

Review / Reseña

Laura A. Lewis. *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of "Black" Mexico*. Duke University Press, 2012.

The *Morenos* of San Nicolás: A Case for Reimagining Mexican (Black) Identity

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Upon first glance, *Chocolate and Corn Flour's* title is deceiving. Anyone who comes across this book might think that it is a contribution to Mexican food history as much as to an ethnography of "Black" Mexico. The first half of the book's title is an oblique reference to *champurrado*, an indigenous drink made from chocolate and corn flour, but the reference to food ends there. Lewis, in fact, borrows the reference from a woman in San Nicolás who uses the word *champurrado* to describe the racial mixture between San Nicoladenses and Indians. While this metaphor is fitting for Lewis' larger argument about racial mixture being more multifaceted than

the white-Indian dichotomy recognized in Mexican *mestizaje*, the metaphor is essentially lost in translation from Spanish to English, from the Mexican cultural context to the non-Mexican. This essentially is the theoretical challenge Lewis faces in attempting to explain the meaning of race and racial identity as understood by Mexicans themselves to an audience for whom these categories have their own distinct cultural and historical meanings.

Laura A. Lewis has sought to produce a comprehensive ethnography of the village of San Nicolás Tolentino, “an agricultural village in the historically black region of Guerrero, Mexico” (1). Ambitiously, Lewis also seeks to place the village in a national and even global context as she ends the book with a discussion of the immigrant experiences of San Nicoladenses in the United States. The scope of this work makes it unique because, as Lewis explains, “...to date no one has produced the kind of comprehensive village-based yet ‘glocal’ ethnography that [she] hope[s] to have adequately laid out...” (3). This would be a daunting task for any scholar, but the author’s decade-long fieldwork in this village and the personal relationships she has developed with the townspeople have allowed her insight into the history of San Nicolás from its founding origins to the streets of present day Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

This book takes on several recurring themes: San Nicoladenses as they see themselves and as they are seen by others; the role of blackness in contemporary Mexican race relations; the role of “cultural workers” in establishing and defining a Mexican “black” identity; and the process and experience of modernization for San Nicoladenses. Lewis cleverly connects the development of San Nicolás to Mexico’s own development and to the United States to show how the village has been affected by shifting national trends and migration patterns.

The book begins with a thorough account of the founding history of San Nicolás and concludes with a discussion of San Nicoladenses’ shifting identity as they seek to define themselves within a U.S. racial context that is decidedly different from Mexican history and culture. This trajectory, from life in a small Mexican village to a U.S. city, is crucial in demonstrating the impact of globalization and the “modern” on the town and its people. Lewis

discusses changes to the town's landscape such as unfinished homes that stand empty due to migration and the influx of remittances from the United States, as well as San Nicoladenses' evolving sense of place within a coastal, Mexican and U.S. context.

Lewis devotes the first chapter to recounting the history of the town of San Nicolas as it appears in historical accounts and as villagers themselves understand it, as there are slight discrepancies between the two. Here, Lewis focuses on historical facts as a way to highlight how and why San Nicoladenses' understanding of their history and their place within the nation have changed over time. She makes the salient point that San Nicolás, in most ways, resembles other Mexican towns that are equally affected by land, markets, and political disputes. In chapter two, Lewis delves into the relationship between *morenos*, black Indians, and Indians, tracing the history of the relationship between these two groups, but also shedding light on current race relations. Additionally, in this chapter, Lewis highlights the nuanced meanings of the term, *moreno*, "on the coastal belt of Guerrero, the history of 'mixture' was such that people of African descent self-identify as *morenos*, or as a race mixed with black Indians" (59).

Lewis is careful with her terminology, always referring to San Nicoladenses as "*moreno*" rather than using titles such as "Afromexican" or "Afromestizo," which have been imposed by outsiders. She tries to avoid the trappings of "cultural workers," in particular, anthropologists like herself, who study other peoples and impose identities on them. Lewis is critical of scholars and tourists who visit coastal Mexican towns looking for African "cultural survivals." She points out that most San Nicoladenses know little of the slave trade in Mexico and nothing about Africa. In fact, throughout the book she shows that whatever discourses townspeople have participated in regarding their "African" cultural roots, it is largely a result of the presence of scholars and their insistence on creating a discourse *for* supposed Afromexicans rather than *about* them. Not wanting to impose the "one-drop-rule" on San Nicoladenses, Lewis identifies them as they identify themselves, as *morenos*, a term that depicts the complex history of racial mixture and race relations in this region.

The term “moreno,” as Lewis points out, is significant since it has a historical and social basis. Essentially, there are no “pure” blacks or Indians, according to villagers, since mixture occurred seemingly instantly in historical time. Therefore, the term “black”—or “*negro*”—to refer to San Nicoladenses, would be inaccurate, to say the least, since it was a colonial category. Therefore, this label is one that San Nicoladenses use exclusively in a historical context to refer to their ancestors.

Oddly enough, the term “black” is itself a signifier of modernity, as Mexican cultural workers, beginning with Aguirre Beltrán in 1985—the first scholar to produce a full length monograph on the Guerrero coast—seeks to uncover Mexico’s African roots. While cultural workers might encourage coastal Mexicans to embrace their supposed “blackness,” the use of the term today negates the reality of racial mixture. Perhaps that is why Lewis italicized the word “black” in the title of her book, making the point that while outsiders rely on phenotype to identify people as of African descent, or in the seminal case of Aguirre Beltrán who relied on historical accounts as if history were static, Mexicans did not begin to use the term on their own.

Another paradoxical aspect of the modernity-inflected use of the term “black” is that as San Nicoladenses become less rural and more modern, they move further away from identifying themselves as black. No doubt, this move towards the modern has been impacted by migrations to the United States and the consequent financial remittances sent back, which are used to build cinder block versus wattle and daub homes. Lewis not only shows how the town’s landscape has changed to reflect national and international trends, but also how San Nicoladenses’ sense of identity has shifted as outside influences have permeated their daily lives in profound ways. One of the drawbacks of modernity, Lewis points out, is political corruption, migration, empty homes, and the imposition of labels and identities by outsiders. Likewise, Lewis suggests the irony in this process of modernization, whereby it is in the United States where San Nicoladenses’ identity as Mexicans is challenged as they encounter preconceived notions and stereotypes of Mexicans for the first time.

There are two main stories in Lewis' book: one about the village and people of San Nicolás and one about blackness in Mexico, and at times these narratives do not seem to connect. Lewis spends two long chapters (four and five) dissecting the history and discourse of blackness in Mexico to show the complexities of race relations and their manifestations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While introducing these themes is important for contextualizing her argument, and while these two chapters are fascinating on their own, perhaps Lewis could have summarized and imbedded them more into other chapters rather than disrupting the flow of the story of San Nicolás and its people. Moreover, Lewis provides ample evidence to argue that terms such as "Afromexican" and "Afromestizo" are cultural workers' products and impositions. Yet Lewis does not say what terms would be accurate in referring to Mexicans of African descent. While the term *moreno* is appropriate for San Nicoladenses, it is likely not appropriate for other towns, as the history of racial mixture would be different in other regions. Thus, the reader is left wondering if there is any one term that can be used. Or is Lewis's point to show that indeed language itself fails and that there is no appropriate discourse available?

In chapter five Lewis elaborates on how scholars and other cultural workers have attempted to impose a *black* identity on San Nicolás and nearby towns, regardless of how these villagers see themselves. She provides the example of Rosa, who states, "we're Mexicans. We don't want to be from Africa" (164). Lewis adds that to impose an "African" identity on San Nicoladenses deprives them of a place that is meaningful to who they are: their town and their *patria* based on a sense of *Mexicanidad*. Lewis's argument is clear: blackness removes San Nicoladenses from the national discourse, which privileges the white and Indian aspects of Mexico's identity. And the larger argument of her book is poignant: Mexican identity, and indeed, Mexican *mestizaje*, requires reexamination. "San Nicolás is not an Afromexican place. It is a Mexican place couched in terms of *morenoness*, an appellation that destabilizes the black-Indian divide while simultaneously recognizing blackness and Indianness. San Nicoladenses' identities thus challenge state models of multiculturalism and stymie the imposition of such models by state agents" (306). Thus,

Lewis' argument is not for a *new* definition of *mestizaje*—one that at present state favors Indian and African roots—but one that is *broader*.

As a historian, I found myself wishing throughout the book that Lewis had provided more documentation to support some of her arguments. Several times she relies on a single ethnographic source to make a very broad point such as when she inquires as to why boys can run around nude in public until the age of five while even infant girls cannot (197). And yet, there is certainly a lesson here for the historian who is not satisfied with finding truth in a single, living, contemporary source: that a sense of place and self are not merely rooted in historical “facts,” but rather they are a contemporary and often very particular interpretations of events and stories. Lewis gives legitimacy to her sources and their sense of self. In the conclusion, Lewis writes, “in these pages I have tried to detail such a history for a single village to challenge the objectification through hollow abstractions that occurs when ‘Afro’ is substituted for the complexities of transnational, national, regional, and local processes, as well as for particular worldviews” (306). The humanist in me recognizes that the way that one San Nicoladense interprets her or his own cosmovision (to borrow a term from Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas) is as legitimate, and perhaps more so, than the way that scholars and cultural workers interpret it for them.

Chocolate and Corn Flour adds a dimension of complexity for the scholar who wishes to study “black” Mexico by forcing us to challenge our own understanding of race and of the historical and social processes that have shaped Mexico. It would be difficult to ignore Lewis' argument and continue to abide by Eurocentric models of race which place Mexicans of African descent in a distant continent to which they have no connection and detaches them from the ideology of *mestizaje* and Mexican belonging.

Lewis' biggest contribution to the study of “black” Mexico is to show that far from being *black*, a term that San Nicoladenses have rejected for themselves, they are *Mexican*. Ultimately, Lewis shows that San Nicolás, more than a “black” village, is a Mexican village whose culture is rooted in the blending and intermingling of peoples and cultures—the fabric of Mexican society. Throughout, Lewis highlights the importance of memory

and place in the development of a unique San Nicoladense identity. In fact, her book makes a compelling argument about *Mexican* identity through the example of San Nicolás.