Becoming Maya: Ethnicity and Social Inequality in Yucatan since 1500 (review)

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torically been a minor political force in many regions across the Black Atlantic in terms of party politics and voting" (p. 180). The difficulties confronting black mobilization in a nation constructed as a "racial democracy" have been addressed at length by critical race scholars and Afro-Brazilian activists promoting stronger consciousness of racism and identification as black. Sansone tends to dismiss their perspectives as based on flawed paradigms of racial essentialism, false consciousness and models of racial activism derived from the U.S., without engaging in close examinations of their analysis. The book raises the provocative question "Do We Need Ethnic Identity to Combat Racism?" (p. 188), but readers hoping to answer in the affirmative may be disappointed by the appeals to internationalism and class projects as alternative strategies for anti-racist struggle. Curiously, affirmative action debates in Brazil receive no attention. Nonetheless, the book's sustained effort to understand ways in which social agents minimize the significance of ethnicity even as they highlight blackness merits serious attention by those who agree or disagree with its politics.

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Becoming Maya: Ethnicity and Social Inequality in Yucatan since 1500. By Wolfgang Gabbert. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004. Pp. xvii, 252. Maps. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $49.95 cloth.

Sociologist Wolfgang Gabbert's *Becoming Maya* constitutes a frontal assault on essentialist readings of Yucatec Maya culture that assert a core identity unchanged over the course of centuries. Gabbert denies that "Maya" was ever a self-conscious definition or category for Yucatán's people, and that much of today's indigenist vocabulary has resulted from interaction with state and federal agencies. The book puts into systematic argument a series of revisions that have been building over the past 15 years, including work on the colonial, early national, porfirian, and revolutionary era, all of which question sharp racial dichotomies.

Gabbert shows that "Maya" is a bit like "Indian": a colonial catch-all category that folded together all sorts of people who did not share a common identity in 1500 or after. Rather, autochthonous inhabitants of the Yucatán Peninsula tended to connect themselves most strongly with city and lineage. Even after the conquest, divisions between commoners and the nobility continued to be strong. Preferred terms such as *indio* or *macewal* tended to refer to one's socioeconomic and juridical status. At the moment of the Caste War (and well beyond) cultural markers such as language, dress, household economy, and religious belief tended to be more shared traits than features which differentiated ethnicities. Revolutionaries sent to reform the peninsula from 1915 onward imposed their overly simplified and dichotomizing vision and that imposition became part of official political rhetoric and historical writing. What we have, then, is a story of how disparate people became Maya, and how that self-identification has been projected backward onto their ancestors.

Gabbert is holding many strong cards here. The beauty of *Becoming Maya* lies in its succinct and crystal-clear argumentation and the extensiveness of Gabbert's readings; in terms of source material, he largely synthesizes from a broad band of secondary readings, although with a bit of archival material thrown in at strategic moments. Anyone who has had prolonged first-hand observation of Yucatán will enjoy Chapter 9, which deals with the complex role of the Maya language and traditional dress. Gabbert argues for a problematic relationship between the federal government and those whom today we know as Maya. The state fostered indigenist rhetoric, rural development, and increased social mobility for Maya speakers but at the same time, the need to interact with the federal government (and the larger outside world) has led to a dramatic decline in the status of the Maya language from 1940 onward. His intriguing final chapter is based on fieldwork in the town of Bolonchén (in Campeche) and shows how relationships between class, family relations, and ethnic makers have evolved over time.

On the downside, his material on the Caste War is rather unsurprising, while the blemishes of Mexico's nineteenth-century positivists are well known by now. Despite the ambitious scope of the book, the careful delineation of arguments, and the comprehensiveness of Gabbert's readings, certain questions and doubts remain regarding his larger argument. It is not at all clear what sort of terminology or ethnic divisions (if any) he would prefer. Are we to abandon ethnic terminologies altogether? Is Yucatán somehow a profoundly racist society in which races do not in fact exist? Indeed, what are we going to call *them*, if there is a "them"? Should we throw out the term "Maya" and instead refer to "politically marginalized rural poor who speak a dialect derived from the north-central Mayapán culture"? Indeed, one suspects that "Maya" will continue to serve as shorthand for scholars and public alike. Beyond issues of nomenclature, how many people actually have the well-defined parameters and consistencies of self-definition that Gabbert would impose upon the object of his investigations? It is worth remembering that people can become perfectly passionate about ideas that are perfectly muddy.

These questions notwithstanding, *Becoming Maya* is a crisply written book with a clear analysis of an important topic. Ideal for classrooms and obligatory for specialists, it will interest not only Yucatecan and Maya scholars, but anyone concerned with the elusive concept of *indígena* that informs and yet muddles so much of Mexican history and political culture.

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