Distance and Documents at the Spanish Empire's Periphery

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Introduction
ON SEEING DISTANCES

We have become increasingly accustomed, over the last half-century, to the idea that the globe is shrinking. If travel is fast, communication is faster. The instantaneous delivery of messages that would previously have taken days or weeks has done curious things to our sense of distance, so that space and time, those two reliable measures of remoteness, seem at times entirely eroded. What does distance mean when such previously formidable obstacles can be so easily overlooked? Surely distance has not disappeared entirely. Despite the illusion of universal proximity, there are yet ways of being remote and distant in our day.\textsuperscript{1} Distance, it seems, is not so much about a spatial measure as it is about the endurance of those obstacles: space and time. In some cases they endure where they have been carefully cultivated as barriers from a world perceived as fast-paced; in other cases they endure where resources are scarce and the means cannot be found to overcome them. So, even now, not every place is equally connected and distance is, undeniably, relative and flexible. In this sense, there is little difference between our conception of distance and that of people in the colonial Atlantic world. Distance was then, as it is now, less a question of measurement and more a question of perspective.

Pertinent as it is to both modern and colonial life, I did not begin the research for this book with the intention of studying the conception of distance. It seems now that nothing could be more central to the workings of the Spanish empire, stretching so far across four continents that, as the saying goes, the sun across it never set. But, in fact, I began at the margins of the topic, both spatially and thematically, and I only fully perceived distance as a central research problem after some time.

The discovery of the problem began with a series of perplexing questions that arose while reading a document, an Inquisition case from the early
Documenting Distance: Form and Content

This level of discussion is beyond reach for the idiotic men who sit on the . . . council of the town of San Pedro Carchá, and however useless their questions, it would be equally useless to reply. *Vale.*

—Anonymous Guatemalan official, 1792

It may be that in some cases distance presented an opportunity for people in the Spanish empire. Certainly the “witches” in Escuintla benefited from their remote placement on Guatemala’s Pacific coast, far from the punishing presence of the Mexico City tribunal. But distance was, undeniably, also an obstacle. From the point of view of officials attempting to maintain the rule of law or merely gather information, distance created serious problems. One solution, of course, could be found in sending delegates: trusted individuals who would carry the norms and expectations of the center to the periphery. At times, however, “idiotic” delegates at the periphery failed to fulfill expectations. Even when delegates were reliable, those individuals had to find a way to report back, and documents provided an essential means of overcoming the obstacles posed by distance.

This chapter begins the discussion of this process by examining how both the form and content of documents reflected the imperatives of distance. Documents were initiated, elaborated, and concluded by many authors in various places and times: they were produced along a temporal-spatial route. But the intervals of time and space embedded in a document do not stand out because authors intentionally reduced them. Indeed, protocols were developed to deliberately flatten the effects of distance and to ensure that officials everywhere wrote in ways that were universally intelligible. Distance alone did not give rise to these protocols, but the impediments of distance certainly informed them.

Similarly, document content responded to the problems posed by distance. Most obviously, officials in Spain could not “see” the Americas. They relied continuously on American officials to make it visible and knowable. Concentrating on questionnaires written in Spain and the official reports—*visitas* and *relaciones*—written from Guatemala in reply, this
Dangerous Distance:
A Visita by Archbishop Cortés y Larraz

The true solution would be to congregate the towns in more well-appointed locations; in this manner the four annexed towns could become one and they would be placed on favorable land and not at such great distances, among hidden nooks and high peaks, where they gain only freedom from good conscience and freedom to disobey the law.
—Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz, describing the parish of Opico

Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz distinguished himself from other writers of geographical descriptions of Guatemala in many ways: among these, by his willingness to propose a solution to distance. But the archbishop also went further than other officials in identifying and articulating distance as a problem. Not content to merely observe the great obstacles posed by poor roads and impenetrable jungle, the archbishop argued that such obstacles created sizeable dangers in the form of “freedom.” Though Cortés y Larraz may have written of these dangers more explicitly than other authors, the assumptions about distance underlying his arguments are not unique to him. At the Spanish peripheries, distance from ecclesiastical and secular authorities was a problem that imperiled the spiritual and moral health of the empire.

Focusing on the visita written by Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz in the late 1760s, this chapter examines how the conception of routes and key administrative centers, established in Chapter 1 as fundamental to many cuestionarios and relaciones, likewise influenced the archbishop’s understanding of distance and space. Archbishop Cortés y Larraz, who visited more than one hundred parishes in Guatemala and wrote a multi-volume illustrated visita, placed a great deal of descriptive emphasis on the route that he traveled. He thought carefully about how to measure the route, and his text places importance on rendering the length and conditions of each route for his prospective readers. Similarly, Cortés y Larraz emphasized central places, and distances to them, in his study of each parish. Placing the parish seat conceptually at the center, other towns, haciendas, and settlements were understood in terms of their distance from it.

This chapter also continues the consideration of “distant” as a pejorative term, in certain usage, for contemporaries in colonial Guatemala.
The Mail in Time

MOVING DOCUMENTS

My Dear Sirs—My pen is incapable of expressing the tragic consequences visited upon this city (that was once Guatemala) by the many and forceful earthquakes, the heavy and copious torrents of rain that fell at the same time... And I must tell you that all the goods, letters, notices, and papers sent on June 1 to these kingdoms and all of the monthly mail to and from the provinces lie entombed—buried in the fragments and ruins of the roof and walls of the old office, such that to send you this letter, we have been forced to take refuge under a straw roof in the little plaza of San Pedro.1

—Don Simón de Larrazábal,
Administrator of the Guatemalan mail, August 1, 1773

To travel like a letter in colonial Guatemala entailed something very different in 1700 than it did in 1800. By the time Antonio José de Irisarri traveled with a correo in the early nineteenth century, the Guatemalan mail system was a fairly efficient and reliable means of moving documents across the isthmus and farther, to Mexico and Spain. But the development of such a system occurred only in Irisarri’s time. For much of the colonial period, the mail system was an unreliable and above all sluggish means of communication.

Concentrating primarily on the operation of the mail system in the Bourbon period, this chapter argues that the regular and frequent exchange of documents did not become possible in Guatemala until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In this period, the pace of communication grew systematic and more places were incorporated into regional mail routes. This change in pace would greatly influence the type and genre of document sent through the mail. It would also influence the conception of space and distance, as communication from previously “distant” places became more readily accessible.

Taking It to the Periphery

OVERLAND MAIL CARRIERS

I, Blas Cabrera, his majesty's mail carrier, with all due re-
spect . . . state: That the receipt here enclosed . . . by the
Administrator of the mail in this kingdom, proves that I
delivered to the office in his care the closed mail trunk con-
taining the correspondence from land and sea pertaining to
the roundtrip journey that I undertook to Oaxaca.1

—Blas Cabrera, official mail carrier, 1773

The correos, or mail carriers, of late eighteenth and early nineteenth
century Guatemala covered hundreds of leagues on foot and on horse-
back. Traveling as far north as Oaxaca and as far south as Costa Rica,
they passed through cities, Indian towns, and long stretches of uninhab-
ited terrain. Some correos served the postal system for fifteen or twenty
years, journeying across Guatemala almost monthly. But even those
who worked as correos for less time engaged in far more long-distance
travel than the average person in colonial Guatemala. They experienced
the journey to distant peripheries more often than others. Sources about
correos therefore not only document how the peripheries were reached;
they also offer a far more textured impression of what reaching the pe-
ripheries actually entailed.

The first three sections of this chapter focus on these correos in the co-
lonial period, considering who they were, what their work required, and
how their extensive travels informed a particular conception of distance.
These shed light on the economic motivations, social violence, and inter-
ethnic relationships that marked the correo experience. The last section of
the chapter considers correo travel in the context of the early nineteenth
century, when a changing conception of distance redefined space, place,
and political boundaries for Guatemalan society as a whole.

Carrying the mail in late colonial Guatemala demanded of correos a
continual balancing act. The dangers of the road—insufficient supplies,
injury, banditry, inclement weather—could result in illness, assault, or
even death. Correo travel consequently required a certain mettle, and as
it tipped toward bravado, this necessary willingness to confront danger
frequently brought its own, equally dangerous kind of peril. Officially,
correos worked for the Spanish crown, but they often intentionally or un-
5 The Distant Archive

I hereby order that from now on all decrees and letters . . . be stored in the archive of the audiencia and that a book be made to keep an accurate inventory of them so that they may be understood and obeyed with the greatest facility. ¹

—King Philip II, 1597

As Guatemalan peripheries shifted, distancing Spain and bringing formerly marginal places to the fore, a concurrent and related change occurred in how documents were stored. Chapter 4 has argued that while routes remained important to the imagining of places linked by distances, the perception of Guatemalan space into coterminous territories defined by political boundaries came into focus. It has also argued that conventions in correspondence changed, as the denser and more efficient mail system facilitated the creation of local correspondence “circuits” where previously the far-flung itinerary and radial modes of document travel had entirely dominated. As the next two chapters argue, the related manner of storing documents transformed as well, beginning in the late colonial period and continuing in the national period.

In the colonial period, the documents carried by Guatemalan correos traveled to the desks of ecclesiastical authorities and merchants, to the homes of individuals, and to officials in every corner of the Spanish empire. But once documents had traveled a particular spatial-temporal route through the audiencia, their travels did not end. Many of the official documents carried by correos traveled across the Atlantic or to a neighboring audiencia only to be stored for short or long periods of time in archives. These two stages of the document’s voyage were not unrelated; indeed, a pause in an archive was often simply a resting point in the creation of a composite document. The escribanos who kept colonial archives were also crucial to their composition and movement. Yet in the national period, the gradual transformation of composite documents made for documents with shorter life spans. Documents traveled from point of origin to point of receipt and remained there, their single journey complete. The archivists who replaced escribanos had less of a role in document creation and
The Inventories of Guatemalan Archivists

Despite my continuing poor health, I have gone to the Customs Office to review the ancient archive of the escribanta de cámara, which is currently a mountain of scrap-paper piled in a room; it has been moved to a large storeroom within the customs house, and the bundles have been placed on skids so that the necessary sorting might begin.¹
—Miguel Talavera, Guatemalan archivist, in 1836

In the nineteenth century, the role of escribano changed. While escribanos del número (otherwise known as escribanos de provincia) essentially continued their work as public notaries, certain government escribanos found their work divided and distributed among various officials. In some cases, the position of government escribano was dissolved, to be replaced by a secretary or archivist.² After 1825, government escribanos were appointed as national escribanos at the federal level or state escribanos at the state level.³ Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, as the colonial bureaucracy was recast and to some extent replaced by the bureaucracies of the federal and national governments, the tasks previously delegated to escribanos fell largely to secretaries, archivists, and notaries. Archives had been nodes of communication in the colonial period. They now became repositories of stationary documents whose only travel would be temporal. Divorced from the processes of creating and moving documents relating to political affairs of the moment, archivists became custodians of the past.

The formal transformation of the escribano position and, more importantly, the changing political boundaries of the former audiencia, left Guatemalan archives in a state of considerable disarray. However, despite the period of chaos caused by the wars for independence, which prevented the smooth transfer of papers from escribanos to archiveros (archivists), continuities of method are evident. Two comprehensive efforts were made to organize the government archives in the Guatemalan capital, the first in the 1830s and the second in the 1840s. These attempts at organization mark the beginning of Guatemala’s national archival system. The early archivists of Guatemala’s national archives both preserved and modified the practices of colonial escribanos. One important continuity was the reliance on document inventories. As late as the end of the nineteenth century,
In the summer of 1993 I began a long stay in Tucurrique, Costa Rica, a town I had lived in for some years as a child but could not remember. A Costa Rican friend later laughed at the mention of Tucurrique, saying that though he had never heard of the town, the word meant something like “that out of the way place” or “that corner in the middle of nowhere.” And, in fact, Tucurrique felt to me on that trip like a place in the middle of nowhere. I flew to San José, took a bus to Turrialba, waited for a bus connection, and then took another bus to Tucurrique. We passed more than one mud slide on the winding dirt road, and the River Reventazón, as the name suggests, was swollen to bursting with muddy water. The months I spent in Tucurrique were profoundly disorienting in the way an extended dislocation always is the first time. On the one hand I found myself in a kind of earthly paradise, a valley where you could pick fruit off the trees and then in the afternoon watch the clouds roll in to dump rain of biblical proportions on the corrugated aluminum roofs. On the other hand, being among habits and livelihoods so new to me threw off my inner compass, so that I could no longer remember why certain things mattered and others didn’t. Every few weeks I visited friends in San José and reminded myself, vaguely and not too persuasively, of what the world had previously been like. Even there, it was difficult to remember. The Miami airport where I’d made my connection months earlier seemed a hazy, fictional place that I might have imagined.

When, many years later, I read the geographical report by engineer Luis Diez de Navarro, who in 1744 traveled throughout the Kingdom of Guatemala reporting on the state of the provinces, I was astonished to see Tucurrique lying, seemingly unchanged, in the middle of his description. “Going along the latter [route],” he wrote, “one finds two Villages