CHAPTER NINE

(RE)READING THE OLD/NEW WORLD IN THE 1640S:
THE RELACIÓN OF ANTONIO DE MONTEZINOS

Menasseh ben Israel [in Vindiciae Judæorum] recounts an amusing tale of a Portuguese nobleman, who in order to secure the release of his body-physician, who had confessed to the crime of Judaizing under torture, seized the Inquisitor himself and extracted a precisely similar confession out of him by the same means!

—Cecil Roth, A History of the Marranos

In this chapter I offer a close reading of a text from the mid-seventeenth century, the Relación of Antonio de Montezinos, which purports to relate the discovery of a previously unknown group of Jews in the Spanish colony of Nueva Granada. This text served as one of the instigations for Menasseh ben Israel’s famous Mikveh Israel [The Hope of Israel]. The oft-mentioned but relatively under-analyzed text of Montezinos provides a chance to explore further Judeoconverso and Sephardic attitudes toward and relationships to European colonialism and native Americans. In an effort to make this Jewish discovery narrative less strange and fantastic than most scholars have been willing, I place it in its historical and discursive context, which entails a comingling of the Converso/Sephardic experience of persecution by Catholic Spain and Portugal with the Converso/Sephardic experience of the opening up of new continents with European overseas expansion. In particular, I juxtapose the Relación of Montezinos with knowledge from the seventeenth and twentieth/twenty-first centuries of actual Amerindian populations in Nueva Granada, something no one seems to have thought to do. My excursus here comprises a midrash on a mestizo text, one following Franz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks, a reading of the messianic theo-political dreams of Conversos and Conversos who managed to flee to open Judaism.
Continuing the discussion of the previous chapter, it should be no surprise that many of the leading Sephardic literati in seventeenth-century Amsterdam—Daniel Levi de Barrios, Joseph Penso de la Vega, even ‘orthodox’ men such as Isaac Orobrio de Castro—not only show familiarity with, but repeatedly cite classic works of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism, including Luís de Camões, Os Lusíadas; Manuel de Faria y Souza, Comentarios a la Lusiada de Luís de Camões; José de Acosta, Historia natural y moral de las Indias; Bernardo José Aldrete, Varias antigüedades de España, Africa y otras provincias; Sebastián Manrique, Itinerario de las missiones que hizo... en varias missions del India Oriental; Pedro Teixeira, Relaciones... de los reyes de Persia.1

Nor should it surprise us when Menasseh ben Israel dedicates the second part of his Conciliador (1641) to the “most noble, most prudent and fortunate señores of the Council of the West Indies,” that is, the directors of the West India Company.2 Here Ben Israel “recounts in the panegyric style the story of the birth of the United Dutch Provinces which had set themselves free from Spanish tyranny”3 and dedicates his work to these gentlemen, who were meanwhile busy wreaking havoc around the Atlantic in pursuit of profits. The cruelty wielded in this pursuit by the other Dutch mercantile/military body, the East India Company, toward natives and others is astounding, as any reader of Edmund Scott’s Exact Discourse of the Subtilties, Fashions, Pollicies, Religion, and Ceremonies of the East Indians can attest.4 Scott served as the principal agent for the East India Company in Bantam, Java from 1603–1605, and his book was published already in 1613 in England, by the Rev.

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3 Méchoulan, “Menasseh ben Israel and the World of the Non-Jew,” in Kaplan et al., Menasseh Ben Israel and His World, 86.