

Book Reviews

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COSAMALÓN, Jesús Antonio, 2017, *El juego de las apariencias. La alquimia de los mestizajes y las jerarquías sociales en Lima, siglo XIX*, Lima and Mexico City, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos & El Colegio de México. 430 pp.

Alchemy, a protoscience going back at least 2,500 years, was the illusory search for a formula with which to convert a mixture of ingredients into gold. If the mixture was correctly prepared, something valuable would be created out of ingredients that had no value. It was a question of producing an improvement. Historian Jesús A. Cosmalón employs this idea to call attention to the way that the city of Lima was hierarchized between the beginning of the 19th century and the lead-up to the War of the Pacific (1879-1883). By capturing and satisfactorily combining educational, economic, residential, and, above all, matrimonial capital during this period, **something** that was not valuable was converted into something that was. And what was this **something**? Skin color. Like the gold of the alchemists, in pre-war 19th century Lima what was sought by mixing these capital ingredients was the **whitening** of skin.

Through an exhaustive analysis of the 1860 Lima census, which is stored in the Historical Archives of the Municipality of Lima and is probably the oldest existing document with detailed information about the city's total population in that period, Cosmalón provides a thorough demonstration of the main thesis of the book: "Racism and discrimination were not incompatible with the egalitarian republic because the system allowed for escaping racial labeling by way of social mobility..."¹ (p. 46)

While Cosmalón is not the first historian to note how the emergence under the law of an egalitarian republic coexisted with racial discrimination, as far as we know he is the first to demonstrate, through careful use of statistics, that despite the importance of skin color and its fundamental role in constructing social hierarchies in mid-19th century Lima, subjects

1 All translations in this review are by *Apuntes*.

attempted and often achieved social mobility through an alchemic combination of the aforementioned educational, economic, residential, and matrimonial capital that “whitened” or “blackened” them. In this sense, this book achieves a place of honor in 19th century historiography. Cosamalón is a historian who engages in the sociology of racism of time gone by.

But what does this whitening or blackening of the skin consist of? Physicists have taught us that the perception of colors is the product of a complex and amazing interaction of light and matter. Our eyes, equipped with lenses finely honed by the passage of time, capture the product of this interaction in the form of color. Thus, for example, the red of a rose is not *stricto sensu* in the rose but rather in the way that its petals capture a certain type of energy waves contained in the light. And skin color? A person’s pigmentation and color are not necessarily the same. The former can be explained biologically, but the latter cannot – and that is where the social sciences and humanities come in.

If, according to physicists, the interaction produced by color is as complex as it is amazing, then so too is the sociological perception of color. Indeed, it is far from true that a person is “white” – the color of human beings is created by the interaction of social elements that are not always visible to our eyes. Part of the work of the social scientist involves making these explicit and explaining how they function. This is what Cosamalón does brilliantly: he proposes understanding the perception of color of 19th century pre-war Limenians as the result of a game of appearances: “This is a **game of appearances** that requires people to display themselves in a particular way, governed by rules that are shared by observers and the observed” (p. 49, author’s emphasis). Appearance and perception ultimately create skin color in relation to the possession or lack of highly valued attributes such as education, money, housing, and a suitable spouse. Such, then, was the performative perception of skin color in 19th century Lima – another of the fundamental theses of the book, and one backed up in detail.

This is a rigorous study in terms of its treatment of sources and its bibliography. It is a dense text, with a preface, an introduction (long and somewhat labyrinthic), four robust chapters (Lima at the end of the colonial period; Limenians according to the census; the rules of the game of appearances; and marriage as an operator of racial alchemy), a final section providing conclusions, appendices, and acknowledgements, in addition to sources, and an extensive bibliography. A self-professed *salsero* and proud fan of this most Latin American of genres, Cosamalón begins each section (with the exception of chapters 3 and 4) and even the acknowledgements with a musical reference from the genre. Of the book’s 430 pages, few are

lacking in copious footnotes, which are so substantial that several take up almost half a page and many others two-thirds of a page.

I think there is at least one thing that is debatable about the way Cosamalón uses the category of **mestizaje**. On the one hand, it is clear that the term is used in historical sources, since the census he analyzes uses the category as one of its variables; but, on the other hand, Cosamalón uses it in a different way in the analytical ideas that he proposes. This distinction is not altogether clear in the book. Thus, one is not always sure whether the author is using the term in the way it is used in his sources, or in the way in which he, as a historian, understands it, or whether he is expressing his stance regarding this category.

In general, this book is important and of interest not only to historians, but also to every researcher who wishes to understand both the 19th century history of Lima and the fundamental and foundational importance of this century in creating racial stereotypes linked to the social stratification of Peru.

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