In this monograph, Mary E. van Deusen studies over 100 lawsuits brought forth by enslaved individuals who originated in Europe’s overseas domains in sixteenth-century Spain. Following the truism that slavery is about routes rather than roots, van Deusen’s aim is to reconstruct the ruptures and transitions experienced by slaves, as well as the ways they formed new contacts, identities, and selves. She follows the history of these individuals from their moment and place of captivity, through their forced migration to the household where they would be kept, and into the courtroom where they would petition for their liberty. Because after the New Laws of 1542 Indios originating in Spanish domains could no longer be enslaved (unless they fell under very particular categories such as captivity in “just war,” cannibalism, and so forth), these petitions for liberty hinged on the ability of petitioners to prove that they were Indians and that they originated from Spanish domains. As a result, petitioners, slave owners, witnesses, experts, and judges all debated the questions of who these Indians were, how they could be recognized, and how their origins could be ascertained. Van Deusen describes the fascinating processes of “perception and naming” and “sense-making” (p.17), which involved story telling as well as contestation. They included references to genealogy, physiognomy and branding, but mainly depended on diverse bits of information, speculation and rumors. In the process of attempting to identify who was who, certain individuals were selected as experts because they had travelled widely or were familiar with, or pretended to be familiar with, non-Europeans. To determine a petitioner’s place of origin, most sought to construct the routes the petitioner took: from where, and on which ship did they travel. Knowledge regarding European overseas territories, peoples, cultures, and languages was essential, leading litigants, slave owners, experts, witnesses, and judges to strategically reconstruct geographies that most of them were profoundly unfamiliar with. Requiring on occasion that these actors describe which power controlled which territory, these discussions thus forced individuals to answer questions that even the courts were unable to resolve. Common-sense assumptions, such as Indians always associated with one another, were also made.
These questions involving both people and places were never asked in the abstract. Instead, they were invoked in order to reach a particular decision, or resolve a particular situation or request. As a result, classifications were profoundly relational and contextual, rather than being theoretically sound, necessarily logical, or permanent. They acquired a meaning (and a significance) in specific circumstances which, on the one hand, were always highly subjective but, on the other, nevertheless constantly depended on local as well as global systems of knowledge, themselves evolving over time. Living in villages that were becoming increasingly globalized (p.32), sixteenth-century individuals who participated in such debates thus gave mesmerizing testimonies that reveal to us how they made sense of their world and how they tried to order it. We can see from their testimonies how they strategically employed their interpersonal connections, their knowledge, and their wits in order to get what they wanted.

Van Deusen also deals with judicial inspections that were meant to verify the legal status of *indios* residing in the archdiocese of Seville. Analyzed mainly from the point of view of Crown officials as well as slave owners, this analysis provides readers with an additional glimpse into what was at stake in dismantling a slave system that according to some worked beautifully and, according to others, had to end, the sooner the better. The point of view of slaveowners is also at center stage when van Deusen examines how they attempted to demonstrate that their slaves were legally obtained by just war, by *rescate* (purchase or ransom), or because of their cannibalism. Here too, geographical imagination collaborated to tell stories about particularly difficult Indians who, coming from particularly bellicose areas, merited their inhuman fate.

Van Deusen’s book offers a breath of fresh air in a literature that took categories such as “Indian” for granted assuming that their meaning, employment, and even birth were obvious. She wonderfully reconstructs the complexities of the past clearly and forcefully, giving an important reflection on how engagement with empire affected Castilians because, in the words of the author, “the four parts of the world could inhabit” even a small town such as Carmona in Southern Spain. Last but not least, van Deusen’s book seriously engages with the law. Realizing that litigants’ claims were informed by what was possible and what was juridically efficient, van Deusen judicially uses her source materials, highlighting both certainties and uncertainties, discerning between what can be learned, what can be guessed, and what we will never know. She explains why certain things were invoked, while others were not, constantly reminding the reader
how the legal framework, as well as contemporary systems of knowledge, worked together to frame, reframe, and modify what was said and done. Thus, what readers might have thought was incoherent, even senseless, gains meaning and becomes intelligible. As the author concludes, “there was no self-referential Castilian system” that would support a single taxonomy or epistemology. What we find here is a beautiful depiction of a plethora of individuals who, in the process of pursuing their own agenda, gradually and haphazardly, also constructed what we now call “the state.” All these characteristics make this book a “must” read and an example to follow.

Tamar Herzog

Harvard University