



Arce, B. Christine. *México's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2017, pp. 331, ISBN: 978-1438463575. Reviewed by Kevin M. Anzzolin (kmanzzol@gmail.com), Assistant Professor of Spanish, Department of Communication Studies, Foreign Languages, and Performing Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin.

In 2000, Mexico's PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional)—political party which came to power in the wake of the 1910 Revolution—was toppled from the Presidency after roughly 70 years. With Vicente Fox's 2000 election, coming but six short years after the passage of NAFTA, the Mexican plebiscite essentially validated the nation-state's efforts to rollback the social welfare programs, land reforms, and political cooperativism that had been the hallmarks of PRI-led government during the

twentieth century. Concomitant with the nation's newfound pursuit of neoliberal economic policies, Mexican politicians, academics, and everyday citizens began interrogating those organizing myths that had previously buttressed twentieth-century Mexico: most particularly, the concept that the country's population was comprised of what Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) famously called the 'cosmic race'—the phenotypic and supposedly utopian melding between North America's indigenous peoples and Spanish colonizers. Now, on the other side of the twentieth century, these master tropes of Mexican nationalism seem dated. Indeed, as historian Mauricio Tenorio astutely signals in 2017's *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) Mexico's dalliance with "mestizophilia" was oftentimes and unfortunately tantamount to a distinctly "anti-black" perspective (39).

As academics begin to pick apart these remnants of twentieth-century Mexican intellectual history, new identities—both in terms of gender and especially, 'race'—have garnered newfound scholarly attention. Particularly fruitful has been historical research into Mexico's so-called 'tercera raíz' or 'third race'—that is, its African presence. 2003 saw the publication of Herman L. Bennett's *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*, tome that the scholar followed with 2009's *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico*. 2015, in turn, saw Marco Polo Hernández-Cuevas publish *The Afro-Mexican Ancestors and the Nation They Constructed*. Also of note during the first decade of the 2000s was an ambitious exhibition entitled 'The African Presence in México: From Yanga to the Present.' The show—which included paintings, photographs, and historical texts documenting Mexico's largely untold African heritage—travelled extensively throughout the United States between 2006 and 2011. All these interventions have interrogated monolithic conceptions of mestizo identity that were propped up by the ruling political clique of Mexico's twentieth century.

It is in this context that scholar B. Cristine Arce has published *México's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women* (2017), text that examines Africanity within twentieth-century Mexico's cultural production. Arce's study "brings to light the important place of those who have remained in the shadows of Mexican history: blacks and women" (166). The Black and mulatto women—whether real or literary—that Arce examines are understood by the scholar as "nobodies." As Arce argues, such an appellation is apt due to "the violence inflicted onto their real bodies" (9). "With no names and no real voices," Arce claims, these women are "paradoxically folklorized while summarily eliminated" (9). Activating such diverse thinkers as Hayden White, Diana Taylor, Michel de Certeau, and Jacques Rancière, Arce examines a diverse group of Black and mulatto Mexican women who, the author proposes, "reflect an almost latent communal will to narrate that which the official history often ignores" (10). While the first three chapters ("Part One") deals with those women who participated in the 1910 Revolution—mythologized in Mexico and beyond as rough and tumble 'soldaderas'—the latter three chapters ("Part Two") evaluate the real-life roles and artistic representations of the 'mulata' figure: Latin American women evincing mixed (African and Anglo) phenotypes.

In general terms, Arce's text is an ambitious and welcome exercise in historical, cultural, and racial recuperation. *México's Nobodies* compellingly argues that both political rhetoric and historiography have inadequately 'figured' and/or unjustly 'silenced' females of color throughout Mexican history; Arce rescues hitherto untold stories of how Black and mulatto females are made visible and, alternatively, rendered invisible by hegemonic cultural discourses—a process she refers to a type of "metonymic freezing" (14) that ultimately "stultif[ies] our notions of identity" (16). Better said, the figures that Arce considers were only perceivable to the extent that they were stereotyped.

Particularly refreshing is the fact that Arce practices what she preaches; in order to apprehend the figures who comprise her research, Arce employs tenets from ancient Aztec philosophy alongside more canonical voices from contemporary Western theory. Specifically, the author invokes the Aztec art of weaving—"an under-appreciated art form that nonetheless produces knowledge" as "a perfect metaphor for appreciating the contributions of México's nobodies" (25) even while likening this intertwining to Rancière's concept of 'apart-togetherness' as discussed in his *The Emancipated Spectator* (2014). According to Arce, the notion of an intimate interconnectivity between spectator and artist is as equally valid within Aztec and Rancièrian thought. This reader also felt that Arce's language here intimates a certain ludic celebration of non-fixity reminiscent of *écriture féminine*.

In this way, *México Nobodies* successfully recovers previous unknown or invalidated knowledge that originated from unrecognized and/or intensely stereotyped subjects. The work will be of great interest to Latin Americanists, African Studies scholars, and those dedicated to diaspora issues.

The text will inevitably serve as a catalyst for further research into Mexico's 'third race.' Lastly, in terms of pedagogy, the study especially provides ample fodder for courses on the Black diaspora and/or race in Latin America. Including musical pieces from Afromexican songstress Toña la Negra, or selections from Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* (either in Spanish or its English translation), or photographs of *soldaderas* of color would provide wonderful supplementary material to various types of courses, especially at the undergraduate level.

Despite the notable worth of Arce's study, the author does take some missteps. First, the text's binary character—engaging subjects that are both female AND of color—feels somewhat forced and in need of more rigorous theorization. Besides the somewhat perfunctory appraisal that “[g]ender and race cannot be engaged independently because Mexican nationalist discourse and art grapple with the entangled strands of both” (8), Arce offers few suggestions in terms of understanding the confluence between race and gender; perhaps Ange-Marie Hancock's recent *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (2015) could have offered Arce a workable theoretical model. Furthermore, and more importantly, this reader wonders if the text's payoffs for African Studies would not have been more significant if Arce had also engaged the African presence of males in Mexico. As explained below, limiting the scope of her study to a single gender may have hindered more ambitious conclusions regarding how race has been constructed in Mexico.

Second, this reader feels that the work could have been more persuading as a thinner text—namely, by shortening and combining Chapters 1 and 2. Third, Arce's inattention to the time period directly preceding the outbreak of Revolution (the so-called Porfiriato, which lasted from 1876-1910) yields a somewhat disingenuous history of gender relations in Mexico. Not unlike twentieth-century Mexico's top-down reification of all things related to the Revolution, Arce's narrative, too, ultimately characterizes the 1910 Revolution as freedom's most meaningful bellwether. That is, *México's Nobodies*, not unlike PRI-led Mexico, casts the Revolution (1910-1917) as the foremost impetus for gender equality, and thus elides the simultaneously emancipatory and restraining (that is, contradictory) mechanisms of wage labor that affected Mexican society before the outbreak of Revolution.

The fact that the Mexico Revolution is evaluated in Arce's first chapter speaks to this commonplace: namely, that 1910 marks a chiliastic break with past social oppression. Here, Arce argues that “the mobile presence of the *soldaderas* affected women's *place* in Mexican history, but also created, through the aleatory nature of a popular uprising, revolutionary *spaces* that led to a split from previous models of female behavior” (41). According to Arce, by being seen, being photographed, and being transported throughout Mexico during the years of armed conflict, women of color “forged new spaces, both figurative and real” (56); the author underscores her point by including a bevy of photographs of female soldiers of color participating in the Mexican Revolution. As already noted above, although Arce's laudatory assessment of these strong and brave Afromexican women is welcome, some caveats regarding her periodization of gender transformation in Mexico are necessary.

That is, even though Arce acknowledges that “women were already on the move before the outbreak of Revolution” (56), failing to flesh out this statement ultimately produces a less than frank historical analysis. During the thirty odd years leading up to the Mexican Revolution, industrialization—especially in relation to textile production—fundamentally changed the face of labor in Mexico and, in particular, within Veracruz, the Mexican state that Arce correctly recognizes as enjoying a rich African heritage. This elision effectively recapitulates the grand narrative of Mexican national identity as recounted by the PRI during the twentieth century.

As Margaret Towner cogently explains in “Monopoly Capitalism and Women’s Work during the Porfiriato” in *Latin American Perspectives* (4.1-2, 1977: 90-105) even before the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, gender roles were being dramatically transformed by new labor practices. Throughout Veracruz’s Orizaba Valley, women—oftentimes women of color—began working in light industry positions. Tellingly, one of the foremost and more traditionally-minded Mexican intellectuals of the Porfiriato, Francisco Bulnes, crassly referred to working women as more detrimental to the social fabric of Mexico than a ‘Barcelona anarchist.’ Mexico’s changing gender roles—brought about by what Towner refers to as “transformation industries” (90)—were further emphasized in the cultural realm by the introduction of new modes of transportation. As William H. Beezley shows in *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (1987), the bicycle became synonymous with women’s liberation and competition across genders; whisking around Mexico City, women, enjoying dramatically enhanced mobility, bared their pedaling legs with reckless abandon. In this way, *México’s Nobodies* sidesteps an inconvenient truth: changing modes of production (along with technological innovation) very possibly did more to transform gender roles in Mexico than the 1910 Revolution.

Regardless of these caveats, Arce’s first chapter does lay appropriate groundwork for Chapter 2, in which she convincingly interrogates the three primary and hackneyed stereotypes that have plagued Mexican *soldaderas* “the ‘Adelita’ as the young sweetheart, the ‘Cucaracha’ as the harlot, and the abnegating wife or mother” (81). These colloquial images of female soldiers—whether mestizo, Black, or indigenous—are “far too restrictive, paying little mind to the vast array of women and children who followed the men but also fought alongside them” (116). Arce’s clear manner of organizing the stereotypes Mexican women of color confronted is persuasive and should be especially beneficial to those not directly involved in Latin American Studies.

Chapter 3 concludes Arce’s examination of both the myths and realities surrounding women who participated in the Mexican Revolution; the chapter offers a powerful and necessary counter to the stereotypical ways of seeing female revolutionaries as they were chronicled in the previous chapter. As Arce explains, “[a]ll the women in this chapter suffer the violence of the Revolution, however, they are not lachrymose, hysterical, promiscuous, or motherly” (116).

Especially striking here is Arce's interpretation of various Afro-Mexican female soldiers in Nellie's Campobello's *Cartucho, relatos de la lucha en el norte de México* (1931), John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), and Francisco Rojas González's *La negra Angustias* (1944). In the former two texts, Arce reads women soldiers of color as uniquely agentive, both in terms of armed conflict and sexuality; various *soldaderas* are characterized as "defying a static iconicity that congeals and de-contextualizes" (141). Both Reed's text as well as Campobello's (translated into English in 1988 as *Cartucho and My Mother's Hands*) should be especially intriguing to African Studies instructors; selections from the respective texts could easily be included in any number of classes, and Arce's detailed engagement of these texts is elucidating.

The second half of *México's Nobodies*—titled "The Blacks in the Closet"—deals with Afromexican women unrelated to the 1910 Revolution; Arce examines how Black and mulatto Mexican females (both real and fictive) invited both attraction and repulsion. This section of *México's Nobodies* makes manifest the "painful aporetic status of México's black history" (187).

Chapter 4 opens this latter half, wherein Arce admixes the popular Mexican legend 'La Mulata de Córdoba' with a story culled from the archive about an Afromexican runaway enslaved person named Antonia de Soto. Toggling between myth and reality, Arce explores how "tropes linking blackness to witchcraft, mesmerism, and pacts with the devil proliferate in the colonial imagery of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and continue up until the twentieth century, when legends like la Mulata de Córdoba found in poetry, opera, and film continue to represent the contours and limits of the black female presence in México" (183). Both la Mulata de Córdoba and Antonia de Soto are presented as exemplary cases of how alternative subjectivities activate unconventional knowledge and ambitious collaborative efforts to successfully elude the unjust grasp of colonial authorities. By harnessing supernatural forces and cross-dressing, Antonia de Soto triumphantly flees her captors; Arce proposes her story proves the "rebellious cooperation between indigenous groups, blacks, and mixed-raced people" (176).

Chapter 5 deals with "common themes" (187) found in Mexican films produced in the 1940s and 1950s and which engage the African presence in Mexico in contradictory manners. Via films like *La negra Angustias*, *La Mulata de Córdoba*, *Angelitos negros*, and *Negro es mi color*, Arce focuses on the inclusion of "blatant stereotypes that tangle gender and race at the same time they almost unwittingly celebrate the role of blacks and women in the making of the most important historical movement of the last century in México" (190). Arce thus laments that "although Africans have been in México since the conquest, they are often regarded as anomalous coastal communities that are either leftover from the colonial era or descendants of shipwrecked Africans" (191).

In general terms, Arce's conclusions here are persuasive; yet, this reader cannot resist detailing a few captivating counter examples and related provisos. Again, due to the fact that Arce focuses on a single gender, she omits other noteworthy literary representations of Afromexicans; to boot, depictions that read as more genuine and less heinously stereotypical.

Case in point is *Perfiles del terruño*, text from author Cayetano Rodríguez Beltrán first published in 1902; therein, the author describes everyday life in Veracruz, including various Afromexican personages that are represented in a folkloric but not injurious manner. In terms of nineteenth-century representations of the African presence in Mexico, Arce does not seem aware of William H. Beezley's article "How El Negrito Saved Mexico from the French: During the French Intervention, 1861-1867" nor the third volume José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (translated into English as *The Mangy Parrot*), wherein the author offers a spirited critique of slavery. This reader also wishes that Arce had considered a play from 1966—*La fiesta del mulato*—written by Mexican Luisa Josefina Hernández. The play tells the story of a mulatto who is persecuted by colonial authorities after he discovers a gold mine on land that he believes is his. All these examples suggest that blackness may have been understood as more fundamental to ideas of Mexican identity than Arce believes.

Chapter 6 examines the music and public presence of one of twentieth-century Mexico's foremost songstresses, Toña la Negra. For Arce, the Afromexican singer "is paradoxically central as a cultural figure who both reflects the relationship between México and blackness as a part of the circum-Caribbean, yet deflects it through her status as an exception" (268). As both public persona and artist, Toña la Negra successfully accomplished a precarious balancing act: both in terms of her image and her art, she garnered enthusiasm and accolades from the Mexican public even while explicitly evincing her African heritage. Unfortunately, in order to actualize this delicate maneuver, Toña was continually bracketed as 'Caribbean' or 'Veracruzán'—not quite 'Mexican.' This chapter, too, offers a generous amount of material for scholars of African Studies—especially for those whose students are musically inclined.

In conclusion, despite this reader's few qualifications and addenda, Arce's text is very much an accomplishment. It should be welcomed by scholars in African Studies, Latin Americanists, and especially those interested in issues of identity after the twentieth-century heyday of Mexican nationalism.