Ann Twinam

Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. xvii + 534 pp. (Paper US\$34.95)

Purchasing Whiteness is the story of *gracias al sacar*, a phenomenon allowing mulattos and pardos to purchase whiteness in Spanish America. Contrary to popular belief, petitioners were not seeking to become white; rather pardos and mulattos wanted exemptions to participate in occupations (practice as surgeons, serve as notaries, and receive ordination as priests) and enjoy privileges otherwise reserved for Whites (graduate from universities, obtain titles of courtesy, and freely marry). This meticulously researched, elegantly written book examines *casta* mobility, specifically how and why a handful of *castas*, or free persons of mixed race, sometimes succeeded (and occasionally failed) in their endeavor to do white things.

Ann Twinam's methodology in analyzing these is innovative. Whereas previous generations of scholars had located only four whitening cases, she used "reverse engineering" to sort through more than 38,000 *legajos* in the Spanish archives and uncover forty whitening petitions, largely from circum-Caribbean locales. Employing both etic and emic approaches, along with a processual emphasis focusing on understanding linkages between actors, context, and time, she provides a useful model for future scholars studying honor, identity, and race in the Americas.

The purchase of whiteness was one of seventy-one favors sold by the Crown to remedy flaws in a person's *naturaleza* (inherent attributes) stemming from their birth (illegitimacy), religion (Jewishness), or race (pardoness). Anybody without purity of blood was subject to provisions against holding office, practicing certain professions, or access to white spaces. However, defects of *naturaleza* could be erased by purchasing the *gracias al sacar* (relief from the defect). The rationale for this was the mandate of reciprocity the Crown providing vassals with commensurate rewards for loyal services rendered.

Africans brought to the Americas and their descendants searched for interstices to find pathways from slavery to freedom and then upward mobility within the hierarchical society through subversion of colonial categories of control. Slaves took advantage of the free-womb law, where the children of a male slave and a free female were free to secure freedom. Next, *castas* devised ways of avoiding tribute payment (for example, moving frequently) since it marked their inferior status, and sought to appropriate privileges reserved for Whites, such as civic participation in public ceremonies. Their defense of the Spanish Empire and prior conversion to Christianity prompted the Crown to

recognize castas as vassals in the 1620s, making them eligible for the mandate of reciprocity. In the early 1700s, castas attempted to participate in activities reserved for Whites, including graduation from universities and ordination to the priesthood. Only a very small number of castas enjoyed these perquisites, but the Crown enacted decrees in the 1730s putting a stop to such practices. Crises in the Spanish Empire and occupational scarcity opened paths for further mobility in the 1760s. Castas petitioned for occupational exemptions: in Cuba, a pardo petitioning to practice as a surgeon had the defect of pardonness erased; and in Panama, a pardo petitioner applied to become a notary. Both were successful and, in the latter case, the Crown attorney recommended that dispensations could be purchased for pardonness, setting a precedent for the implementation of the whitening *gracias al sacar* petitions.

It wasn't long before castas were asking for white status. However, there were no guidelines for whitening applications or for established policy on what whitening meant. Initial whitening applications in the 1770s and 1780s were unsuccessful, but when elites in Caracas learned of an application in 1788 it prompted concerns that the erasure of pardonness would undermine the established class structure. Once the *gracias al sacar* was finally enacted in 1795, Caracas elites defended their interests more aggressively than anywhere else in the Americas. In order to become white, petitioners had to demonstrate white appearance, social acceptability, and royal service. Their success hinged on overcoming Whites' fears that interaction with the petitioner might damage their own reputations. Despite the Crown attorneys and Caracas elites' concerns, few castas petitioned and even fewer were successful in obtaining the purchase of whiteness. The absence of a carefully considered Crown policy of whiteness was problematic, especially when the Cortes de Cádiz convened in 1810. Disagreements emerged over who and what constituted the base population of the Americas; did the castas count? Vigorous debates ensued and the final decision excluded the castas from citizenship. That was the last straw in the castas' centuries-long struggle for equality, and they opted for independence.

This is an ambitious book. Twinam is the first to have described why the *gracias al sacar* appeared and what it meant. In accomplishing this herculean task, she did much more than analyze the whitening case histories, by telling the story of countless other castas who informally passed and struggled to provide a better life for their descendants. For anyone interested in understanding this process throughout the Americas, *Purchasing Whiteness* is essential reading.

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