (*cajuela*) next to the font of holy water, one opened and the other sealed. The address on both was nearly the same: "Antonio Rodríguez, may God protect in the Indies in New Spain, postage one tostón". Because he had known Rodríguez for five years in Sombrerete, Hernández took the letters to send them north "at the first opportunity". As he read the opened letter, however,he was startled to discover that Rodríguez' wife in Moguer had given birth to a son on 24 October 1614. But because Rodríguez had a wife in Sombrerete, where he was "vecino and resident", Hernández reported his suspicions to the Holy Office of the Inquisition, handing them also the evidence of the letters.[27]

Tracing the steps of Hernández in this way gives us a glimpse of how some ordinary routines intersected with the aquisition and processing of information. Entry into the church, the glance at the letters, the reflex to forward the two of them, the reading of the opened one, were not decisions but habits. The connections that he soon made, however, amounted to new information: the suspicion that his friend was a bigamist. Such a suspicion, Hernández well knew, must not to be kept to oneself. He passed it on immediately to its proper custodians.

Was the behavior of Hernández only characteristic of the capital? Probably it was not. People in centers of any size would have done much the same thing: the difference was not in process but scale. In Mexico City there was more information, fed by a wider range of sources, renewed more frequently, all permitting more and faster connections. Information lying inertly in the Cathedral in the form of undelivered letters was more likely to be activated, brought into the streets, and attached to people more quickly, because so much more traffic passed through that cathedral than any other. However obscure an individual, however distant in the provinces, Mexico City was the place to look for him. Take for example Alonso Guerra (born about 1544 in Bohadilla de Rioseco, two leagues from Villalón), for sixteen years missing in the Indies without a word.[28] After twelve years, in what must have been one of many attempts to locate him, his wife Catalina (now in Cantillana) wrote to Pedro Rodríguez, her uncle in Cartagena, asking him to look for Alonso. Pedro had no luck in Cartagena but eventually made it to Mexico City, travelling with a coffle of black slaves to sell there. Because he presumed that Alonso was in the cattle business, he approached three men in the main square one day, in appearance also cattlemen, and inquired about Alonso. The strangers indeed knew of him and said that he lived out toward Santa Ana. Later, a carter delivering fodder told Pedro that his master was Alonso's compadre, godfather of one of his children. Furthermore Alonso himself was a carter, he said, at least on occasion, although in the old country he was said to have been a scribe (*escribano*). With this Pedro was convinced he had found the missing husband.

The continual circulation of people in Mexico City plus the size of the metropolis, made it a place to find out information. For the same reasons, paradoxically, some anonymity was possible there. Yet fugitives of whatever type could go unnoticed or forge new identities for only so long. Eventually travelers from even the most obscure and far-flung places passed through the city to recognize and greet their compatriot or, as the case might be, to expose an alleged compatriot as a fraud. Here the comings and goings of people were important but, even more, the process occurred as a matter of course because everyone collected and passed on information about paisanos, relatives, neighbors, and even strangers. María Guadalupe Delgadillo (born about 1760 in Texcuco) ran away from her husband in Tepespa (doctrina of San Juan Teotihuacán) twice, each time going to Mexico City.[29] The first occasion she took refuge in the convent of San Lorenzo, where

[27]This file is as interesting as it is fragmentary. There is no indication that it went beyond Hernández' initial denunciation. One of the letters is inserted in the file (fol. 111). A substantive problem that cannot be resolved with the documentation is that Rodríguez appears to have resided in Sombrerete for five years or so and the baby obviously was conceived in January, 1613. Hernández, I think, mistook his friend in Sombrerete for the Rodríguez of the letters. Others with similar suspicions did more checking before going to the Inquisition.

[28]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 256, exp. 5.

[29]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1192, fols. 1-85.

she earned her keep as a servant. Behind the convent walls, María remained unnoticed for five months, but when she ventured into the street "to find a cure" for an illness, relatives of her husband spotted her. They took María in tow, brought her back to their house, and returned her to Tepespa. Returning to Mexico City a second time, María followed the same pattern: she obtained work as a servant in a private home, did the same in three different convents, and then returned to her original employer. This time, even though she wrote to her husband scolding him for mistreating her and asking him to change, she eluded his relatives and acquaintances for five years or so. Then, with grave consequences, she called attention to herself by contracting a second marriage. She took this step, she said, after talking to "some Indians from Tepespa, selling chickens at the Palace Fountain" and hearing from them that her husband was dead.

With María one sees how Mexico City could function in these several phases. It was a place to hide and to be found. And whether one was lying low or searching, it was a vantage point to glean news from home villages, choosing informants with discretion, if necessary, to minimize publicity. The trick for a woman, perhaps, was to remain cloistered as much as possible, stay away from the busy streets, and be watchful. Shrouding oneself in a rebozo surely made it easier to keep an eye on others while shielding one's own features from view.

Hypólita de Alcántara's (born about 1666 in Mexico City) avoidance of her husband Mathías, though both were in Mexico City at the same time, shows what could be done. Her evasion began when Mathías was caught stealing and sentenced to four years of labor in an *obraje*.[30] Although she stayed with him for a few months or so, the "bad life" (*mala vida*) was too much to endure, she said, and she ran off.[31] Probably as a stopgap, she worked for a short time at the convent of San Bernardo, and then she joined the household of the Condesa de Peñalba where she remained for eight years. She moved in with her mother just before testifying before the judges of the Inquisition. It is notable, then, that during and after her husband's four-year incarceration she lived undetected in the same city. After he was released and back on the streets, she managed to stay hidden even as she kept track of him. She said that he was easy to spot because he was so disfigured ("por ser tan orroroso de condición"), an appearance also described by the notary of the Inquisition: "body thin; face dark, long, and withered; beard and moustache graying; forehead scarred in the middle; eyes dark; upper teeth missing, bottom ones rotten". By watching Mathías, Hypólita knew when he moved into his parents' house near the Alameda and when he moved to Puebla with Matheo, like her husband, a trained embroiderer (*bordador*). And even as Hypólita was avoiding Mathías, he, after his release from the obraje, was searching for her (por muchas y varias diligencias) in a little drama of hide-and-seek that lasted about a year and a half before Mathías moved on.

Other cases could be discussed to illustrate in more detail how communication moved within and between cities, towns, and countryside. The framework for that communication I have characterized as a network of nodes stitched together by roads. On the basis of this sketch, a few conclusions seem justified. The conditioning factor for everything else was that the flow of people between every kind of place--city, town, port, or mining camp--was constant and itself a topic to be talked about. This ebb and flow of a large population carried information as a living repertoire to be recounted, played with, embellished, simplified, or interpreted as the case might be. To a considerable degree that information took as its subject matter people. People never tired of talking with and about each other. They also made a clear distinction between information considered amusing, curious, entertaining, or harmlessly scandalous, and that which indicated moral or criminal culpability. The latter they invariably reported to local authorities or to agents of the Inquisition. It was not in vain that that tribunal counted on the cooperation of the populace for its investigations, for indeed it was a popular institution.

[30]AGN, Inquisición, vol. 547, leg. 8.
[31]Mathías stated that she had remained with him for two months, Hypólita that it had been a year.